

EXPERIENCES OF GENDER POLICING WITHIN THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,
TRANSGENDER AND QUEER (LGBTQ) COMMUNITY

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Psychology
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
December 2013

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy Degree

in the field of Psychology

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July 25, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

LAUREN LOUISE JENSEN, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in PSYCHOLOGY, presented on July 25, 2013, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: EXPERIENCES OF GENDER POLICING WITHIN THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND QUEER (LGBTQ) COMMUNITY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Ann R. Fischer

This is an exploratory study and qualitative investigation of the social construction and enforcement of gender through social interactions with a specific focus on how gender policing is experienced within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale (pseudonym), the specific location of this study. Gender policing refers to the implicit and explicit feedback that one is accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms, expectations, and ideals, with the implied meaning that not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences. Two focus groups comprised of five people each who self-identified along the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context in their lives were used as the primary method for data collection. Inclusion criteria were based on those who identified with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or who had had experiences in Riverdale in spaces that were predominantly LGBTQ. Focus group questions attempted to elicit participants' experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale as they negotiated a sense of self in relation to others in the LGBTQ community. The content of the focus group discussions were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborn (2003). The current study illuminates how gender as a system of power is experienced and assigned meaning within interpersonal relationships in service of developing a social identity through inclusion within an LGBTQ community. Results from the data analysis yielded five broad themes: (a) gender oppression, (b) discouragement with community, (c) attempts to cope,

(d) queer, and (e) change. These themes reflect narratives of oppression in the dominant culture and the impact of oppression on identity work in the LGBTQ community in a rural college town. Results are presented within the context of gender and gender policing on structural levels, interpersonal levels, and the level of internalized self-policing. Instances of gender policing on an interactional level were often associated with the assumed threat of social rejection and isolation and the experience of disappointment, pain, and disconnection. Results from this study support the literature on (a) the accomplishment of gender, (b) the maintenance of power differentials through the regulation of perceived differences between sex and gender categories, (c) the development of identity as group process, and (d) perceived problems within the LGBTQ community such as the maintenance of oppression and barriers to social change through the process of inclusion and exclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document was not created in a vacuum; it exists because of the team of people who surround me, who help me to keep on writing no matter the obstacle. I would like to acknowledge and thank those who have created a cocoon of love, support, and friendship that helped me to complete this work. You have been invaluable cheerleaders, taskmasters and earth mothers and I can never fully express my gratitude.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Michelle and Tony, for always believing in me, even when it was hard to see the finish line. Thank you for the sacrifices you have made so that I could be afforded the privilege of an education. Mom, every day, you remind through your courage and perseverance, that those qualities exist in me too, even if most of the time I don't feel like it. And Dad it is your persistence, inquisitiveness, and stubbornness that I carry with me when I'm presented with the toughest questions. Thank you to my brothers, Michael and Andy for reminding me to "stop worrying so much." Michael, I'm very much looking forward to a long, relaxing hike with you when this is over. Andy, I'm looking forward to some Auntie Lolo time with you, Nancy, Elizabeth, and Joe. A special thanks to my teachers all along the way and my resource counselor Mrs. Cooney who believed in my ability as a thinker and scholar despite having a learning disability.

Thank you to my amazing friends, Rachel, Kelly, Elliot, Max, SJ, Me-Chelle, Melissa, Barbie, Heather, Alyssa, Marisa, Julia, Amanda, Lindsay, Reese, Nick, and Ye for always having encouraging words and a couch to crash on. You mean the world to me and I appreciate your presence in my life.

Thank you to Darlene for your mentorship that helped to guide my research question. Thank you to my SIUC graduate school family, Heather, Qianhui, Missy, Kris, Yuka, Ryan,

Bedford, Lissa, Kari, Maggie, Christian, Val, and Andrew. I look forward to expanding the field the field of psychology together and learning from each other throughout our long careers.

Thank you to my amazing former supervisors, Taisha, Christian, and Jessica who pushed me to be critically self-aware from a non-judgmental perspective.

Thank you to my internship family, Dianna, Gurminder, and Krystle. Thank you for being my “study buddies” this year and helping me find new “pathways” and the willpower to reach my goals. We’re so close to the finish line! Thank you for Carolyn and David for your collaboration as cultural consultants.

Thank you to my friend and academic godmother, Sarah Fenstermaker, Ph.D. for fostering my critical consciousness and continued curiosity of gender. Thank you to my committee Joan McDermott, Ph.D., Cade Bursell, M.F.A., Jane Swanson, Ph.D., and Reza Habib, Ph.D. for supporting this project and pushing me to think critically.

Finally, I would like to thank my chair and advisor, Ann Fischer, Ph.D. Thank you for helping me find my own feminist voice. You are an inspiration and model of professional accomplishment and personal grace. I feel so lucky to have completed this extraordinary task with your support. I’ll never forget my first working meeting with you. I remember bursting into tears, feeling overwhelmed with joy, excitement, and disbelief. It struck me: I was sitting across from “the” Ann Fischer, and that *she* wanted to hear *my* ideas. Despite your best attempts to demystify the expert, you will always be “the” Ann Fischer to me. Thank you for your trust in me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following, hypothetical, exchange occurring among a group of lesbian women in their 20s, who are all friends, sitting in a living room watching TV.

Jen: You still haven't shaved your legs! How long has it been?

Kelsey: I don't know. I don't think I'm going to shave them anymore.

It just doesn't feel right when I do; I feel bare.

Jen: That's gross. Women are supposed to be bare.

Lana: Uh ... and women are supposed to like dudes too...

Just putting that out there.

In this hypothetical exchange Jen was holding Kelsey accountable to the "rules" about what it means to be a woman. The suggestion that women are *supposed* to be bare implies that this is an essential part of femaleness: a code of conduct. Jen was letting Kelsey know that she is breaking that rule with the implied message that she should change back and start shaving again. If she does not she might be gross, she might not be a "real" woman, or her friend might think less of her. The context of this exchange occurring among a group of lesbian women is also important. A third friend in the room, Lana, was able to disrupt the process of policing certain rules about gender by showing the ways in which the "rules" of being a woman are faulty or oppressive. If women are supposed to like men but all of them had been in relationships with or attracted to women, then they were breaking another rule. Jen was able to connect with how and when the rules did not apply to her or when she herself was breaking them.

There is no way to know Jen's intention behind her comment in a situation like this. We cannot know what Jen might have been reacting to in herself, her friendship with Kelsey, or something else entirely that led to the feedback she gave. It is possible that there was no intent to be mean or malicious in terms of criticizing her friend's behavior. However, what her comment does reflect is a larger binary system of gender that assumes that there are qualities which are essentially female and essentially male. These assumptions are socially constructed. Neither Jen, nor the hair on Kelsey's legs, are the "problem." Instead, Jen's interpersonal feedback to Kelsey reflects a problematic gender system that encourages the enforcement of gender conformity within a binary system.

The exchange between Jen and Kelsey is an example of gender policing. Gender policing refers to the implicit and explicit feedback that one is accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms, expectations and ideals with the implied meaning that not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences. I was unable to find a consistent and agreed upon definition of the term "gender policing" in the literature. The concept I am referring to in this document is sometimes referred to as gender enforcement or gender accountability. However, these terms are not always used consistently. For this reason, I want to be very clear and specific about how I use the term gender policing in this document. I use the definition described above as the conceptual foundation for how I understand gender policing. This definition is a compilation of how the literature on the social construction of gender defines the ongoing accomplishment and enforcement of gender. My definition of gender policing is informed most by West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualization of gender as an ongoing accomplishment in social interactions, West and Fenstermaker's (1995) conceptualization of accomplishing gender

differences, and Hollander's (2013) description of gender accountability. Hollander (2013) defines gender enforcement as one of three components of gender accountability, described in a subsequent section of this dissertation. As Hollander (2013) describes, "people hold each other – and themselves – responsible for their accomplishment of gender by implementing interactional consequences for conformity or nonconformity" (p. 10).

Gender policing is one component within a broader system of gender socialization. Gender socialization involves the construction of gender through social interactions (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1987), such as the way we "do" gender in relation to others and gendered institutions (e.g., Acker, 1992), such as marriage or the military. One of the consequences of gender policing is that it maintains perceived differences between two socially constructed categories, man and woman, which reciprocally reinforce a system of gender in which masculinity holds more power in relation to femininity (Lorber, 1994).

As detailed in Chapter 2, the enforcement of gender conformity keeps the gender system going (e.g., Spade, 2006). This is seen through institutional levels of gender policing such as sex segregated restrooms or requirements on identity documents to identify within dichotomous sex categories, and through interpersonal interactions like the one stated at the beginning of this chapter. Gender policing on an interactional level is present in the literature on homosociality (i.e., nonsexual attractions and interactions between individuals who are assumed to be within the same sex-category; Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Homosocial interactions provide a context for understanding the social construction of gender through the ways in which individuals hold each other accountable to group-level gender norms, expectations and ideals (e.g., Bird, 1996). This is also seen in the ways parents feel pressure

or accountability to reinforce gender norms and punish gender non-conforming behaviors that are exhibited by their children (e.g., Kane, 2006).

The motivating question for this study was to understand how gender policing is experienced within interpersonal relationships. This question comes out of an interest in the social construction of gender through gendered institutions and social interactions. Gender, as a system of power, has a pervasive influence on how we see ourselves and how we relate to others. This often *hidden* system of power can influence moment-to-moment decisions in our everyday interactions (Lorber, 1994). As Wilchins (2004) explains, combating sexism and homophobia cannot be accomplished without a discussion of gender. The silence around the experience of gender policing in response to gender non-conformity maintains the invisibility of the larger oppressive structure of gender: the invisibility of what Serano (2007) refers to as trans-misogyny. An intention of this study is to continue a conscious discussion of how the enforcement of gender conformity is experienced through interpersonal relationships and to make the invisible more visible.

To be more specific, I am interested in how the enforcement of gender conformity operates within the boundaries of LGBTQ communities. Connection to an LGBTQ community is considered to be an important part of developing a positive sexual or gender identity when individuals move away from the privileged category of heterosexuality (e.g., Firestein, 2007; Haldeman, 2007; Liddle, 2007; Potoczniak, 2007) or when their gender moves away from their sex assigned at birth (e.g., Lev, 2007). This brings up the importance of identity work in relation to group membership (e.g., Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996).

There are four categories of identity work that Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) use to conceptualize the construction and maintenance of shared group identities. These

categories include (a) defining (e.g., developing representations and meaning of the identity), (b) coding (e.g., developing a set of rules), (c) affirming (e.g., deciding who has the authority to affirm the identity and how it will be done), and (d) policing (e.g., calling attention to those who are violating the rules in order to maintain the group boundaries). They refer to these processes as components of subcultural identity work. This study seeks to understand how the process of gender policing intersects with the process of identity work within an LGBTQ community.

Part of this interest comes from the historical context of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, broadly speaking, displacing issues of gender (e.g., gender non-conformity) off of gay and lesbian communities and onto transgender communities in order to make political gains (e.g., Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 2004). Trying to separate “gay issues” from “gender issues” reflects a historical and political pressure for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals to conform to gender norms and expectations in order to accomplish “normalcy” (e.g., “It’s okay if you’re a lesbian, so long as you don’t start looking like dyke.”). A similar pressure to conform within gender borders for political gains is present in the history of transgender communities. Access to medical interventions, such as hormone replacement therapy, often required gender conformity to one’s identified gender (e.g., Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 2004). This put medical and mental health professionals in the role of gate keepers to access to medical care and the put them in a position of power to police gender. Again, the structural system of gender that holds masculinity at a higher position of power in relation to femininity is maintained through the assumed differences between men and women. This system of power is what becomes reflected in the structural and interpersonal

enforcements of gender conformity. But how do people within the LGBTQ communities experience this, and what kind of meaning do they make of it?

The concept of gender policing is narrow in scope given that gender policing is only one component of the larger system of gender. In addition, the phrase “gender policing” in and of itself implies a negative connotation. For this reason, the questions that I posed to participants took a broader view of how gender might be experienced within an LGBTQ community located in a particular place and time.

In a group discussion format, my interview questions focused more on expectations within the LGBTQ community, how they are communicated, and how they impact the way in which people see themselves and how they want to be perceived within the LGBTQ community. The guiding premise of this study is to describe participants’ experiences within the LGBTQ community as they negotiate and present a sense of self in relation to others in the LGBTQ community. Part of my analysis looked at how gender, as a system of power, influences these experiences. How do gender expectations present in the intersection of LGBTQ community borders, and how do people experience it?

To address this exploratory question I used a qualitative method that is informed by the philosophical assumptions of constructivism (e.g., Hansen, 2004; Ponterotto, 2005; Schwandt, 2000), critical theory (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005), and phenomenology (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Wertz, 2011). My research question is a theoretical fit within a qualitative paradigm because of the focus on understanding participants’ experiences of a particular phenomenon (Wang, 2008). Within this study, the phenomenon being explored is how the enforcement of gender conformity is

experienced within the broader context of the social construction of gender and LGBTQ community borders.

Focus groups were used as the primary method for data collection. Hollander (2004) asserts that the use of focus groups as a research design can provide researchers with important information about the construction of realities through social interactions by observing the ways people communicate with each other. Focus groups rather than individual interviews also illuminate common group norms through the process of the group discussion. Thus, focus groups are a good fit with the analysis of how gender is constructed and enforced within social interactions. As a supplemental analysis, I will first describe the social contexts and interpersonal process of the focus groups as recommended by Hollander (2004). The content of the focus group discussions were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborn (2003).

Conceptually this exploratory study contributes to the literature about the social construction of gender with a specific focus on gender policing, which is deeply connected with systems of sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia (e.g., Pharr, 1996). Bullying and gay-bashing in the school system, for example, have been closely linked to negative reactions to gender non-conformity (Klein, 2012). It is time to start making deeper connections to gender (Klein, 2012) and investigate how the regulation of gender categories works as a system of oppression (Wilchins, 2004).

This study illuminates how systemic issues of power (i.e., gender) are experienced and assigned meaning within interpersonal relationships in service of developing social identities (i.e., inclusion within an LGBTQ community). The recapitulation of power and oppression can be seen through the process of inclusion and exclusion within community

borders that then contributes to self-regulation (e.g., Fischer & DeBord, 2013; Pharr, 1996).

To not examine within-group dynamics and internalized oppression would lead to missing the bigger picture of how individuals are programmed by an oppressive culture to take on the role of oppressor (e.g., internalizing the perspective of how those in power perceive and objectify the “other”) (Pharr, 1996). This study provides a step toward understanding the phenomenon of gender policing on structural levels, interpersonal levels, and the level of internalized self-policing.

An examination of dynamics of gender policing within an LGBTQ community contributes to a critical dialogue within LGBTQ communities about how gender oppression perpetuates. Regarding counseling and clinical psychology in particular, results from this study also provided mental health practitioners with important information about assumed sources of “social support” for their clients within LGBTQ communities. Furthermore, developing an increased capacity for cultural empathy (Vasquez, 2010) includes understanding complex mechanisms of oppression that are often mislabeled within psychology as problems that are rooted within individuals (e.g., Burman et al., 1996). This exploratory study advances the call for social justice within counseling psychology (e.g., Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006) through a critical examination of power, group dynamics and the visibility of intersecting social identities (e.g., Fischer & DeBord, 2013)

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review the literature relevant to the exploratory investigation of the experiences of gender policing among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals within the LGBTQ community. The construction and enforcement of gender is the major focus of this study. The ways in which gender is constructed, accomplished and enforced are mutable and dependent on the specific social contexts that are continuously shifting. The current study focused on the social situations in which gender is constructed and enforced.

There is a limited amount of empirical articles on the concept of gender policing. For this reason, the literature review will extend beyond counseling psychology and look at publications in social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and related fields. In order to frame the concept of gender policing I will first review conceptualizations of gender. Here I focus on the construction of gender through social interactions and structural systems of gender. Next, I will define gender policing through the use of examples in the literature that demonstrate the process of enforcing gender norms. Next, I will provide a conceptual framework for understanding the construct of community and identity work in relation to group identity. I will also present examples of community border policing such as LGBTQ community border policing and black racial identity policing. Finally, I will outline the need for the current study and a statement of my exploratory research question. There were no hypotheses being tested in this investigation.

Conceptualizing Gender

Understanding how gender is policed first requires an understanding of how gender is constructed. Based on the conceptual work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, Wilchins (2004) defines gender as “a language, a system of meanings and symbols along with the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use – for power and sexuality (masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness)” (p. 35). Conceptualizations of gender within social sciences literature and the scholarship of gender have shifted between a very personal level (e.g., gender as an identity, constellation of traits, sex differences, gender roles, gender scripts or gender an ongoing accomplishment) to thinking about gender on a broader structural level (e.g., gendered institutions, gender as an institution, gender as a system) (Risman, 2004).

Sex “roles” theories came out of a need to look at gender as a learned behavior beyond an innate identity (Acker, 1992; Lopata & Thorne, 1978). The shift from sex roles to gender roles came out of need to separate the conflation of sex and gender categories (Acker, 1992; Lorber, 1994). Both Lorber (1994) and Risman (2004) emphasize how much having a biological explanation for behavior is valued in Western culture, and as a result gender scholars found it important to separate sex categories from gender. Making a distinction between sex and gender allowed scholars more space to examine the social construction of gender beyond something that is assumed to be biological predetermined. However, Butler (1990) argues that there is no useful distinction between sex and gender given that both sex and gender categories are socially constructed.

Lopata and Thorne challenged theories of gender in terms of dichotomous “roles” in 1978 by deconstructing the implied meaning of term “sex roles.” One of Lopata and

Thorne's (1978) most compelling critiques of thinking about gender in terms of learned "roles" is that it grossly over simplifies the construct. A role is something we step in and out of (e.g., teacher, student, parent). There are environments in which someone may be in the role of a teacher with the title "professor" but when she goes home, she is no longer in the work role of a teacher and may instead take on the role of a partner or a parent. Gender, however, is something we are constantly constructing and reconstructing within different social contexts. We do not step in and out of our gender. West and Zimmerman (1987) broke away from thinking about gender in terms of static roles or biological traits in their seminal article, *doing gender*. West and Zimmerman (1987) conceptualize gender as an ongoing accomplishment in social interactions. The notion of doing gender is similar to what Butler (1990) refers to as the performance of gender. However, a distinction between these two theories is that the performance of gender implies a subjective consciousness of how one is performing gender whereas the concept of doing gender is about the continuous *accomplishment* of gender in response to expectations within fluid moment-to-moment interactions. The accomplishment of gender can also occur without one being consciously aware that it is happening (Hollander, 2013).

Scholars such Acker (1992), Lorber (1994), and Risman (2004) criticize the theory of doing gender for being too narrow in scope. These authors shift their focus away from West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of gender as something we do to examine gender through broader structural levels. Lorber (1994) in particular encourages gender scholars to be cognizant of gender as a system of power and oppression that works to maintain women as subordinate to men. From Lorber's (1994) perspective this system operates beyond the everyday interaction or accomplishment of gender. In this section I will elaborate on

perspectives of a) gender as an accomplishment (i.e., “doing gender”) and b) gender as a structure. Understanding conceptualizations of gender provides the foundation for understanding the ways in which gender is enforced.

Gender as an Accomplishment, “Doing Gender”

The theory of “doing gender” is an interactional approach to understanding the construction of gender. West and Zimmerman (1987) stepped away from the internal and individual concept of gender (e.g., gender as an identity or constellation of traits) to look at how gender is accomplished within specific social interactions. They conceptualize gender as something we “do” rather than something we “are.” This was a significant theoretical shift away from gender role theory and sex differences, which focused more on static roles or stereotypes and biological explanations for perceived differences in behavior. Gender as an accomplishment emphasizes gender as being ubiquitous and unavoidable. As Wilchins (2004) explains, “since it is as system of meaning, gender can be applied to almost anything” (p. 35). Gender is created in our everyday interactions and is informed by specific expectations, norms, and ideals within a specific time, place, history, and system of power (West & Fenstermaker, 1995)

As an example, Gilbert (2011) uses herself as a tool to show that gender is, in part, something we do. She does this by presenting herself as a man. Gilbert’s (2011) presentation as a man was part aesthetic (e.g., clothes and haircut), part embodiment (e.g., adjusting the shape of her body) and part behavioral (e.g., what she was doing). Gilbert darkened her hair to get rid of the highlights and make the overall color seem duller. She had her pixie cut changed to a boxy haircut. She bound her chest and wore baggy clothes. She also used fake hair to create stubble that was placed above her lip and on her chin. These

athletic cues changed her appearance to signal “male.” In addition to how she looked, she adjusted the way she walked and the way she interacted with others.

In one particular anecdote, Gilbert (2011) discusses the difficulties that arose when she tried to gain camaraderie with a man using the same behaviors she would normally use while presenting as a woman. Acting as “one of the guys” in a flirtatious way did not work once she was read as a man. Coy banter that she could engage in with men when she was read as a “tomboy” was suddenly met with aggression when she was read as a man. When this happened, Gilbert withdrew, focused her gaze to the floor and demonstrated submission. The context was different. She quickly learned that there were different codes for how men engaged with other men. Gilbert (2011) found that she could be successfully read as a man by other men when she restricted her communication style and emotional expressiveness. Rather than being present and available she imagined herself pulling her gaze back, watching the world from a distance. She also found that engaging with other men was often easiest when making comments about women they noticed on the street. Talking about how good a woman looked as she passed mediated the connections she made with other men. Gilbert (2011) learned how to “do” gender through her social interactions with other men and how they responded to her as a man. Her experience highlighted that gender is accomplished through the evaluation from others.

West and Zimmerman (1987) also conceptualize “doing gender” as the “scaffolding” of the structure of gender. This is important because thinking about gender as an interaction can act as a bridge between the individual (micro) level and the institutional (macro) level of understanding gender. Gender as an accomplishment, as something we “do,” informs both what we see as individual interests (e.g., gender as static traits) and what we see as gendered

institutions (e.g., academia, marriage, the military) (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The ways in which institutions are gendered can be examined by deconstructing the accomplishment of gender, which reflects and maintains the gender system within a power hierarchy.

As an example, Sasson-Levy (2001) uses both the theory of gender as a structure and gender as an accomplishment when looking at the way the Israeli military recruits combat soldiers by emblemizing an ideal masculinity. Sasson-Levy (2001) interviewed 20 male combat soldiers within one year of their release from the army. The masculinized characteristics that Sasson-Levy highlights, both conceptually and in the stories of those she interviewed, are control over self (both emotionally and in the maintenance of the body) and risk/thrill seeking behaviors. Sasson-Levy (2001) notes that maintaining control over the body and managing emotions were not the focus of her interviews but that these themes were so prevalent that they became an important focus of conversations about military experiences among combat soldiers in her study. There is nothing “natural” about these characteristics in terms of being a man or a soldier but by marking them as such it influences an individual’s interest to replicate it in order to achieve “true” masculinity. In this study, Sasson-Levy (2001) demonstrates both the function of gender as a broader structure and the implications for how a gendered institution can inform the way gender is accomplished.

Deconstructing the gender structure into interactional components also provides an opportunity to “do” gender differently and then work to “undo” gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This perspective of undoing gender through an expansion of how gender is accomplished is also supported by Devor’s (1989) notion of gender blending, Halberstam’s (1998) notion of female masculinity, and Feinberg’s (1998) notion of trans liberation.

Feinberg (1998) argues that individuals need to have the right to self-determination in terms of their body, their identity, and their self-expression. Restrictive gender norms, ideals, and expectations inhibit the freedom of self-expression. However, scholars such as Butler (1990), Lucal (1999), Jackson (2005), and Risman (2009) question the ability to “undo” gender on an interactional level, arguing that subverting the gender binary may reinforce it. First, reacting in opposition to a particular construct maintains that the construct exists; one is still responding to the original frame of reference. Second, even if the category of male and female are expanded through doing gender differently, this still does not subvert the dichotomous gender hierarchy of power.

As an example, in Lucal’s (1999) paper *What it Means to be Gendered Me*, she discusses how consistently being misread as a man affects her day-to-day and moment-to-moment experiences. For Lucal (1999) there is a disconnection between her gender identity as a woman and her assumed sex category as male. She wears short hair, does not shave her legs or remove any other body hair, does not wear skirts or dresses, make-up or stereotypically women’s jewelry. Because of the dichotomous sex/gender system and because she does not exhibit gender cues that signal “female,” she is more often read and categorized as male. Social cues that signal a “male” sex category are often defined as being not female (Pleck, 1995) such as not having long hair, not wearing makeup, not shaving legs, or not wearing dresses.

Doing gender differently in and of itself does not subvert the gender system; she is simply placed in a different sex category. In order to break down the gender hierarchy she would need to consistently correct people in social interactions each time she is misattributed to the male category. This would have the potential to change expectations of male and

female characteristics, but again, Liscal (1999) argues that her presentation alone does not do this. Furthermore, gender norms and expectations are constantly changing. We cannot know what prevailing expectations are, anywhere, at any time (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Scholars such as Butler (1990), Liscal (1999), Jackson (2005) and Risman (2009) emphasize the importance of thinking about the institutionalized structure of gender, as described below, and see this as the location for dismantling the gender system.

Gender as a Structure

Theories about gender as a structure look at how gender operates at every level of our lives. Acker (1992) uses the term “gendered institution,” Lorber (1994) talks about gender as a social structure, and Risman (2004) emphasizes the term “gender as a structure” (while simultaneously noting discrepancies in the literature about how “structure” is defined). All of these scholars attempt to understand gender from a broader systemic level. Acker (1992) talks about gender on a structural level in terms of institutions being organized on gender lines (e.g., marriage, the military, education). Acker (1992) explains that “gender is present in the processes, practice, images, and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life” (p. 567).

Although the structure of gender is maintained through the personal and ongoing experience of accomplishing gender in the way that West and Zimmerman (1997) talk about gender, Acker (1992) highlights the importance of going beyond the personal experience to examine the system that keeps women oppressed. Lorber (1994) echoes this sentiment by emphasizing gender as a social institution of power, an institution that is both ubiquitous and unseen. For Lorber (1994) calling attention to the function of gender as a system that maintains women as subordinate to men is more important than the individual

accomplishment of gender itself. Similarly, Risman (2004) argues that thinking about gender as a structure is important because it gives gender political credibility. Gender as a structure offers scholars a framework for deconstructing the way gender is used to hide power differentials that are embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional levels of our lives (Risman, 2004).

An example of institutions being organized on gender lines is reflected in the institution of marriage and the oppressive division of labor in heterosexual partnerships. Tichenor (2005) suggests that marriage provides a script or contract about the expectation of men being the economic contributors and women being the domestic contributors. What Tichenor (2005) found is that this gendered expectation persists even when women make as much or more money than their husbands. This finding suggests that the structure of gender is present independent of other external factors such as income.

As another example, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) look at the pervasiveness of feminine gender ideals that are published in children's stories, a major component of gender socialization within a culture. They examined the themes of feminine beauty in Grimms' fairy tales in particular. Throughout history, stories focusing on an ideal feminine beauty are the ones that continued to be retold and maintained. An example of a feminine ideal, as presented in these stories, is the idea of a woman's physical attractiveness is one of her most powerful assets. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) point out that the paradox of feminine beauty being portrayed as a powerful asset rather than a mechanism of oppression is that the asset of feminine beauty is often still dependent on men's resources. Furthermore, the feminine beauty that is most often portrayed in children's stories is defined within the context of being White, heterosexual, and of a high socioeconomic status. This finding

suggests that gender is more than something we do in social interaction; it is also a structure of power that penetrates even our most intimate moments such as telling bedtime stories.

Conceptual summary. Theories provide scholars with a framework for understanding the complexities of gender. Thinking about gender as an accomplishment offers insight about the ways in which we “see” gender in the moment to moment interactions. Gender is accomplished within the context of the norms, expectations, and ideals that are present in a given moment (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The ongoing accomplishment of gender in social interactions reflects and maintains the structure of gender (Acker, 1992). When looking at the collection of gendered institutions, the function of gender as an underlying oppressive system becomes more visible (Acker, 1992; Lorber, 1994). For this reason, it is important that one perspective of gender not be overemphasized at the expense of another. Thinking about gender both in terms of an accomplishment and a broader structure offers a comprehensive understanding of how gender works. Although this study is focusing on the construction and enforcement of gender through social interactions, and the meanings that are made of those interactions, my broader analysis places these experiences in the context of the structure of gender that they reflect.

Jackson (2005) and Risman (2009) seem to argue that the oppressive nature of gender cannot be undone unless the structure of gender is changed (i.e., gender as a hierarchical power dichotomy). Jackson (2005) argues that celebrations of gender transgressions in social interactions are naïvely hopeful of significant long-term change. From Jackson’s perspective creating diversity in how we categorize gender calls attention away from the larger issue of hegemonic masculinity. Having more options for doing gender does not change the social

structure of men holding more power by oppressing others (i.e., women). Instead, Jackson (2005) suggests that having multiple categories allows dominant masculinity to become just one of many categories which in turn reinforces the invisibility of White, heterosexual, upper-class, able-bodied male privilege.

However, Devor (1989), Halberstam (1998), and West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that there is room for undoing the oppressive nature of gender by doing it differently. As an example, in Quinn's (2002) study of sexual harassment in the workplace, she noticed that promoting empathy disrupted assumptions that often perpetuate the "male gaze." Quinn did this in the interviews by asking male participants to put themselves in the position of a woman being observed and objectified. The male gaze is an accomplishment of masculinity that simultaneously demonstrates the wielding of power to objectify and oppress women. As part of this accomplishment, Quinn (2002) argues that men must ignore or obscure a woman's perspective such that they do not recognize her possible experience of pain; she is an object being observed and therefore does not have emotions. Sexual harassment training that focuses on reengaging the male perspective of empathy and seeing women as people rather than objects could lead to men doing masculinity differently in a way that would start to change the gender system. This point reflects the importance of looking at both the structural and interactional levels of gender given that these domains are interlinked. The structural and interactional accomplishment of gender occur simultaneously (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

Gender Policing

Defining “Gender Policing”

In this document, gender policing is defined as the implicit and explicit feedback that people are accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms, expectations and ideals with the implied meaning that not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences. As noted in Chapter 1, the concept of gender policing is sometimes referred to as gender enforcement or gender accountability. The definition of gender policing that I will use in this document is a compilation of how the literature on the social construction of gender defines the ongoing accomplishment and enforcement of gender.

Hollander (2013), for example, refers to gender enforcement as one component of gender accountability. Hollander (2013) expands on West and Zimmerman’s (1987) perspective of gender as something that individuals accomplish in ongoing interactions. Hollander also acknowledges that the literature on gender accountability fails to specify how, when, where, and for whom gender is accomplished and the consequences of accountability. To help organize the literature on gender accountability, Hollander (2013) proposes a framework for thinking about accountability as a three-part interactional system. These parts include (a) *orientation* to a person’s an assumed sex category, (b) *assessment*, or evaluation of others’ behaviors according to expected norms and ideals associated with of their assumed sex category, and (d) *enforcement* of these expectations through interactional consequences for conformity or nonconformity.

Spade and Valentine (2011) explain that the enforcement of gender “is about more than just doing gender, it is about assault, coercion, and constraints on people’s behaviors, as well as more subtle and tacit constraints on identities to enforce gender conformity” (p. 477).

An important component of gender policing is the implied message that there will be real or assumed negative consequences for not complying. Thus, there is an element of power involved either on a structural level or within interpersonal dynamics that influences the message that someone should be accomplishing gender differently.

There may be instances of gender policing that are not explicitly seen as people doing gender inappropriately. There are also forms of benevolent policing that are produced in the form of a compliment. Take for example one woman saying to another, “Wow! I’ve never seen you in a dress. You look really great when you wear a dress and put on makeup”. The experienced subtext of this statement could be that not wearing dresses and makeup is less acceptable.

One of the functions of gender policing is maintaining perceived differences between two socially constructed gender categories (man and woman) which reciprocally reinforce the hegemonic gender order of masculinity holding more power in relation to femininity. In this section I will a) elaborate on policing gender within a binary system, b) provide examples of structural gender policing, and c) provide more expansive examples of gender policing within an interactional context since this is the focus of this study.

Policing Within a Gender Binary

The current social paradigm of gender does not allow for gender ambiguity (Bornstein, 1994; Bryant, 2006; Roughgarden, 2004), which is further complicated by the conflation of sex and gender categories (Dozier, 2005; Meyerowitz, 2002). In the United States, science and biology are often used to justify the essentialism of two gender categories (Lorber 1993). The logic poses that if there exists two biologically essential sex categories then there must be two essential gender categories. However, Lorber (1993) reminds us that

researchers often actively look for biological confirmations to support socially constructed assumptions about the gender binary.

An example of the pressure to conform to a gender binary is represented in the surgical alteration the sex organs of intersex infants (Preves, 2003). Painful and often unnecessary procedures are performed on infants with ambiguous sex characteristics in order to fit a child into a socially acceptable sex category. Furthermore, this decision about which sex category to put the child into is often based on arbitrary indicators such as the size of the child's genitalia (Preves, 2003). Wilchins (2004) notes that the surgical procedures performed on intersex genitalia is an example of the social reification of sex and gender binaries: Rather than adjusting the categories to fit the actual bodies, bodies are cut to fit within constructed categories. Being intersex is not pathological. Its construction as pathological is only possible within the social construction of sex and gender as dichotomous categories.

Scientific research has yet to show that there are two distinct sex categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2002), yet the borders of what it means to be male and what it means to be a female are continuously policed as if there are two and only two sexes. Despite a lack of consensus, even within the category of intersex, some have suggested that there are multiple biological variations that could expand the number of sex categories from three (i.e., male, female, intersex) to a possibility of five (Fausto-Sterling, 2002), for example. But even beyond that, it can be difficult to decide which biological characteristic is sufficient to justify the divide. Should the defining marker be based on chromosomes, sex characteristics, hormone levels, or something else?

Forms of policing the gender binary vary across interpersonal microaggressions to extreme physical violence. Davis (2012) uses the example of Gwen Araujo's murder on October 3, 2003 in Newark, CA as an explicit example of gender policing. Her killers, who met Gwen at a party, believed that they were deceived because Gwen was not forthcoming about her transgender history. They believed that this deception warranted the punishment of extreme physical violence and ultimately her death. Davis (2012) reminds us that transgender people are acutely aware of living in a culture that punishes gender expressions that are perceived to be different or inappropriate based on the gender order.

Structural Gender Policing

Gender policing often occurs through interpersonal interactions but is also reflective of a broader social structure of gender. Structural levels of gender policing are seen through the limitations of occupational, political, and social rights among those who are perceived to be doing gender inappropriately. The segregation of restrooms and laws that ban people for using the “wrong” restroom (Davis, 2012; Spade, 2006), for example, also reflect institutional regulations of gender borders. Laws that require transgender people to undergo sterilization before being allowed to change the sex category they were assigned to on their birth certificate is another example (Davis, 2012). Spade (2006) explains that these institutional regulations of things like changing one’s name on identity documents or sex markers on a driver’s licenses share similar themes about the judgment of “authenticity of trans identities, and all are based on the idea that the state should determine people’s gender identity using binary gender as the standard” (p. 66).

Systems of gender policing are seen in structures of employment as well. For example, Latino and African American men from a working class background are often

pressured to change their gender expression to mirror the expectations of White upper-middle class masculinity within the workplace in order to attain employment (e.g., Carter, 2011). In this example, the structural enforcement of gender is understood through an intersectional lens of race, class, and gender. Similarly, women who want to gain and maintain employment as dancers in a strip club associated with upper economic class clientele often have to reflect a different representation of female sexuality compared to the expectations of female sexuality at a strip club associated with working class clientele such as being more withholding (e.g., Trautner, 2005). Here we see the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality. The accomplishment of gender and sexuality is influenced by the norms and expectations associated with a particular class. As another example, women employed in historically male dominated workplaces often hit structural barriers to advancement and this is especially true for working women who become mothers (Moe & Shand, 2010). When some women come up against barriers in the workplace as parents this reinforces the implicit message that, as women, they should not be working (e.g., receiving the message that, “You’re having problems because this isn’t the place for women.”). These are all examples of structural limitations in occupational settings based on the structure of gender. In many of these examples the representation of the correct accomplishment of gender is intimately connected to the intersection of norms and expectations associated with other social identities such as class and race.

Interactional Gender Policing

The current study is focused on the construction and enforcement of gender within the context of social interactions and the examples I provide in this section reflect this level of policing. I will present examples within the context of a) homosocial interactions and b)

parents policing gender. In each of the examples presented, the common thread is the message that an individual or individuals are accomplishing gender inappropriately according to their assumed sex category. Gender policing in these instances acts as a method for holding others accountable to gender norms, expectations, and ideals within a given context. The following examples also show that these social interactions reflect and maintain the broader social structure of gender that conflates sex and gender and places hegemonic masculinity at a higher position of power than other forms of non-dominant masculinities and femininities.

Homosocial Interactions. Homosocial interactions refer to the nonsexual attractions and interactions between individuals who are assumed to be within the same sex-category (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Bird (1996) uses the term homosociality to examine the ways in which social interactions between heterosexual men both perpetuate a hegemonic masculinity and minimize non-hegemonic masculinities. The concept of “hegemonic masculinity” refers to the institutional maintenance of male domination over women (Connell, 1987). This structure suggests that there are dominant ways of accomplishing masculinity, reflected within a given social context, which reinforce the status quo of masculinity being associated with more power and privilege in relation to femininity (Connell, 1987).

Bird (1996) elaborates on the concept of hegemonic masculinity by observing the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is socially constructed through perceived consensual masculinity in homosocial spaces. Bird (1996) interviewed 9 heterosexual men about their homosocial interaction. Only heterosexual men were represented in this study; however, it is unclear if this was an explicit inclusion criterion for the purpose of the study. Two of the men identified as Black and the other nine as White. Their ages ranged from 23 to 50 years

old. Many reported growing up in a middle-class family, and two reported growing in a working-class family.

Recruitment took place within an academic community, and all of the men who participated had some level of post-secondary education. Bird (1996) also engaged in 25 hours of field observations of men participating in homosocial interactions within local bars and coffee houses. Those observed were not the same as those interviewed. In the interviews, participants were asked about their childhood experiences, social experiences (e.g., the types of social groups they most often interact in), and perceived appropriate and non-appropriate topics of conversations and shared interests within homosocial spaces (e.g., what is okay and not okay to talk about with other men). Participants were also asked how the group norms of masculinity matched and did not match their individual understanding of their gender identity.

Bird found that the accomplishment of “male” was often based on being “not female.” This supports other theories of gender which propose that the accomplishment of masculinity is often based on not doing femininity (e.g., Pleck, 1995). Bird (1996) found three emerging themes that are crucial to the social construction of hegemonic masculinity through social interactions. These themes are (a) emotional detachment, (b) competitiveness with other men, and (c) sexual objectification of women. The men who participated in the study often acknowledged how even if their own conceptualizations of masculinity differed from the group norm, there was an understanding of how to behave and those rules were followed in group settings with other men. The phenomenon of gender norms and expectations perpetuating through social interactions based on assumed group consensus rather than individual beliefs or attitudes has been supported empirically by other scholars as well (e.g.,

Kilmartin et al., 2008). Gender is more than static individual traits; gender is accomplished in social interaction based on assumed group norms and expectations.

Participants in Bird's (1996) study also described situations in which not following the rules (e.g., showing emotion, not competing, expressing dissent about stories that sexually objectify women) would often result in being excluded from homosocial spaces. There were negative consequences for not conforming. One participant in the study provided an example of a time when he decided to share his experience of feeling hurt within a group of men and stated that the other men reacted with (what he perceived to be) embarrassment. This experience left the participant feeling disappointed and reinforced the social norm that men do not share their emotions with other men (Bird, 1996).

This subtle enforcement of gender norms through interpersonal cues is a theme that came up in Gilbert's (2011) personal reflection during her experience trying to present herself as a man that was mentioned earlier in this chapter. She learned that showing affect and empathy resulted in receiving negative interpersonal feedback from other men. Gilbert (2011) also noticed that she had a harder time being read as a man when she was emotionally available and therefore learned to withdraw her emotions to successfully accomplish masculinity. Subtle policing from other men in homosocial spaces helped to shape her "accurate" portrayal of masculinity.

Another example of homosocial interactions perpetuating the standards of hegemonic masculinity is seen in McGuffey and Rich's (1999) study from observations at a summer camp. Participant observations analyzed for this study were the result of McGuffey's role as a camp counselor over a nine-week period at a summer camp that served a broad range of families in terms of both class and ethnicities. Among the children observed, 67% were

White, 25% were African American, 5% were Asian or Asian American, and 3% included other ethnic identities such as Arabic and Latino. The composition of the camp changed about every two weeks, and the camp averaged about 77 participants per week with children ranging in age from 5 to 12 years old. About 54% of the camp was comprised of girls and 56% of boys. While acting as a camp counselor, McGuffey kept a daily observational log of gender play and interactions among the children. Once a week McGuffey and Rich (1999) discussed the notes and observations at length. They were particularly interested in the ways that gender boundaries were created and how and when they were transgressed. In addition to participant observation McGuffey interviewed 22 of the children and six parents.

A theme that emerged in McGuffey and Rich's (1999) study is that boys in particular were bullied (i.e., singled out) when they were not accomplishing their masculinity appropriately and transgressed gender boundaries. They note that the pressure to accomplish a hegemonic masculinity appropriately (e.g., to devalue femininity) among the boys at the camp was often a result of avoiding the threat of being isolated from group membership or avoiding the risk of being physically and emotionally harassed (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). The kind of gender violence used to police masculinity is also represented in "gay-bashing." Gay-bashing (i.e., verbal and physical harassment directed at those who are perceived to be gay) occurs as a means for reinforcing appropriate masculinity by calling attention to behaviors associated with what is "not" masculine (Perry, 2009).

McGuffey and Rich (1999) noticed that girls at the camp had more flexibility to transgress gender boundaries and enter boys-only spaces. However, those who succeeded, often by being especially athletic and/or emotionally detached, were perceived as "weird" (and were therefore marginalized) by the other boys. The few girls who were accepted in

male-only spaces did so by presenting enough masculine “cues” (or not presenting feminine cues), and their acceptance was conditional on their gender being masculinized (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). Although transgressing gender boundaries did not have the same level of consequences for girls there is still the implicit message that they were not doing their gender inappropriately. Instead, the accomplishments of gender that did not fit the category of femininity were seen as something else. For example, girls were marginalized as being a “tomboy” or “weird.”

Parents’ Policing of Gender. Gender policing from an authority figure is seen when parents enforce gender norms, expectations, and ideals to fit their child’s behavior within sex/gender categories. A theme of gender policing was salient throughout Kane’s (2006) investigation of parents’ role in the accomplishment of gender. Kane’s (2006) analysis of parents’ contribution to the accomplishment of gender was based on 42 semi-structured 1-2 hour interviews with a diverse sample of parents. Everyone interviewed had at least one preschool-aged child. Kane’s (2006) interviews were conducted by her and her research assistant. They focused on parents’ perceptions about the way their children accomplished gender with a particular interest in how parents respond to their children’s perceived to be gender non-conforming behavior. Parents were given a small monetary compensation for their time and the interviews primarily took place in northern New England. The parents’ demographics ranged across class, race, and sexual orientation. There were also differences in the structure of the families; single parents, dual parents, blended families were all represented.

Although Kane (2006) had a specific interest in understanding how parents respond to their children’s gender non-conformity, she used an inductive coding process. All of the

interviews were transcribed, and Kane coded the transcripts for key issues and themes that were raised by all interviewees in response to the interview questions. Kane (2006) found that parents kept their children (boys in particular) in alignment with gender expectations by reacting when their children were doing gender inappropriately.

For heterosexual men in the study, enforcing gender norms with their boys was often motivated by its reinforcing their own masculinity (Kane, 2006). When their sons were successfully accomplishing what it means to be a “guy” this reciprocally reinforced their maleness by knowing the rules and teaching those rules to their sons. For heterosexual moms and gay parents, enforcing gender norms (especially for boys) was perceived as being motivated by a social responsibility to make sure their child was “doing it right” (Kane, 2006). These parents felt like they would be held accountable to their child’s appropriate presentation of gender. Homophobia was also salient as a motivator to police boys’ gender expression, such as not wanting their boys to be perceived as or become gay. This connects to the conflation between gender and sexual identities (e.g., Dozier, 2005; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Meyerowitz, 2002) such that assumptions about children being “gay” are often in response to perceived gender non-conformity (e.g., Klein, 2012). In general, parents in Kane’s (2006) study gave girls more room and flexibility to transgress the gender norms of femininity. This observation parallels the gender dynamics that McGuffey and Rich (1999) observed in their study of the gender construction and enforcement among children at a summer camp. Boys, more often than girls, seem to be held accountable to accomplishing gender appropriately.

Flexibility in the gender hierarchy. The notion of femaleness being inferior in relation to maleness is what Serano (2007) refers to as trans-misogyny. This context helps to

explain why girls, but not boys, sometimes have more flexibility in accomplishing gender. A threat to femininity is not seen as bad as a threat to masculinity. This is also reflected in the inclusion criteria that were created for Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood the *DSM-III* (Bryant, 2006). It was gender variant boys, not girls, who were being observed and investigated in the 1960s by Dr. Green at UCLA with the intention of trying to prevent the future development of homosexuality, transsexuality, and cross-dressing (Bryant, 2006). Initial theories about sexual orientation suggested that young boys who presented in stereotypically feminine ways would later grow up to be homosexuals, transvestites, or transsexuals in adulthood (Bryant, 2006). The behavioral reports from Dr. Green's studies in the 1960s were then used to inform the inclusion criteria for Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood in the *DSM-III* which was published in 1980 (Bryant, 2006). But there was not as much concern about girls who acted like boy (e.g., "tomboys"). Gender non-conforming girls were not taken to the doctor or psychologist to treat gender deviant behaviors as often as boys. Masculinity is placed in a higher position of status, and therefore behaviors that emulate it are often seen as more valued and therefore "understandable."

Although there may be more flexibility when accomplishing femininity, this does not mean that femininity is never policed. Some women, broadly speaking, have gained access to previously men's only spaces (e.g., high positions of power in a corporation or professional sports) but it is still not okay for women to "be" masculine (Wilchins, 2004). Professional female athletes, for example, are often asked to pose for magazine covers that seem to be in service of the male gaze, often in sexualized positions, showing skin, or wearing make-up and their hair let down. Women can be athletes in masculinized sports so long as they still convey their femininity in other ways. Women can wear pantsuits so long

as they are purchased in the women's department. Women can wear short hair so long as they do not actually start looking like men. Lesbians can be butch and accomplish masculinity so long as they are identifiable as female and do not identify as men.

This is highlighted in Lucal's (1999) personal account of negotiating the gender binary that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. Lucal's (1999) experience of identifying as a woman but being read as a man often leaves her in the position of having to explain and justify her identity as a woman in everyday interactions. Some of the examples that she gives to provide this justification are things like carrying multiple forms of identification, wearing nail polish, or using her voice as an indicator of her sex category (Lucal, 1999). What is reflected in these examples is the anticipation of and vigilance about gender policing.

Lucal is aware that others she encounters may have negative reactions to her gender presentation or to not being able to identify her as a "boy or a girl." This relates to Hollander's (2013) conceptualization of gender accountability. Social interactions are based on individuals' automatic orientation to someone's assumed sex-category, assessing gender expectations, and holding others accountable (i.e., gender enforcement) to these expectations. As a result, Lucal (1999) explains that she avoids spaces that are heavily policed like public restrooms or dressing rooms in department stores. She also shares that she takes on responsibility for others' discomfort in response to her presentation, which is often read as gender ambiguous, by saying things like, "It happens all the time." There is a lot of work and energy involved in negotiating an identity that is continuously policed. Each interaction in which she is asked to authenticate her identity with the female sex category or when she is in the position of having to take responsibility for others' misattribution conveys the message

that she is not conforming to the set of rules and expectations associated with her sex category.

Personal and political consequences. It is the consistent feedback about accomplishing gender inappropriately that Wilchins (2004) talks about as being connected to a deep source of shame. As she puts it, “not mastering your gender is like not mastering toilet training. If people can’t tell if you’re a boy or a girl, they feel uncomfortable and/or angry, and you feel humiliated and embarrassed” (Wilchins, 2004, p.20). Wilchins (2004) suggests that this intra-personal experience of shame contributes to the silence about gender non-conformity and experiences of gender policing in social-political movements about human rights. For example, feminists fighting for women’s rights have been attacked by being called “mannish.” Wilchins (2004) explains that “feminists were forced to press their political agenda on the one hand while fending off genderist attacks on their personal lives on the other” (p. 7).

A consequence that occurred in response to this kind of gender policing within the women’s movement was a compromise of women being presented as equal but still different, such that “women could do anything men could do and still retain their femininity” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 8). The gender system was preserved in service of gaining political rights. Those who did transgress the gender borders had to be kicked out of the inner circle. As an example, in 1968 anyone suspected of being a lesbian or bisexual was removed from the National Organization for Women (Wilchins, 2004). A similar phenomenon of removing gender issues from the political agenda was present in the gay rights movement. Part of proving “we’re just like you” came at a cost of separating gender non-conformity from gay issues.

Throughout her historical review of women's rights, gay rights and transgender rights, Wilchins (2004) continues to summarize the missed opportunities to support gender rights and the right to transcend gender stereotypes. Instead, the dichotomous and hierarchical structure of gender in which masculinity is placed at a higher position of power continues to be maintained. She suggests that this is a result of a political calculation whereby activists try to prove that the minority can fit within the "mainstream." This becomes both a cause and a result of the intra-personal shame experienced when a group defies gender norms and expectations. From Wilchins' (2004) perspective, it is *unlikely* that "we can hope to really cure homophobia or sexism if we avoid discussing gender" (p. 20). The silence around the experience of gender policing maintains the invisibility of the larger oppressive structure of gender and the invisibility of trans-misogyny. An intention of this study is to make the invisible more visible by continuing a conscious discussion of how the enforcement of gender conformity is experienced through interpersonal interactions.

LGBTQ Community

The previous sections focus on the conceptual bases for understanding the construction, maintenance, and enforcement of gender. A framework for understanding gender policing with examples of gender policing on structural and interactional levels have also been presented. The following section will address the construct of "community." This study is focused on how the concept of gender policing, within the broader social system of gender, is experienced with LGBTQ communities. This section will provide a conceptual framework for (a) understanding the definition of a community, (b) the complicated meaning of an LGBTQ community, (c) the importance of community within the context of LGBTQ

identity development, and (d) the ways in which the concept of an LGBTQ community is being used for the purpose of this study.

Defining Community

Lev (2007) defines community as “a group of people, a collectivity, in which the members share something in common, whether interest, values, or characteristics” (p. 160). Within community spaces there is an assumption of “presumed trust or camaraderie between members of a community based on shared values or beliefs, in addition to an exclusion of outsiders” (Lev, 2007, p. 160). This definition makes sense intuitively yet still makes the boundaries of who is and is not part of a part of a community blurry and abstract. This ambiguity is also true when trying to find a consensual definition of an LGBTQ community. In fact, no such monolithic community exists (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Firestein, 2007; Haldeman, 2007; Lev, 2007; Liddle, 2007; Potoczniak, 2007).

Defining an LGBTQ Community

When “LGBTQ” is used as superordinate category it conflates the experiences of sexual and gender identities. It can cause unique experiences within that category (e.g., experiences specific to lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, bisexual men, transgender men, transgender women, gender-queer, and queer individuals) to become dismissed or made invisible (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007) and it also does not account for the influence of intersecting identities such as race or class. The complex interactions among sexual identities, gender identities, cultural identities, and individual variables leads to a great degree of difference between and within the LGBTQ spectrum (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007).

For example, the length of an acronym used to represent the community can start to become very long and confusing. Consider LGBTQQIAAP, this acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, allies, and pansexual (See Appendix I for glossary of terms). One reason the acronym continues to grow, sometimes referred to as the “alphabet soup,” is the attempt to celebrate the diversity of distinct identities within the community rather than assuming that everyone shares the same experience. However, a consequence is that it can start to blur the message of unity that a community represents. The lack of consensus about how to define the LGBTQ community can make it difficult to clearly communicate the needs of the community.

Another reason the acronym representing the LGBTQ community starts to get muddled is because of the complex interactions among sex, gender, and sexual identities. In the United States, one’s sex, gender, and sexual identity are often assumed to be immutable and linked. However, sex, gender, and sexual identities are not the same thing (see Appendix I for glossary of terms). In addition, someone’s assigned sex category, gender identity and sexual identity are not fixed and can shift over time. There is sometimes tension within the LGBTQ community about what the focus of the community should be. Is it about sexual identities, for example? This perspective may help gay men and lesbian women push for civil rights that allow for assimilation into hetero-normative structures, but it leaves out those who are marginalized on the basis of their sex category or gender identity (e.g., Wilchins, 2004).

Furthermore, there can also be a conflict within the community about what acceptance should look like. For example, extending access to civil rights such as marriage or working in the military to lesbian women and gay men does not change the structural

system that views cisgender and heterosexual as the dominant norm. Some activists within the LGBTQ community have criticized the lesbian and gay political movement for working toward assimilation and integration into a hetero-normative society rather than destabilizing the system that created inequity in the first place (e.g., Seidman, 2002). As I presented earlier, the structural system of gender that holds masculinity at a higher position of power in relation to femininity is maintained through the assumed differences between static binary sex and gender categories. This system of power is what becomes reflected in the structural and interpersonal enforcements of gender conformity.

A pattern of gender conformity in political movements is articulated in Wilchins' (2004) overview of civil rights movements for women, gay and lesbian individuals, and transgender individuals. Wilchins (2004) points out the presence of conformity to gender norms, expectations, and ideals associated with the sex binary in each movement. For example, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, during the women's right's movement, "in 1968, the National Organization for Women went so far as to purge any member who was or was suspected of being lesbian or bisexual" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 10). The suspicion of someone being a lesbian or bisexual woman was often based on women who did not conform to female gender expectations. During the gay rights movement, "gay issues" were separated from "transgender issues" which served to reinforce that gay men and lesbian women were "just like" heterosexual cisgender men and women, though they just happen to partner with someone of the same sex. This argument further marginalized transgender individuals and gender non-conforming bisexual, lesbian, queer, and gay individuals (e.g., Wilchins, 2004).

Another problem that comes up with trying to define the LGBTQ community is seen in the considerable strain experienced by LGBTQ people of color who feel that they have to

pick between predominantly White LGBTQ community spaces and their cultural, ethnic or racial identity communities (e.g., Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Firestein, 2007; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Green, 1997; Haldeman, 2007; Jackson & Brown, 1996; Lev, 2007; Liddle, 2007; Potoczniak, 2007; Seidman, 2002; Weston, 1997). Whereas White women may feel that inclusion in a lesbian community offers the experience of “finding community,” for women of color the experience of negotiating the boundaries of community and connection with their ethnic community and lesbian community may be experienced as a conflict (Weston, 1997). There may also be differences in expectations about being “out” and to whom in predominantly White LGBTQ spaces vs. expectations among LGBTQ people of color (e.g., Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). As a result, LGBTQ people of color may establish relationships with other LGBTQ people of color when possible (Liddle, 2007), leading to subcategories within categories.

Again, one inclusive and coherent model of an LGBTQ community does not exist. The fluidity of sexual and gender identities blurs the construction of community boundaries given that there is not an “end point” or final destination across identity development in these domains (e.g., Rust, 2003). It remains increasingly complex to delineate the boundaries of communities with respect to LGBTQ identities and yet, as I describe in the next section, the construction of these communities matters.

Community and LGBTQ Identity Development

Affiliation with a community or reference group is unequivocally connected to a positive identity development among lesbian women (Liddle, 2007; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), gay men (Haldeman, 2007; Reynolds & Hanjorgins, 2002), bisexual women (e.g., Firestein, 2007), bisexual men (Potoczniak, 2007), and transgender individuals (Lev, 2007).

Despite various critiques of identity development models with respect to LGBT identities, the significance of community engagement within these identity categories is often unchallenged (Liddle, 2007). There is no standard for the ways in which someone is supposed to engage with a community or reference group (Haldeman, 2007), but the experience can be very important.

The construction and affiliation with a community can be healing (e.g., Peck, 1998), and community connection can act as a buffer against minority stress (e.g., Meyer, 2003). Community membership within the context of LGBTQ identities is often associated with a sense of acceptance and a source of social support that exceeds support within individuals' family of origin (Kurdek & Schmidt, 1987). It can also provide an opportunity to develop a de-stigmatized view of self within the context of role models in a community (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). In a sense, communities provide the context for re-socialization from an affirming perspective. Rust (1996) reminds us that individuals within White Western cultures are often socialized as heterosexual by default.

Imagine, for example, a boy who is beginning to understand himself as something other than straight. If he were to look through published books on the topic of homosexuality he might find a definition that fits. However, these portrayals may also be associated with pathological traits given the historical context of both the medical and mental health professions' pathologizing perspectives on gender and sexual identity deviance (e.g., Bryant, 2006). The experience might go something like this: "Oh what a relief, I do exist, this definition fits with how I see myself . . . and I guess these other [negative] things must be true too." The homophobic and transphobic undertones that are present in published literature on homosexual and transgender identities may also reflect the attitudes of a social

climate that stigmatizes LGBTQ individuals. A community offers an opportunity to unlearn hateful messages and stigma (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). Haldeman (2007) argues that a community can serve as an attachment figure in and of itself that can provide LGBTQ individuals with corrective experiences through relationships with the community. As another example, Lev (2007) explains that in the development of transgender communities, “transgender people had to change their self-perception from one of people with mental health problems to one of individuals deserving respect. They needed to develop a sense of meaning in their community identity and have the experience of agency and empowerment that comes from belonging to a larger group” (p. 160).

Using “LGBTQ” in this Study

For the purposes of this study I use the term “LGBTQ community” to refer to interactions among individuals who identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrums. This may involve interpersonal interactions that occur in large groups, small groups, or one-on-one. This may occur in public spaces or private spaces. The linked association in any of these situations is the assumed shared connection to an abstract LGBTQ experience (e.g., nonheterosexual and/or non-cisgender experience). There is a shared experience of living within an oppressive social climate with respect to homophobia and transphobia. There is a potential intersection in the ways that gender and LGBTQ community borders are negotiated in these instances. The focus of this study is to expand the literature on the social construction and enforcement of gender within social interactions. I specifically examined the experiences of interpersonal interactions among individuals who identify outside of the heterosexual category and/or away from their sex assigned at birth within a particular geographical location, time, and historical context.

Given that the language of an LGBTQ community continues to be used to communicate some aspect of a shared experience with respect to social oppression and because of the intertwined social and political histories within LGBTQ sub-categories (Lev, 2007), I will continue to use this language throughout this document. The language of a LGBT (and sometimes LGBTQ) community is also used in the city that this study was conducted; this acronym continues to be used to describe an abstract community.

Again, the focus of this study is the social construction and enforcement of gender. The context of these interactions occurring within the LGBTQ community provides an important lens for understanding this phenomenon, in addition to the intersection of other social identities. The purpose of this study is not to focus on the unique experiences of a subgroup within the LGBTQ spectrum (e.g., bisexual women). At the same time, every effort will be made to not conflate the experiences of those within LGBTQ communities or overlook important social identity intersections.

Community Border Policing

The following section will continue the discussion of gender policing and community but also emphasize the group construction of identity borders and the ways in which those boundaries are enforced. I will first start with a conceptual overview of identity work in relation to groups as described by Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996). This will provide a framework for understanding the social phenomenon of community border policing. Next I will provide examples of border policing within in the LGBTQ community. Finally I will provide an example of racial identity policing to parallel the ways in which within group policing can sometimes occur among marginalized populations.

Identity Work as Group Process

Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) urge social psychologists to move beyond looking at the individual perspective of identity development to acknowledge the construction of identity that occurs through group interactions. For them, identities are accomplished for and affirmed by others, which reciprocally reflects that identity back to one's self (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). It is the "joint creation of the symbolic resources upon which those presentations depend" that Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) refer to as "subcultural identity work" (p. 115). Available resources are used to create codes that signify a group identity and that get used to inform the presentation of that identity. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) suggest that the "work" is accomplished on two separate levels: the group work to construct the rules and signifiers of a group identity and the individual level in which the group rules are used to inform a representation of self to be affirmed by others.

Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) suggest that ineffective identity work could result in experiencing "feelings of anxiety, isolation, insignificance, confusion, and inauthenticity" (p. 122). Even further, they suggest that that successful identity work is necessary to "maintain emotional and cognitive equilibrium – or, more simply, sanity – because we must signify ourselves to others in a consistent enough way to generate consistent feedback about who and what we are" (p. 122). Identity work is thus a representation of constructing a group identity but also a reflection of how people see themselves.

It is important to note that identity work may not always be intentional. However, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) propose that "at one time such acts must have been

intentional” but that “identity work can become a matter of habit and slip beneath conscious awareness” (p. 119). An example of this is in the decisions that are made when buying a particular product. There may be intention behind what that product communicates (e.g., a pair of shoes with stereotyped gender connotations, such as high heels). However, once that product has been purchased, continuing to use that brand may be a result of habit.

There are four categories of identity work that Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) use to conceptualize the construction and maintenance of shared identities. These categories include (a) defining (e.g., developing representations and meaning of the identity), (b) coding (e.g., developing a set of rules), (c) affirming (e.g., deciding who has the authority to affirm the identity and how it will be done), and (d) policing (e.g., calling attention to those who are violating the rules in order to maintain the group boundaries). They refer to these processes as components of subcultural identity work. These processes do not need to occur sequentially but Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) argue that all four must be present to be successful in constructing and maintaining a shared or group identity.

Once a group has been identified as its own category (either by those within the group or a label imposed from outsiders) group consensus yields definitions and identifying codes to represent those who are included in the group. Identifying codes of a particular group are then used as markers for framing the ways in which the identity can be accomplished and how to identify those who are “fake” and/or who might not be following the rules appropriately (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). There can also be a dual purpose to identity policing. Identity policing calls attention to those who do not belong in the group or who otherwise need to adjust to better fit within the group. This process reaffirms the

identity of the one doing the policing. In order to police an identity and call attention to the rule that was broken, one has to know what the rule was to begin with.

Identity work can also contribute to within-group tension due to the continuous negotiation of group boundaries. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) suggest that “policing may be especially vigorous in subordinate groups if the identity at stake is one that aids group survival in the face of a hostile society” (p. 127). When the risks are higher in terms of how a group identity is represented there may be more tension about negotiating group boundaries and more policing of that identity. The following examples in the next two sections highlight this identity work process and identity policing in particular. Identity policing within the LGBTQ community will be presented first, followed by racial identity policing within a Black youth community center.

LGBTQ Community Borders

Narratives of policing community borders are heard across multiple social categories. Lev (2007) explains that “all communities by their very nature have permeable boundaries and struggle with issues of membership and exclusion” (p. 164). The tension of deciding who is accepted and who is not is thought to be part of the process of developing and maintaining a “community.” This is similar to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) definition of identity policing which is “the protection of the meaning of an identity and enforcement of the code for signifying it” that is part of identity work in a group process (p. 123). There are ever-evolving rules within the construction of communities, and those claiming membership to those groups are often held accountable to those subtle rules, codes, or norms. In this section I will briefly present examples of LGBTQ community border policing.

Lesbian experiences. In the book, *Challenging Lesbian Norms: Intersex, Transgender, Intersectional, and Queer Perspectives*, Aragon talks about the “ludicrousness of spending so much energy on defining what is authentically female or lesbian” (2006, p.4) and highlights the close connection between legitimacy and exclusivity. Aragon’s membership in the group was challenged by other lesbian women because of her experience as intersex. This makes her less of a woman and less of a lesbian, from the group’s perspective. The theme that Aragon highlights here is that what is considered real or authentic is often defined by naming those who are fake or inauthentic. As Liddle (2007) states, “a lesbian who does not conform to the normative values of the community may be excluded by that community for not conforming” (p. 63). This process reflects the operation of power within groups and the stratification of status hierarchies.

Transgender experiences. In the book *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, Spade (2006) shares a personal recollection of being arrested for trying to use the men’s bathroom in 2002. Soon after this arrest, Spade was criticized within transgender communities for not adequately “passing” as male and therefore as not being “authentically” trans. Some of the interviews among participants in Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey’s (1997) study of transgender identity formation reflect a similar experience. Participants in their study often felt pressure within transgender communities to be consistently read as either male or female. Spade (2006) explains that some people within transgender communities are “concerned that the legitimacy of trans identity in the eyes of a transphobic culture is frequently tied to how normal and traditionally masculine or feminine trans people appear” (p.65). Again, this reflects the process of policing what is assumed to be authentically male or female. Within a transphobic culture, not accomplishing gender

appropriately may be assumed to reflect poorly on the collective communities of transgender individuals who may wish to be seen as normal or whose personal safety depends on being seen as normal.

There is considerable variation within transgender communities in terms of gender identity, expression, and embodiment (Broad, 2002; Lev, 2007). Historically, the inclusion of multiple forms of identity, expressions, and embodiment under the broader category “transgender” was a political move to build alliances against the oppression associated with gender non-conformity (Stryker, 2008). However, this variation contributes to some of the border policing that can occur within transgender communities. Individuals within transgender communities can be held accountable to the appropriate accomplishment of a transgender identity within a given context (Lev, 2007). For example, transgender communities sometimes separate the “real” transgender individuals (i.e., big “T”) from those who share some characteristics but not all of them (i.e., little “t”). This distinction is often defined by an individual’s interest in taking steps to physically transition to align an identity with embodiment (Broad, 2002; Wilchins, 2004). Sometimes the line is drawn between those who actually seek out medical services to change their bodies and those who do not, though this distinction marginalizes those who may be interested in gender affirming medical procedures but do not have the financial and social resources to access them.

Part of internal or within-group gender policing within transgender communities is also an artifact from the requirement of gender conformity for transgender individuals to access medical services to align their sex category with their gender identity (Denny, 1992; Stryker, 2008). Individuals seeking gender affirming procedures have historically been put in the position of having to recreate an “origin myth” about when and how their transgender

identity started and about how they would accomplish gender after transitioning. Identifying as heterosexual and successfully “passing” as one’s identified gender, for example, were often required (Denny, 1992; Stryker, 2008).

Policing of the “T” within LGB. Beyond the phenomenon of border policing within the category “transgender” there also exists a tension with respect to whether or not transgender identities should be included in the broader category LGBT (Lev, 2007). Halberstam (1998) refers to an example of this as the “Butch/FTM Border Wars.” For example, some feminist butch lesbians see transgender men as “sell outs” in the women’s movement for identifying as men and as responsible for erasing the butch community. Some transgender men see butch lesbians as being too afraid to transition. The border wars are in response to beliefs about how masculinity as a resource should be used to reflect an identity, expression, or embodiment (Halberstam, 1998). Similarly, there is a tension and suspicion among some feminist lesbians around the inclusion of transgender women in women-only spaces (e.g., Michigan’s Womyn’s Festival) (Wilchins, 2004). These are just a few simplistic examples of complex phenomena, but they help to demonstrate the process of defining and maintaining group boundaries which lead to within group discrimination.

It is also important to remember that there is an intertwined relationship between transgender communities and the lesbian and gay civil rights movement (Haldeman, 2007; Lev, 2007; Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 1997). For example, Pride events (i.e., public celebrations of LGBTQ communities) commemorate the Stonewall rebellion in 1969 in which patrons of the Stonewall Inn revolted against police raids that were common among underground lesbian and gay community venues (Haldeman, 2007; Stryker, 2008). Although this was not the first rebellion of its kind (Stryker, 2008), the Stonewall rebellion marks a

shift in a collective consciousness against shame and toward visibility and celebration of LGBTQ identities (Haldeman, 2007). What is often forgotten in this history is that drag queens and gender non-conforming female-bodied people, low-income or homeless people, and people of color, were the ones on the frontlines of this rebellion (Pharr, 1997; Stryker, 2008). Instead, those organizing and celebrating Pride as public events tend to be predominantly White, middle class, cisgender gay men and lesbian women at the Stonewall rebellion. Transgender history within LGB history is continually erased. Similarly, the history of people of color contributing to the gay rights movement is erased through the exclusion of people of color in lesbian and gay institutions such as gay bars (e.g., Han, 2008).

Transgender and LGB communities share historical roots and parallels in the struggles for civil rights, yet the tension about whether or not transgender experiences should be included in LGB communities continues to be in question. As members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community celebrate political gains toward public recognitions of diverse sexual identities as “normal,” the needs and rights of transgender individuals are often forgotten and left out (Lev, 2007; Stryker, 2008). This deepens the gap between transgender communities and the larger “LGBTQ” community. Currah (2001) argues that part of the tension comes from the perceived threat of transgender identities to political gains within the lesbian and gay civil rights movement. This fits with Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's (1996) conceptualization of identity policing being heightened when the group's survival is at stake within a hostile society. For example, many of the arguments for lesbian and gay rights are based on the assumed stability of sexual orientation (Currah, 2001). If there can be a shift in gender then this could create a shift in sexual identities. The stability of these categories would be disrupted.

Another threat, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, is that of trying to separate gender from sexual identities. “Gender issues” (e.g., gender non-conformity) were displaced as a problem experienced by transgender individual and separated from the gay agenda that was working to show that lesbian and gay individual are “just like everyone else” (Wilchins, 2004). Proving that gay and lesbian identities fit within the bounds of normalcy was accomplished by showing that gay and lesbian identities could be understood within the bounds of gender conformity (e.g., masculine gay men and feminine lesbians). This political argument marginalized transgender individuals within the LGBTQ community by creating two camps: the issues related to sexual identities and “their” issues related to gender. This argument in favor of showing that homosexuality is “normal” by means of homonormativity also marginalizes gender non-conforming lesbian, bisexual, and gay individuals in the LGBT community and assumes that individuals with the LGB community are not affected by the pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. It was not until 2000 that gender expression and identities were added to the Human Rights Campaign mission statement (Wilchins, 2004). The social and political tension around the inclusion of “T” with LGB continues to influence the identity work involved in representing and identifying with an LGBTQ community.

Bisexual experiences. One thing that connects the experiences of transgender and bisexual individuals is the negotiation of a binary system and a sense of invisibility within LGBTQ communities. While transgender individuals are often seen as a threat to the perceived naturalness of a sex and gender binary (i.e., male/man or female/woman), bisexual individuals can be seen as a threat to the sexual identity binary (i.e., gay or straight). The political tension between transgender communities and lesbian/ gay communities parallels some of the tension between lesbian/gay communities and bisexual men/women (Firestein,

2007; Potoczniak, 2007). For example, within lesbian communities, bisexual women's perceived ambivalence about their sexual identity is seen as a threat to political gains (Rust, 2003). Men who identify as bisexual disrupt the notion of there being a "pure" and biologically based sexual identity that is not based on choice (Potoczniak, 2007). Potoczniak (2007) explains that if being gay were perceived as a preference or choice, "gay men may fear that their rights gained on the basis of a dichotomous, non-fluid, and inborn sexual orientation could be jeopardized" (p. 125).

Individuals who identify as bisexual often feel like they are living as both "insiders" and "outsiders" (Ochs, 1996). They are often highly stigmatized both within heterosexual communities and lesbian and gay communities (Firestein, 2007). There can be a tremendous amount of pressure for bisexual individuals to "pick a side" (Firestein, 2007) or to adopt an identity that fits within a dichotomy based on the gender of their partner (Potoczniak, 2007). In her interviews with bisexual and lesbian women, Esterberg (1997) noted that bisexual women in her study often felt that only parts of themselves could be reflected within lesbian communities, thus being only partially accepted and recognized. Similarly, in their semi-structured interviews with nine bisexual and/or transgender individuals, Cashore and Tuason (2009) found many participants felt frustrated with the invisibility and invalidation of bisexual and transgender identities within LGBT communities. This relates to another critique of using the acronym LGBTQ. In instances when the focus is really on lesbian and gay identities, the needs of bisexual and transgender identities remain ignored.

Black Identity Policing

The experience of racial identity policing, or specifically Black identity policing, is not the same thing as LGBTQ identity policing or gender policing. However, there are

similarities within the experience of identity policing across marginalized groups.

Furthermore, the experiences of identity policing often intersect with other identity statuses (e.g., class, nationality, ability). In this section I will present experiences of Black identity policing specifically.

There is an ongoing identity struggle within Black American communities around the boundaries of authenticity. The abstract boundaries of these communities are used to negotiate who is “real” and who is the “sell out” (e.g., Binder, 1999; Collins, 1990; Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Clay (2003) emphasizes that these boundaries are particularly important for the creation of a community. In order to have an identity-based community there needs to be some cohesion around how that identity is being defined and maintained. This reiterates Lev’s (2007) point about the expected struggle around inclusion and exclusion when forming communities.

Black youth community policing. Clay (2003) uses ethnographic data from a racially mixed, low-income youth community center in Northern California to demonstrate the use of a cultural capital (e.g., hip-hop culture) to construct boundaries of status hierarchies within Black youth communities. At the time, she was working as a volunteer tutor. The center was comprised mostly of individuals who identified as African American and some who identified as Latino and Asian.

Clay (2003) uses Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of “cultural capital” to exemplify how social boundaries are created. Clay (2003) uses the term cultural capital to communicate something abstract or symbolic that connotes status. Clay’s (2003) assertion is similar to that of Hall (1992), who proposes that although the perceived authenticity of one’s ethnic identity is marked by genetic phenotypes such as skin color, there may also be additional socially

constructed cultural markers that transcend biological markers such as skin color.

Furthermore, Hall (1992) suggests that these social markers of inclusion may be particularly important for those within the social group but mean less for those outside of it. Those who are insiders to the group or who want to be insiders are more aware of what the markers are and what they mean. For example, as a White woman adult, how to construct an authentic Black youth identity and the cultural capital I could use to do so would not be as meaningful or useful to me and therefore I am less likely to be aware of these cues.

Clay (2003) parallels her ideas about the construction of Black youth identity to that of Butler's (1990) discussion of the social construction of female identity. Butler (1990) suggests that gender identity is based on the *expression* of gender. Clay also builds from Goffman's (1959) use of the term "front stage" performance such as using clothing, language, and behavioral patterns to communicate an identity. Clay (2003) suggests that there is an integration of socially constructed identities through interpersonal interactions, performances and accomplishments. Furthermore, the use of specific cultural capital to signal authentic inclusion within a particular group, is often interpreted as representing an internal or essential part of a person's identity (Clay, 2003). It is this interpretation, viewing individual representations of a culture as somehow essential, which reciprocally support the legitimacy of the community boundaries.

Clay (2003) discusses one example from her observations of an African American 13-year-old youth, Tiffany. Clay explains that in her first observation of Tiffany "she had shoulder length, straight hair that she had pulled back tightly into a ponytail and was wearing baggy, pale blue corduroys and a long-sleeve, gray T-shirt" and that she spent most of her first day in the center quietly standing in the corner of the room (2003, p. 1353). The next

time she saw Tiffany, her clothing had significantly changed and reflected something more like the images of African American women in hip-hop culture. Clay (2003) argues that this change in her fashion (using the cultural capital of hip-hop culture) granted her acceptance among other youth at the community center because she was perceived to be more “authentic.” Clay (2003) also noticed that Tiffany changed the way in which she interacted with other boys at the center, such as generating attention from the boys through a tug-of-war dynamic of chasing and playfully being chased by the boys at the center. There were times when she would provoke the boys and other times she would act as if the attention was annoying and unwanted. This was part of gaining acceptance and status within the Black community at this particular youth center. Her racialized accomplishment of gender reflects the importance of using intersectionality as a critical lens. Tiffany's accomplishments of race and gender, based on specific contextual norms, are intertwined (not additive) and cannot be separated.

Although Clay's (2003) article focuses on the boundary construction and accomplishment of racial identity through the use of cultural capital, her observations are also relevant to this study. Clay's example of Tiffany's shift in behavior exemplifies an instance of both implicit gender and racial identity policing. Tiffany learned to perform her race and gender differently in order to be granted inclusion into the community.

Summary, Statement of Research Question, and Need for Current Study

Summary

This study is built off of the conceptual foundation of the social construction of gender through interpersonal interactions (e.g., gender as performance [Butler, 1990]; gender as an accomplishment [West & Zimmerman, 1987]), which reciprocally reflects an

oppressive gender system (Acker, 1992). The broader system of gender within White Western culture is predicated on assumed biologically essential sex and gender binaries (Lorber, 1993) within the context of a hierarchical power differential. The dichotomy of sex and gender categories is both a result of and a mechanism for maintaining the power distribution of men over women (Lorber, 1994).

Gender policing or the enforcement of gender conformity is one way in which the gender system continues (Spade, 2006). This is seen through institutional or structural levels of gender policing and through interpersonal interactions. Gender policing through interpersonal interactions is presented in the literature on homosociality. Homosocial interactions provide a context for understanding the social construction of gender through the ways individuals hold others accountable to gender norms, expectations and ideals within a given context (e.g., Bird, 1996; Hollander, 2013). This is also seen in the ways in which parents feel pressure or accountability to reinforce gender norms and punish gender non-conforming behaviors that are exhibited by their children (e.g., Kane, 2006).

My argument is that the phenomenon of gender policing goes beyond gender socialization and the accomplishment of gender. Much like Hollander's (2013) definition of gender enforcement, I understand gender policing to be the enforcement of gender conforming with the implied message that there will be negative consequences associated with not conforming. Thus, there is an element of power involved either on a structural level or interactional level that influences the message that people are accomplishing gender inappropriately. Gender policing is about the regulation of what is expected to be essentially male or essentially female within assumed to be biologically natural sex and gender binaries.

I am interested in the way gender policing in social interactions intersects with the boundaries of the LGBTQ community borders.

Gender and sexual identities are often mistakenly conflated (Dozier, 2005; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Meyerowitz, 2002); someone's gender non-conforming behavior does not indicate their being gay or lesbian. At the same time, an accomplishment of gender that deviates from dominant norms, expectations, and ideals is sometimes used to signal or communicate one's connection to LGBTQ communities (e.g., VanNewkirk, 2006; Wilchins, 2004).

I am interested in how the enforcement of gender conformity operates within the boundaries of LGBTQ communities. Connection to an LGBTQ community is considered to be an important part of developing a positive sexual or gender identity when one moves away from the privileged category of heterosexuality (e.g., Firestein, 2007; Haldeman, 2007; Liddle, 2007; Potoczniak, 2007) or when their gender moves away from their sex assigned at birth (e.g., Lev, 2007). I am interested in the process of identity work in relation to group membership (e.g., Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996) as it intersects with regulation of gender categories.

The consequences of gender policing within LGBTQ communities might have different meanings for different individuals. Some may experience gender policing as part of the socialization process into a new community while others may leave these experiences feeling as though they have been excluded from that community. There may be instances in which individuals feel that they need to change or adjust their gender identity, expression, or embodiment in order to be granted access and acceptance into an LGBTQ community and some who do not interpret experiences in this way. These were not hypotheses that I tested

but rather possibilities within the context of policing sex and gender categories and LGBTQ community borders.

Statement of Research Question and Design

This study is an exploratory and qualitative investigation of the social construction and enforcement of gender through social interactions. I am specifically interested in how gender policing is experienced within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale (pseudonym), the specific location of this study. The phrase “LGBTQ community” is being used in this document to refer to experiences among those who identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrums in at least one context in their lives.

Framing the experiences of gender through a lens of policing may have limited the participants’ perspectives or what they could have shared. Instead, I used a broader frame about the social construction and enforcement of gender and how this intersects with the construction and maintenance of LGBTQ community borders. I asked participants about their experiences within LGBTQ communities, and I did not use the term “policing.”

In a group discussion format, my interview questions focused more on expectations within the LGBTQ community, how they are communicated, and how they impact the way in which people see themselves and how they want to be seen within the LGBTQ community. The guiding premise of this study was to describe participants’ experiences within the LGBTQ community as they negotiate and present a sense of self in relation to others in the LGBTQ community. Part of my analysis looked at how gender, as a system of power, influenced or informed these experiences. I wanted to examine the intersection of gender and LGBTQ community borders.

To explore the experiences of gender within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale, I used a qualitative method that was informed by the philosophical assumptions of constructivism (e.g., Hansen, 2004; Ponterotto, 2005; Schwandt, 2000), critical theory (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005), and phenomenology (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Wertz, 2011). My research question was a theoretical fit within a qualitative paradigm because of the focus on understanding participants' experiences of a particular phenomenon (Wang, 2008). Within this study, the phenomenon explored was the enforcement of gender conformity, and how this is experienced within the broader context of the social construction of gender and the construction of LGBTQ community borders.

Describing the social location of participants' experiences is also important to this study. The way gender is constructed and enforced is informed by the context of other intersecting social categories such as race, nationality, class, age, religion, and ability (e.g., Fenstermaker & West, 2002; Fischer & DeBord, 2013; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). The intersection of multiple identities informs the constructed meanings among participants about when they believe they are being "policed" by their peers.

Focus groups were used as the primary method for data collection. Hollander (2004) asserts that the use of focus groups as a research design can provide researchers with important information about the construction of realities through social interactions by observing the ways people communicate with each other. Thus, focus groups are a good fit with the analysis of how gender is constructed and enforced within social interactions. The content of the focus group discussions were be analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborn (2003). As a

supplemental analysis, I will first describe the social contexts and interpersonal process of the focus groups as recommended by Hollander (2004).

I intentionally kept the sampling criteria for this study as open as possible rather than focusing on a single identity in an attempt to reflect the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ community where this study took place. Criteria for this study included: (a) being 18 years old or older, (b) being available to meet in person in Riverdale for the focus group, (c) identifying on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context of their life, (d) identifying with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or having had experiences in Riverdale that were predominantly LGBTQ, and (e) being interested in discussing their experiences in a group setting.

Summary of key assumptions. This project's planning and implementation were guided by a series of foundational assumptions, summarized below.

1. Gender policing refers to the implicit and explicit feedback that one is accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms, expectations and ideals with the implied meaning that not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences.
2. Gender policing is one component within a broader system of gender socialization and accountability. Gender socialization involves the construction of gender through social interactions (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1987) and gendered institutions (e.g., Acker, 1992). Gender norms, expectations and ideals are connected to someone's assumed sex category (e.g., Hollander, 2013).
3. The prevailing assumption within the United States is that there are two and only two sex categories and two gender categories, male/female and man/woman

respectively. Identities, expressions, and embodiments that move beyond this binary structure are often perceived as gender non-conforming (e.g., Bornstein, 1994).

4. A consequence of gender policing is that it maintains perceived differences between the two socially constructed gender categories, man and woman, which reciprocally reinforce a system of gender in which masculinity holds more power in relation to femininity (e.g., Lorber, 1994).
5. This study helps to illuminate and expose how gender as a system of power is experienced and assigned meaning within social interactions in service of developing social identities such as inclusion within an LGBTQ community.
6. Although the specific interview questions focused on social interactions, gender enforcement on all three levels, structural, interactional, and individual, are examined. The structural and interactional accomplishments of gender occur simultaneously (e.g., West & Fenstermaker, 1995), which impacts individuals' moment-to-moment experiences (e.g., Lorber, 1994).

Need for Current Study

Conceptually this study contributes to the literature about the more nuanced construction and enforcement of gender through social interactions, which are deeply connected with systems of sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia (e.g., Pharr, 1996). Furthermore, this study contributes to a conceptual development of the phenomenon of gender policing within the scholarship of gender. We need to know more about how the enforcement of gender conformity operates in different social contexts and how it is experienced. This is especially true in terms of how gender policing is experienced among

marginalized groups. Bullying and gay-bashing in the school system, for example, have been closely linked to negative reactions to gender non-conformity (Klein, 2012). What effect does this have on dynamics within the LGBTQ community? It is time to start making deeper connections to gender (Klein, 2012) and to investigate how the regulation of gender categories works as a system of oppression (Wilchins, 2004).

This project seeks to illuminate how systemic issues of power (e.g., gender) are experienced and assigned meaning within interpersonal interactions in service of developing and maintaining social identities (i.e., inclusion within an LGBTQ community). The perceived relevance and value of social identity processes within psychology is reflected in the fact that there are six chapters on social identity in the last (second) edition of the *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with LGBT Clients* (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007), eight chapters on social identity in the last (third) edition of the *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling* (Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2010), and nine chapters on social identity in the upcoming *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Multicultural Counseling Psychology* (Enns & Williams, 2013).

It is important to critically examine systems of power, how they are replicated within the development of social identities, and how internalized oppression perpetuates these systems. Fischer & DeBord (2013), for example, “encourage researchers to explore meanings of and experiences with inclusion, exclusion, and empowered resistance to unjust systems,” particularly with respect to the invisibility of genderqueer individuals and men and women with a transgender history (p. 102). This study is taking a critical look at the process of inclusion and exclusion within the LGBTQ community and the way these boundaries are placed along gender lines.

To not examine within-group dynamics and internalized oppression would lead to missing the bigger picture of how individuals are programmed by an oppressive culture to take on the role of oppressor (i.e., internalizing the perspective of how those in power perceive and objectify the “other”) (Pharr, 1996). When this perspective is internalized, those in power (i.e., the original oppressors) do not need to do much work except silently or even unconsciously benefit from their position of privilege.

This does not mean that those who are oppressed are responsible for their own oppression or for dismantling it. This perspective would be overly simplistic. But that is not a reason to keep silent about the ways in which oppression perpetuates through the process of internalizing it either. Due to its grounding in oppressive systems, gender policing is as much about the ways in which we learn to police ourselves (e.g., Pharr's [1996] "horizontal hostility") as it is about the ways in which we are policed by others. As Pharr (1996) describes:

If we allow only certain parts of people to surface, and if we silence, reject or exclude basic pieces of their essential selves, then we begin designing systems of oppression. Community becomes based on power and nonconsensual authority: those who have the most power and privilege dictate the community norms and their enforcement. (p. 98)

This project provides a step toward understanding the broader phenomenon of gender policing on structural levels, interpersonal levels, and the level of internalized self-policing. This examination of dynamics of gender policing within the LGBTQ community also contributes to a critical dialogue within the LGBTQ community about how gender oppression perpetuates.

Regarding counseling and clinical psychology in particular, results from this study also provide important information for mental health practitioners to be aware of before they send their gay clients, for example, bounding off to the local LGBTQ resource center for the “social support” they are assumed to receive. It is important that mental health practitioners increase their multicultural competency through developing an increased capacity for cultural empathy (e.g., Vasquez, 2010). This includes understanding more nuanced, within-group experiences of discrimination which reflect complex mechanisms of oppression that are often mislabeled within psychology as problems rooted in the individual (e.g., Burman et al., 1996).

An explicit focus on multicultural issues has been a strong part of the counseling psychology identity as a field (APA, 1999; Fouad et al., 2004; Murdock, Alcorn, Heesacker, Stoltenberg, 1998). Furthermore, Fouad, Gerstein, and Toporek (2006) assert that it is time for our field to move beyond attending to multicultural issues and to start training counseling psychologists to be agents of social justice. A clear vision of social justice through a critical examination of power, group dynamics, and the visibility of intersecting social identities, as recommended by Fischer and DeBord (2013), provided the foundational framework for this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Qualitative research involves understanding the complexity of people's lives as they perceive it, with an emphasis on the context of the particular phenomenon being examined (Wang, 2008). The goal of this study was to expand the literature on the social construction and enforcement of gender through social interactions. I was specifically interested in how gender policing (i.e., the enforcement gender conformity) was experienced within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community in a particular time and place.

As detailed in this chapter, focus groups were used as the primary method for data collection. The intention of this study was to examine a particular phenomenon (i.e., the construction and enforcement of gender), describe how participants experience it, and explore the meaning that is constructed by participants. Since focus groups rather than individual interviews were used as the primary method for data collection, a supplemental data analysis describes the social contexts of the focus groups and how participants talk about their experiences with others (e.g., themes within the interpersonal interactions). The focus groups represented a homogeneous group with respect to being part of an LGBTQ community. However, the large amount of between-group differences (e.g., differences between the experiences of lesbian identified women and bisexual identified men) and within-group differences (e.g., differences among lesbian identified women) reflect diverse perspectives. As stated in Chapter 2, I use the phrase "LGBTQ community" to refer to interactions among individuals who self-identify with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrums in at least one context of their lives.

I intentionally kept the sampling criteria for this study as open as possible rather than focusing on a single identity within the LGBTQ community in attempts to reflect the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ community. Focus groups also offer a closer representation of conversations compared to individual interviews because more people are present and participants can generate ideas from interacting with each other. Focus groups also provide insight into the experience of group level norms. Criteria for this study included: (a) being 18 years old or older, (b) being available to meet in person in Riverdale (pseudonym), the specific location of the study, (c) identifying on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context of their lives, (d) identifying with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or having had experiences in Riverdale that were predominantly LGBTQ, and (e) being interested in discussing their experiences in a group setting. The first 10-12 qualifying individuals, in order of successful screening, were selected to participate in this study. In addition, participants' placement into specific focus groups was based on their availability.

The following chapter outlines my method for investigating the experiences of gender policing within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. This method was developed based on the current literature on the social construction and enforcement of gender. This project was also reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. This chapter includes: (a) the researcher's philosophical assumptions, (b) the researcher-as-instrument statement, (c) the participants, (d) the procedures for data collection, (e) the method for data analysis, and (f) the researcher's strategies for developing credibility or "trustworthiness" of the study.

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell (1998), a paradigm provides a framework for understanding the assumptions that guide a research question and investigation. It is this framework or worldview that influences how the researcher views “the nature of reality (the ontology issue), the relationship of the researcher to that being researched (the epistemological issue), the role of values in a study (the axiological issue), and the process of the research (the methodological issue)” (p. 74). This study was built off of the integration of multiple perspectives. The intention of this section is to be explicit about the assumptions that were used to guide the systematic structure of my investigation. I primarily worked from a constructivist paradigm and integrated perspectives from critical theory to inform the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of the research design (for a review of constructivist perspectives and critical theory see Ponterotto, 2005). The methodology of the study was drawn mostly from a phenomenological perspective (for a review see Wertz, 2011).

Constructivist and Critical Theory

The constructivist perspective is primarily focused on human perceptions and assumes that there are multiple realities. Researchers who work from this perspective are concerned with looking for the *meaning* of experiences rather than identifying objective truths (Hansen, 2004; Ponterotto, 2005; Schwandt, 2000). Truth or reality is thought to be constructed through lived experiences and persistent self-reflections about those experiences. The relationship between the researcher and the participants is a major focus within this paradigm. The meanings of the participants’ experiences are thought to be derived through the dialogue between the researcher and participants (Ponterotto, 2005). The results are thus co-constructed rather than being derived independently by the researcher.

There is no unifying model of critical theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

However, a common component that is seen across those who work within a critical theory model is a perspective of challenging the status quo (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005). Within critical theory, reality is understood as being subjective to the experience (like the constructivist perspective), but it is also understood within a broader context of power and oppression (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005). Researchers working from a critical theory perspective are critical of "mainstream research," which often replicates systems of oppression (Burman et al., 1996).

Ontology, epistemology, and axiology. To reiterate from Creswell (1998), and consistent with Morrow (2007) and Ponterotto (2005), ontology refers to the understanding of reality and what can be known about reality (e.g., one true reality vs. multiple realities that are subjectively constructed). Epistemology refers to the understanding of the connection between the researcher as a person and the research participants as people (e.g., an objective, dualistic, separation from participants vs. an interconnected relationship between the researcher and the participants). Although epistemology often refers to the "way of knowing" in the general sense, Creswell (1998), Morrow (2007), and Ponterotto (2005) use this term to frame the ways in which different theoretical paradigms address *assumptions* about the relationship between the research participants (the knower) and the researcher (the would-be knower). This is a more narrow interpretation of the word epistemology in terms of how it is used in everyday language and in academic writing. However, I use this term throughout the document to refer to the assumptions being made about the relationships between the researcher and the research participants in order to be consistent with Creswell's

(1998), Morrow's (2007), and Ponterotto's (2005) interpretation of the word since their structures for organizing different perspectives across research paradigms are being used to help structure this chapter. The axiology refers to the understanding of the ways in which the researcher's values should contribute to the study (e.g., values having no place in objective science vs. values ultimately being inseparable from the research process) (Creswell, 1998; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005).

First, the *ontology* (i.e., the nature of reality and being) of this study was based on the constructivist view of there being multiple constructed realities that are both subjective and influenced by context (Ponterotto, 2005). Similar to the constructivist perspective, critical theory is based on the premise that there are multiple constructed realities. However, critical theory sees these realities through the lens of power and oppression that are socially and historically constructed (Ponterotto, 2005). In the current study I focused on understanding how participants construct their realities while also recognizing systems of power that influence socially constructed realities. Both the participants' perspectives and the framework of power are presented and incorporated into the data analysis and discussion.

Second, the *epistemology* (i.e., the relationship between the participants as people and the researcher as a person) of this study is understood as subjective and interconnected. Researchers working from a positivist perspective, for example, assume that researchers can achieve an objective detachment from the research participants. Those working from a constructivist or critical theory perspective do not see this detachment as possible. I therefore documented my interactions with participants in my research notes to help increase awareness of how these relationships influenced the data.

Furthermore, according to Ponterotto (2005) researchers working within a critical theory perspective often hope that their relationships with participants will foster a “transformation in the participants that leads to group empowerment and emancipation from oppression” (p. 131). I came from the perspective of understanding subjectively constructed realities within a framework of larger systems of power. At the same time, a stated goal of this project was to understand participants’ realities from their perspective. Both the participants’ perspective and the framework of power are presented.

My intention, however, was not to change participants’ perspective. Although results from this study have the potential to start a critical conversation within LGBTQ communities, fostering transformation among participants was not a focus of this study. Expecting participants to change, as a goal, does not fit with my system of values or theoretical framework. Instead, critical theory fits with how I understand realities through systems of power, and this perspective is included in the data analysis and discussion. Participants have access to this document and could be potentially influenced in that way.

Third, the *axiology* (i.e., the role of the researcher’s values in the scientific process) of this study is based on the constructivist view that the researcher’s values and lived experienced cannot be objectively separated from the study. Ponterotto (2005) explains that researchers working within this paradigm should set aside or “bracket” their preexisting assumptions but not get rid of them, given that this would be impossible. Researchers working within a critical theory perspective take the role of values a step further arguing that it is the researcher’s values and critical observations of replications of the status quo that are thought to challenge systems power and oppression. As stated earlier, although I hoped that this investigation might contribute to a critical dialogue within LGBTQ communities, my

intention was to minimize the explicit influence of my values on how participants talk about their own experiences. I am aware that as a researcher I had more power than participants. I focused on listening to their perspectives rather than sharing mine. However, if participants asked me questions, I was transparent and not withholding. My values and personal experiences are also stated in this document to both bracket my biases from the participants and to reflect on the ways in which my experience frames the interpretations I made.

Phenomenological Methodology

The chosen methodology for this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology is a theoretical fit within the intersection of constructivism and critical theory. The influence of phenomenology in research has its roots in the work of mathematician Edmund Husserl around the turn of the 20th century (Creswell, 1998; Wertz, 2011). Phenomenology and other interpretive based theories emerged during the late 19th century as a reaction to the positivist paradigm (e.g., a belief in one objective reality), noting that there is more than one truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Creswell (1998) explains that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). The explicit focus within phenomenology is on the experience of a phenomenon and the constructed meaning of that experience, not on achieving understanding of an objective reality.

Phenomenology assumes that multiple realities exist. How or why multiple realities exist is thus less important than being able to describe participants’ realities (Creswell, 1998). Furthermore, realities are socially constructed rather than reflecting fixed universal truths (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). This point highlights the theoretical overlap among phenomenological, constructivist and critical theory perspectives. All three

emphasize socially constructed realities. The goal of this study was to describe how participants experience the social construction and enforcement of gender within the LGBTQ community. Therefore these theoretical principles provided an appropriate paradigm for analyzing these fundamentally subjective experiences. Participants were asked to reflect on the ways in which expectations within the LGBTQ community are communicated and the ways in which they present themselves to others within the community. Pulling from critical theory, a lens of understanding how these experiences reflect a broader system of power was also incorporated into the data analysis and discussion of this study. This is a slight deviation from the phenomenological perspective, which posits that only those perspectives which are brought up by the participants through the interviews should be part of the data analysis. However, not incorporating a perspective of power leaves an important part of the context out, and this can reciprocally reinforce the invisibility of systems of oppression.

Relationship between the Researcher and Participants

My philosophical assumptions contribute to how I understand the complex interaction between the researcher and the participants. Because this is such an important factor to consider when doing qualitative research, I will spend some time talking about this dynamic and how it is framed within the current study. There is an inherently intertwined relationship between the researcher and the participants (Lincoln & Guba 2000), and the researcher's subjectivity will influence the study (Maxwell, 1996). There are differing perspectives about the extent to which qualitative researchers should attempt to manage their own subjectivity and attempt to avoid biasing the data.

There is, however, agreement on the assumption that absolute objectivity is impossible. Many qualitative scholars suggest that the researcher's personal beliefs,

preexisting observations, and assumptions should be explicitly stated and that the researcher should strive to keep these separate from the data (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Maxwell, 1996; Morrow, 2005; Wang, 2008). By “bracketing” their own assumptions, it is argued that researchers are better able to analyze and understand the experiences of the participants without bias. “Bracketing” can increase a consciousness of the researcher’s perspectives *before* engaging with participants. This can help to separate the researcher’s biases from the interpretations being made about the experiences of the participants, through such processes as monitoring automatic thinking or interpretations that are a response to a personal bias.

Given the transactional nature of the relationship between researcher and participants, Denzin (2001) takes a more radical approach to qualitative research by making this relationship even more explicit. Even when researchers bracket their preexisting assumptions the researcher is still influencing the participants in the moment-to-moment construction of their realities. The interactions between the researcher and participants (both verbal and non-verbal) contribute to the development of relationships. Denzin (2001) argues for embracing and consciously using these relationships rather than trying to avoid them, by using a reflexive interview such that the researcher influences participants and participants influence the researcher, continuously, throughout the research process. Denzin’s idea of a reflexive interview also fits with the paradigm of critical theory, in which researchers hope that their relationships with participants will influence the participants (Ponterotto, 2005). According to Denzin (2001) and scholars who ascribe to critical theory perspectives, the relationship between the researcher and participants is intertwined and should be treated as part of the research process.

In this study I integrated both the constructivist paradigm and critical theory into the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of my research design, and my methodology is drawn most from phenomenology. Naming and setting aside preexisting assumptions (i.e., “bracketing”) is consistent with the practice of phenomenological research (Creswell, 1998; Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, & McSpadden, 2011). This process is known as “epoché” and refers to the process of putting aside both (a) prior knowledge of natural sciences (e.g., hypothesis, research instruments, prior theories) and (b) the natural attitude (i.e., the tendency to observe objects independent from the context of how they are experienced) (Wertz, 2011). Within phenomenology, the focus is on the subjective experience rather than an objective truth, and bracketing out the researcher’s preexisting bias is part of that process.

I attempted to negotiate a middle ground. Bracketing is an important part of the research process within phenomenology, and my assumptions are presented in this document. I am also aware that my power as a researcher and moderator of the focus group interviews influenced the participants. I attempted to minimize imposing my biases based on my own experiences in order to better represent the experiences of those who participated in the study. However, given that this separation of self from the research process is impossible, my contribution to the research process is included in the data analysis, interpretations, and discussion in addition to bracketing my assumptions in this chapter. I understand the relationship between the researcher and the participants to be a relevant component of the research process that should be examined, and I also understand that by minimizing my power as a researcher, participants may have been more willing to share their own experiences. Bracketing out my own assumptions before engaging with participants and

maintaining my personal notes throughout the research process allowed me, as a subjective being, to be aware of and validate my own experiences so that I could be more open and available to the experiences of the participants.

Researcher-as-Instrument Statement

Although maintaining a completely unbiased perspective as a researcher is impossible, it is important to strive for self-awareness (Morrow, 2005). Throughout this exploratory study, I used continuous self-exploration to uncover how I influenced the data and interpretation and how the research process influenced me (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, Morales, 2007). In this section I provide an overview about myself, my own observations that are relevant to the study, and my preexisting expectations about my research question. The intention of stating my past experience and assumptions before I conducted the focus groups is to make my subjectivity as the researcher explicit. My intention is to engage in a dialogue that moves between me as the researcher, the experiences of my participants, and the broader social context in which the study took place. This initial “bracketing” is a part of the reflexive process that I took throughout the study and is not representative of an exhaustive list of my preexisting values and biases. I maintained an electronic journal of my thoughts, feeling, and reactions throughout the researcher process. I also revisit my subjectivity and personal biases in Chapter 4.

Researcher’s Background

I am a White, able-bodied, U.S. citizen, college-educated, cisgender, queer woman from an upper-middle class upbringing, in my late 20's. I have two married heterosexual cisgender parents. I also have two cisgender, heterosexual male brothers, one older and one younger. My undergraduate education was at a historically liberal university. I majored in

psychology with a specific interest in the psychology of gender. I have been thinking about gender dynamics for a while, and this thinking has been heavily influenced by my education and the system of values associated with the institutions I attended then and now, the instructors I have had, and the rhetoric within academia.

Given that the focus of the current study is on gender and sexuality, my reflections below center on those dimensions. The way in which I came to understand myself as queer is complex and fluid. Although I mostly identify as queer, there are contexts in which I identify as a lesbian. I also do not consistently correct people when they assume that I am lesbian or even when they assume that I am straight. I use the term queer because, for me, it communicates an identity that has moved away from the heterosexual category yet allows for flexibility that is not often present in other identity categories such as lesbian or bisexual. This reflects a value of flexibility that is often prioritized in my life, which influences my personal value of interpreting the phenomenon of gender policing (i.e., the enforcement of gender conformity) as negative. My level of being “out” is also complex. I am a cisgender woman. What I mean by that is that my gender identity and embodiment are in alignment with the sex category I was assigned at birth (i.e., female).

In many interactions my gender expression is also perceived to be congruent with dominant gender norms, expectations and ideals for a White, middle class, heterosexual woman. Although it is difficult to know for sure, I assume that in many social interactions my race, gender, and sexual identity are not questioned. My perception is that I am most often read as a feminine, heterosexual White woman. Part of this may have to do with the social context where those who are perceived to be female often have more flexibility when doing gender compared to those who are perceived to be male.

The places where my sexual identity is questioned most are within LGBTQ communities. It is in these predominantly LGBTQ spaces that I am directly asked whether or not I am straight. My sense is that part of this questioning comes from my gender presentation, such that my expression of gender fits within the norms of accomplishing a heterosexual woman but not quite within the norms of accomplishing a lesbian identity. The question is not about whether or not I am a lesbian or queer; they are questions about whether or not I am “straight.” This suggests that those doing the questioning are responding to cues or signals that seem to signal “straight” or heterosexual. Even though I cannot know the motivations for these questions, I am aware of the interpretations I make of these experiences.

For example, in an instance when I was directly asked if I was straight in a lesbian bar, I walked over to a friend and asked why I would get that kind of a question. She pointed to the shirt I was wearing. I had on a dark brown spaghetti strap tank top with a v-neckline, empire waste, and flowy fabric. My seemingly “girly” attire had called into question my authenticity as lesbian. In another instance, an acquaintance approached me at a lesbian event and asked if I was straight and then stated, “You know, I just can’t seem to figure you out. You seem to ride that line right down the middle.” It is unclear what being able to categorize me would have meant to this person. My interpretation was that I was communicating seemingly contradictory messages about my identity. Her statement that I am riding “a line” right down the middle suggests that there exists an intrinsic line that can separate those who are straight from those who are not.

Another important component of my identity is that I began to outwardly identify myself as queer to others in my mid 20s. This is important for two reasons. First, I “came

out" (e.g., shared my non-heterosexual identity with others) within the community being observed for this study. Second, some might argue that there is a shift in socialization when someone first "comes out" and begins to identify with a new social identity, group or community. For me, there was sort of a *relearning* or new socialization that occurred as I began to identify as a member of an LGBTQ community. Learning how to signal a non-heterosexual identity was often dependent upon how I was communicating my gender. The norms and expectations also shifted within the given context, place, setting, etc. It is important to note that in many instances I responded to these messages or "codes" voluntarily; it is not as if these codes were imposed on me. I transformed my appearance and modified my behaviors because I wanted to be seen by others in the community as fitting a category that would then reflect back the way I saw myself. At other times the feedback that I was not following a "code" appropriately did feel like an imposition, as if there must be something "wrong" with me. The sum of these experiences influenced how I came to understand my sexual identity and gender, the way I thought about my research question, and the way I heard my participants' experiences.

My queer identity and connection to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale provided me with access to participants. I was open and transparent about my connection to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale, and I answered participants' questions. However, the main goal of this study was to understand participants' experience with respect to gender policing rather than trying to validate my own experiences.

I recognize that my use of the term "gender policing" implies a punitive connotation. I understand the phrase gender policing to mean receiving the implicit and explicit feedback that people are accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms,

expectations and ideals with the implied meaning that not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences. The experience of gender policing *is* a part of the broader social construction of gender but is specifically about the enforcement of gender conformity. Policing involves feedback to the individual implying or stating that there will be negative consequences when one does not conform. To reiterate from chapter two, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) define identity policing (one of four broad components of identity work) as “the protection of the meaning of an identity and enforcement of the code for signifying it” (p. 123), which is similar to the concept of gender policing. Those who start to deviate from an expected norm are ushered back within the boundaries, such that the boundary gets protected.

However, the message that people are accomplishing gender inappropriately may not have the same experience and meaning for everyone. For this reason, I started the focus groups with broad questions about participants’ experiences within the LGBTQ community and did not use the term “policing,” to allow for multiple perspectives about the construction of gender and LGBTQ community borders. My intention was to minimize the impact of framing participants’ experiences for them. Throughout the development of this study I continued to go back to my broader question of how gender policing is experienced within the LGBTQ community of Riverdale.

Another aspect of my identity that has undoubtedly influenced the development of my research question, design, and analysis is my multiple statuses of privilege. Through the development of my research question and methodology I continued to ask myself: whose voices are missing, why are these questions important and for whom, and what are the risks and potential harm of asking my questions in these ways? The study of a marginalized group

can often recapitulate stigma by reinforcing a particular group as fitting within a particular category that is different from some dominant group. This process of naming a group as somehow different can also reinforce those associated with the group as being less valued than those associated with the comparative privileged and dominant group of higher power. The study of marginalized groups can also unintentionally marginalize others groups by reinforcing the invisibility of intersecting identities (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Therefore, continually questioning the ways in which privilege, and my privilege in particular, may be affecting my interpretation helped me to become more aware of what or whom I am leaving out and remind me to listen for the context of participants' narrative that I might be missing. This active process of questioning the way in which power is impacting my research and interpretation is consistent with Fischer and DeBord's (2013) principles and tools for cultivating a critical analysis of power within the context of research.

Observations

As I mentioned earlier, my own background and experiences shape the observations and interpretations that I make of my surroundings. It seems relevant to explicitly state some of my own observations related to my research question. These observations are not stated as hypotheses but rather as experiences that outline some of the preexisting biases and values that I brought to this study.

Anecdotally, I have witnessed the implicit and explicit enforcement of gender norms within LGBTQ spaces such as public Pride events, lesbian or gay bars, community picnics, or local house parties. My interpretation of these instances of gender policing is that they can be a source of pain when admittance into the community is predicated on a particular type of

presentation. However, this is not the only interpretation and meaning that can be constructed from instances of gender policing.

I have also witnessed gender policing that was done with “good” intentions such as a friend letting another friend know that in order to attract a butch lesbian she is going to have to put on a dress. When a friend of mine was coming out and beginning to identify with the LGBTQ community she received messages like, “Just because you’re a lesbian doesn’t mean you have to look for a boy” and “You’re too pretty to be butch.” I have seen butch lesbians being policed for being too femme and gay men for being too feminine. Similarly I have heard comments about people not being feminine or butch enough. A consistent theme throughout all of these examples was the message that the individual needed to change or conform to the gender norms, expectations, and ideals within that context. A bias that I bring to this study is my interpretation of what I see as a potential negative consequence of gender policing that occurs within a community, regardless of how positive someone’s intentions might be.

My assumption is that gender policing within LGBTQ communities can reify abstract boundaries about what it means to be an authentic lesbian woman, gay man, transgender individual, for example. Abstract rules that get policed become measures of being queer “enough.” My assumption is also that these abstract measures are socially constructed (both implicitly and explicitly) through group processes. This is seen in the ways in which members of a group are aware of the rules and then reconstruct them by following them and enforcing them through interpersonal interactions.

A consequence of these socially constructed rules is that the rules begin to be understood as “real” or “natural” qualities inherent in a label about one’s sexual and/or

gender identity. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) refer to this phenomenon as “essentializing,” which refers to the “making of doctrinal claims that certain good or bad traits inherent in all who share an identity” (p. 124). These qualities are then used as boundary markers to judge someone’s inclusion or exclusion from a group. Again, these interpretations are based on my own system of values and lived experienced.

Beyond policing the ways gender is used to communicate one’s sexual identity, I am also aware of gender policing of transgender individuals in the LGBTQ community. As an example, some members of the community feel that it is problematic for transgender men to become pregnant because only women can give birth. This kind of a reaction is about trying to keep the categories male and female separate. The idea that someone could fall into both of these assumed-to-be-different categories is confusing. The comments and beliefs that someone needs to “pick” a sex/gender and stick with it (can’t have it both ways) is reflective of a broader structural system of gender that encourages the enforcement of gender conformity within assumed biologically essential male and female categories. The type of gender policing that I have witnessed within the LGBTQ community that was directed toward transgender and genderqueer individuals involved implicit and explicit questioning of their gender in order to identify and justify their assumed to be “proper” sex category. As another example, transgender men entering LGBTQ spaces often receive questions about when they first identified as male, the gender of past and current partners, their surgical status, and the details of their genitalia. When not asked directly, these questions are directed to their close friends. I also know of instances in which gay cisgender men in the community have expressed an interest or attraction toward transgender men but were then warned by

other gay cisgender men that they were “not completely men.” Comments like these are warnings to not be “fooled,” and they reinforce the assumed standard that male equals penis.

My interpretation of gender policing like this is that it serves to reify a sex and gender binary (i.e., dichotomous thinking about gender in static terms of male/man vs. female/woman). Although I have no objective data about the intentions of these events, my own assumption is that gender policing is often a response to discomfort with expression of sex and gender that moved outside of a dichotomy of sex and gender categories. The belief that gender policing may be more prevalent or salient in response to expressions of gender that fall outside of a gender and sex binary is another bias that I brought to this study.

Expectations

Continuing with the process of bracketing, I assumed that participants had experienced gender policing in some way. I also assumed that recruiting participants based on their identification along lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer spectrums, connection to an LGBTQ community, and their location within Riverdale was sufficient to select participants who had experienced the phenomenon studied. Given the pervasive nature of the construction gender through social interactions (see “Conceptualizing Gender” in Chapter 2) I assumed that everyone in the study experienced at least one instance in which they received the message that they were accomplishing gender appropriately.

I also expected that the intersection of other identities would provide different contexts that are relevant to the experiences of gender policing. I assumed that the social context and heterogeneity of the focus group might also impact which stories were shared more freely and supported and which might be more at risk of being silenced or dismissed. I believed that the experience of gender policing had an impact on the participants’ view of

themselves and on their relationship to the LGBTQ community. The meaning of this impact may have been positive, negative, or neutral, and I assumed that it would be different for different participants. For example, the meaning of gender policing experienced by a man with a transgender history may be different from how gender policing is experienced by a butch, lesbian woman.

I expected that the interaction of multiple identities would also provide a broader context for the types of strategies that are used when responding to gender policing. For example, a queer woman of color growing up in a racist and sexist society may have overlapping strategies for how she resists internalizing sexism, racism, and gender policing. For some, resistance may not feel necessary, and for those who do feel the need to resist the message to conform, this too could look very different. In some instances, conforming to gender norms is a conscious response *and* form of resistance.

Participants

The first 10-12 qualifying individuals, in order of successful screening, were selected to participate in this study. In addition, participants' placement into specific focus groups was based on their availability. Five participants were successfully recruited and screened for the first focus group and six participants were successfully recruited and screened for the second focus group. However, on the day of the second focus group, only five participants arrived and consented to participate in the study. I randomly selected pseudonyms (fake names) for each participant. See Table 1 and Table 2 for demographic information.

There is not a set number requirement for a sample size when doing phenomenological research (Wang, 2008). Smith and Osborn (2003), for example, recommend using three to six. Smith and Osborn (2003) do recommend trying to create a

homogeneous group by using purposive sampling to insure that those recruited for the study find the research topic to be particularly salient or relevant to their lives. The sample for this study was homogeneous group within respect to being connected to the LGBTQ community but heterogeneous in terms of between- and within-group differences within the LGBTQ community. In order ensure that the topic was salient or relevant to participants I recruited individuals who identified with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale (pseudonym) or had experiences in Riverdale in spaces that were predominantly LGBTQ.

Creswell (1998) proposes that two main criteria for sampling should be that (a) the participant has experienced the phenomenon being studied and (b) the participant will be able to articulate their experience of that phenomenon. The first criterion for sampling makes sense. It is important that those being interviewed find the interview questions to be relevant to their own experience in some way. This is consistent with the goal of the study, which is to describe the experiences of particular phenomenon. It was important that individuals participating in this study had experiences within the LGBTQ community.

The second criterion makes sense in that in order to accurately describe a phenomenon those being interviewed need to be able to communicate their experience in some way. However, there is potential for bias given that this study is primarily based on written and oral communication as forms of expression. This is a possible limitation of the study. Every effort was made to accommodate multiple forms of communication, to include the use of a translator if relevant and/or possible. Creating sampling criteria that are affirming of all those who have experienced a particular phenomenon and who were interested in communicating that experience was a priority for this study.

Inclusion Criteria for this Study

Criteria for this study included: (a) being 18 years old or older, (b) being available to meet in person in Riverdale for the focus group, (c) identifying on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context of their life, (d) identifying with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or having had experiences in Riverdale that were predominantly LGBTQ, and (e) being interested in discussing their experiences in a group setting.

The qualifier of being 18 years old or older is such that participants were able to give their own consent to participate in this study. Participants also needed to be available to meet in Riverdale since the interviews were done in groups. The process and group dynamics were part of the data being described. The criteria of sexual or gender identity were based on anyone who *self-identified* outside of the heterosexual category or whose gender identity moved away from their sex assigned at birth (there were no criteria about participants' gender expression or embodiment). I included that participants only needed to identify on the LGBTQ spectrums in at least one context in their lives given that the notion of being "out" to everyone in all contexts of a person's life tends to be a White, Western value that may not fit the experiences of all potential participants.

In order to capture the salience of experiences within the LGBTQ community I also recruited individuals who identified with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or who had experiences within the LGBTQ community. Focus group questions pertained to experiences participants had with others in the community. In addition, there were no inclusion criteria based on ethnicity, nationality, class, age, or other social identity markers. Instead, these

additional social identity markers were used to frame the context of the study based on those who volunteered to participate in the study.

Recruitment

Location. Participants were recruited through advertising within Riverdale. I posted flyers (see Appendix A) around the community and online, utilizing social networking sites like Facebook. I targeted specific LGBTQ-identity based locations such as the LGBT Resource Center on the local university campus. The hosts of a local queer radio show also agreed to make an announcement about the study on their show by reading the information presented on the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B for radio script). Recruitment was also based on word of mouth and increased awareness over time.

Information on the recruitment flyer. The recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) included the researcher's name and affiliation with the university under which the study was conducted. The flyer also indicated the nature of the study (i.e., personal experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale), the expected dates in which the focus groups were held (i.e., September 2012), length (i.e., about 2 hours), compensation (i.e., modest refreshments during the group discussion), the inclusion criteria as stated earlier, and the date in which recruitment officially stopped. The recruitment flyer directed interested participants to my e-mail address (that was specifically generated for this study) to set up a phone screening.

Mode of communication. The decision to use an e-mail address as the main form of communication was to maintain the privacy of the researcher. However, this method of communication sets up a bias in the study given that it requires all those interested in participating to have an e-mail account. I tried to accommodate participants who did not

have access to the internet by also recruiting through word of mouth. For example, if an acquaintance informed me that someone they know saw my recruitment flyer (or heard about it on the radio) and wanted to participate, I asked my acquaintance to pass along my phone number, so that we could set up a phone screening or set-up a time to meet in person.

Pre-screening interview. After receiving an e-mail or phone call from those interested in the study, I set up a short (15 minutes) pre-screening interview over the phone. If it was not possible to speak over the phone, I would have set up a time and place to meet in person, in a public setting (e.g., a coffee house) that both parties agree to. However, each of the participants had access to a phone. The pre-screening interview was intended to screen-out those who did not qualify for the study, provide potential participants with more information about the study, confirm that they were still interested in participating, and confirm that they were available during the scheduled day and time of the interview (see Appendix C for a summary of points to convey during the initial screening). I explored whether potential participants felt comfortable with discussing their personal experiences and hearing about the experiences of other participants who presented during the interview. I informed potential participants that it is very likely that everyone will not share the same experiences and that every perspective is valued. Potential participants were informed about the limits to their confidentiality and the efforts that were made to de-identify their information in the final write up. They were informed that a silent process observer would be present during the interview to take notes and that this person identified as an LGBTQ ally. They were informed that they have the option to use a pseudonym during the group discussion.

I also informed participants about an optional “member check” and possible follow-up interview after the focus group discussion. A “member check” refers to the process of allowing research participants to provide feedback on their contribution to a study and/or to provide feedback about the interpretations being made in the analysis (Carlson, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Potential participants were informed about the intention of the “member check” and what to expect (see Appendix H for a copy of the “member check” cover letter). Potential participants had the opportunity to ask any questions about the study at the end of the screening. Once they agree to continue they were told the specific date, time, and place of the focus group. The date, time and place was also sent to participants either electronically or by mail in a cover letter (see Appendix D) and a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix E). An additional copy of the informed consent form was available on the day of the focus group to be signed, but participants were sent the form ahead of time so they had enough time to read and review the consent form.

A brief summary of the study was sent to participants in the cover letter. Participants were told that the questions would focus on how they experience expectations or “unwritten rules” that may come up within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. The intention was to give participants an idea of what the conversation might be like and time to reflect on their own experiences before meeting. Finally, participants were contacted the day before the focus group meeting to remind them about the focus group day, time, and place and to answer any additional questions they had.

Data Collection

Focus Groups

Both group and individual interviews have been used within phenomenological research (Wang, 2008). The methodology of the current study is, in part, based off of a phenomenological study of sexual orientation microaggressions in therapy that utilized two focus groups as the primary source of data (i.e., Shelton, 2009; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). The use of focus groups as a method of inquiry originally evolved out of marketing research (Morgan, 1997). Within this context, the researcher is more of a moderator, and the goal is to elicit participants' reactions to particular products. Within the context of social science, the goal of a focus group is to elicit the opinions of participants about a particular topic, and thus the researcher is still in a role of a moderator (Morgan, 1997). However, the goal is not to reach consensus or resolution of existing conflicts that arise (Wang, 2008).

One of the distinct advantages of conducting focus groups rather than individual interviews is the ability of the researcher to observe group process (Morgan, 1997). For this reason a silent observer was present during each focus group to take notes on content, non-verbal behaviors, and interpersonal dynamics between the group members and between the researcher and the participants. A group discussion also lends itself to highlighting both the similarities and differences about a particular topic (Morgan, 1997). Both the researcher and the process observer were able to note how participants talked about their own experience and how they responded to each other. A focus group offered the potential for a more rich and dynamic conversation about the experience of gender policing.

Another advantage of focus groups over individual interviews is that the conversations that are facilitated within a focus group are more likely to mirror the kinds of

conversations participants may experience in their daily life (Hollander, 2004). The goal of this study was to describe a phenomenon (i.e., gender policing) within the context of the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. The dynamic of a focus group offered the advantage of creating a social microcosm much like Irvin Yalom (2005) describes in his discussion of group psychotherapy. Dynamics that play out in the LGBTQ community in Riverdale could have presented in the focus groups. As a reminder, in this document I am using the phrase LGBTQ community to refer to experiences among LGBTQ individuals rather than assuming there to be one true community. There are multiple LGBTQ communities within the location of this study.

Hollander (2004) indicates that although focus groups cannot tell us as much about the individual experiences of participants as individual interviews can, they can provide rich and important information about the construction of realities through social interactions and the ways in which people communicate. They also provide good information about group level norms and expectations. Hollander states that “participants may exaggerate, minimize, or withhold experiences depending on the social contexts” (2004, p. 626) and that this is true of how participants may respond to other methods of inquiry and in conversations their own lives. Her main argument is that the social contexts of the focus groups are crucial to understanding the data collected. For the purpose of this study the interpersonal exchanges and the social contexts of the focus groups (i.e., dynamics within the room and broader social structures in which the focus group is taking place) are included as part of the data being interpreted.

The disadvantages of using focus groups over individual interviews include having less control (as the researcher) over the direction of the conversation and some potential

sacrifice of depth and specific details about an individual participant's experience. Another disadvantage of group interviews is the possibility that certain views and opinions may become subjugated to the majority opinion (Hollander, 2004; Wang, 2008); dominant voices among the participants may shape the direction of the conversation. There is also the potential for issues to arise related to social desirability based on the influence of the researcher and the other participants, as well as group think (Hollander, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, information gathered within a group context cannot reliably account for how participants might talk about their experiences individually. Within a group interview setting it is also difficult for the researcher to have control over how participants respond to the context of the group. Some may feel safe and supported, and others may not. To try and minimize some of these disadvantages I used a small number of participants for each focus group and monitor for "group think." For example, I used probes that encourage everyone to share their experience even if they feel it has already been stated and/or if it seems very different from what others have discussed. I also used open-ended questions relating to topics discussed in the focus group sessions that individuals completed after the group discussion portion is over, as detailed below. This helped to provide participants with the space to reflect on how they were feeling during the focus group and to indicate -- if they felt comfortable doing so -- information that they felt they could not bring up in a group setting.

Composition of the focus groups. For the purpose of this study, two focus groups comprised of five people in each group were used as the primary source of data. Smaller groups are recommended when the topic is particularly emotional or sensitive (Litosseliti, 2003). The goal of this study was to elicit participants' experience of gender policing within

the context of negotiating a sense of self in connection to the LGBTQ community, which can be a sensitive topic. Therefore, a maximum of six participants were recruited for two separate focus groups. The interview questions that were used were derived from the literature on the social construction of gender, gender norm enforcement, and social identity policing.

Procedure

As participants arrived, refreshments were available. The process observer and I informally introduced ourselves by providing our names and our roles in the study. Each participant was given two copies of the informed consent form (see Appendix E). The informed consent form explained the nature of the study, benefits, potential risks, and the parameters of a future “member check” and potential follow-up interview. Participants signed both copies and gave one copy back to me.

Once everyone arrived the process observer and I formally introduced ourselves and our relationship to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. Although I identify as connected to the LGBTQ community, the two process observers involved in this study (one for each group) both identified as an ally to the community. This was stated explicitly. An appropriate amount of self-disclosure was used to build rapport and establish trust with participants (Wang, 2008).

Participants were reminded that the focus group was being audio recorded and would later be transcribed for data analysis by a professional transcriber who has been trained in confidentiality. They were informed that transcriptions were password protected and that in the final write up, I made efforts to de-identify the participants. After answering questions about the study I distributed the consent forms, review the key points verbally, and waited for

participants to review and sign the forms. Participants were reminded that they could leave the study at any time. No one in this study left early.

To begin the recorded portion of the focus group, I asked participants to introduce themselves by name. They were informed ahead of time that they could use a real name or a pseudonym. I then moved onto to the interview questions (see Appendix F). At the end of the focus group, participants were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix G). The total length of the focus groups was about 2 hours.

After each focus group, the process observer and I met to discuss our reactions to the focus group, emerging themes that were discussed, and notes on the interpersonal process and non-verbal behaviors. Notes from these meetings informed the interpretation of the emerging themes.

Materials

Interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews are most often used in phenomenological research (Langridge, 2007), and the broad research question is used to guide the specific interview questions (Creswell, 1998). Within the context of focus groups, it is often recommended to minimize the number of questions used in order to provide participants with more opportunities to talk among themselves (Hollander, 2002). The preliminary questions were broad and open in order to allow for diverse perspectives. Focus group questions were generated based on the topic being studied and the literature on the construction and enforcement of gender and ways in which people construct identities in relationship to groups. Probes were used to elicit more information about participants' experience (see Appendix F for complete description of the interview protocol).

The concept of gender policing is narrow in scope given that gender policing is only one component of the larger system of gender socialization. In addition, the phrase “gender policing” in and of itself implies a punitive and negative connotation. For this reason, the questions I asked participants took a few steps back to hold a broader view of how the construction and enforcement of gender might be experienced within an LGBTQ community located in a particular place and time. In a group discussion format, my interview questions focused on expectations within the LGBTQ community, how they are communicated, and how they impacted the way in which participants see themselves and how they want to be perceived within the LGBTQ community. The guiding premise of this study was to describe participants’ experiences within the LGBTQ community as they negotiated a sense of self in relation to others in the LGBTQ community.

The questions that I used for this study did not explicitly ask about gender given that gender is ubiquitous and likely to emerge as participants discussed expectations within the LGBTQ community. Part of my analysis looked at how gender, as a system of power, influenced these experiences. I also decided not to frame my questions about gender to avoid confirming my own biases and assumptions about how gender influences dynamics within the LGBTQ community. In this study, the four broad primary questions were used in both focus groups without needing much of the focused questions to generate a discussion. Only question 4 in the secondary questions was needed during the first focus group discussion.

The content of the focus group questions and the structure of the focus group were reviewed by 10 cultural consultants who meet criteria for the study. Cultural consultants provided feedback on the clarity of questions and their automatic reactions about how they might feel if they were participating in the study. Their feedback was used to modify the

focus group structure and questions in order to maximize the effectiveness of the focus groups to elicit information about the research question.

The focus group discussions were audio recorded and kept under my direct supervision. A professional transcriber who was trained in confidentiality transcribed the recordings. The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, including breaks, false starts, and small utterances. The transcripts were stored in a password protected Microsoft Word document. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Follow-up questionnaire. After the focus group discussion is complete, participants were given a paper-and-pencil questionnaire (see Appendix G). This included (a) demographics questions, (b) open-ended prompts about the focus group, and (c) an optional space for indicating their contact information to be contacted after the focus group for follow-up questions. The demographics portion questionnaire included open-ended prompts about participants' self-identified gender identity, sexual identity, ethnicity, nationality, class, the nature of their work (either paid or unpaid), and a space for any additional information that feels important for the researcher to know. This information was used to help describe the sample. Participants were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview, and a separate question asked they would be willing to be contacted for a "member check" regarding their direct quotes being used in the study. If participants mark "yes" to either question they were asked to provide at least two means of contact (an e-mail address, a phone number, or a mailing address). Finally, there were open-ended questions for participants to respond to their experience during the focus group.

"Member check" procedure. Member checking refers to the process of allowing research participants to provide feedback on their contribution to a study and/or to provide

feedback about the interpretations being made in the analysis (Carlson, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is one way for researchers to establish credibility or trustworthiness of their results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), but there is no set standard for how one should employ this process (Carlson, 2010). There is a wide range of ways in which a researcher might use member checks that can span across the research and data analysis process.

Carlson (2010) emphasizes the importance using a flexible model of member checking based on the needs of a particular study and planning ahead to avoid potential “traps.” Carlson explains the importance of considering how member checking might impact the researcher-participant relationship. For example, participants might feel a sense of embarrassment when reading their verbatim transcript, especially if they were not informed about what to expect or about the intention of the member check process. Planning ahead and making sure participants know what to expect are key aspects to avoiding traps that could harm the researcher-participant relationship and the credibility of the study (Carlson, 2010).

In keeping with a research design that values reflexivity (e.g., Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Denzin, 2001; Doyle, 2007) I continued a collaborative interaction with research participants after the focus group discussion. Part of this continuous exchange came from summarizing themes at the end of the focus group and checking for reactions. I asked open-ended questions on the follow-up survey about participants’ experience during the focus group. I provided my contact information so that participants could contact me if they had any questions or wanted to add something after leaving the focus group. Finally, I asked

participants to provide feedback on their direct quotes during the preliminary stages of data analysis.

Based on Carlson's (2010) suggestions for using member checking effectively, I included a statement about this (optional) procedure in the informed consent form and discussion so that participants knew to anticipate it. For those who agreed to do a member check, I provided participants with options to do the member check electronically, by mail, or over the phone. The intention was to provide participants with options that could accommodate different needs and preferences. I also provided participants with a cover letter (see Appendix H) that accompanied the documents being reviewed. This cover letter included explicit information about (a) the intention of the member check, (b) how participants can be helpful in the data analysis process, and (c) what to expect. In sum, being transparent with participants about the function of a member check, providing clear directions, and offering options was used as strategies to maintain the integrity of the relationships between research participants and me, to enhance the credibility of the final interpretations.

Data Analysis

Overview of the Process

The current study used focus groups for the data collection, which brings up unique needs for data analysis. To start, it would be fruitless to try to separate the behaviors of the individual participants from the group dynamics; the relationships between these two levels are intertwined (Morgan, 1997). Both of the focus group interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber from the audio recording into two separate Microsoft Word documents. I then listened carefully to the recordings while reading the transcripts. I

reviewed my notes, along with notes from the process observer about the interpersonal dynamics and non-verbal behaviors during the focus group discussions. The transcripts served as the primary source of data for the study. Both of the transcripts were reviewed and coded for themes by me as the primary researcher, using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, described in the following section. Redundant themes were eliminated or combined with other categories. As themes emerge they were compared to direct quotes within the data and to the debriefing notes that were taken after the focus groups.

After comparing the themes to the debriefing notes, direct quotes were sent to the participants to check for their validity. Participants who agreed to be contacted after the study were sent a list of their direct quotes from the transcripts along with the associated preliminary themes (see Appendix H for a copy of the cover letter with instructions for the member check). Participants' feedback about their direct quotes was documented in my notes and used as an additional comparison for the final interpretation.

All ten participants who participated in this study agreed to be contacted for a "member check." Each member was sent the member check cover letter (See Appendix H) and their direct quotes from the group discussion with their associated preliminary themes. Half of the participant responded to the member check. The one participant who responded thanked me for sending her the quotes to review, reported having a positive experience in the group, and stated that she would not change anything she said. The other four similarly stated feeling comfortable with their quote and did not have anything to add or change.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The method of data analysis for coding the transcripts was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The stated goal of IPA is to explore the personal and

social worlds of participants with a particular emphasis on the constructed meaning of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The focus is to accurately describe the perceptions of the participants rather than attempting to achieve objective statements about a particular phenomenon. This process is known as a “double hermeneutic” since there are two levels of interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Participants (the knowers) are trying to make sense of their worlds, and the researcher (the learner) is trying to make sense of their worlds. There is no single standard for implementing IPA. In order to be systematic in my procedures, the data analysis of this study was modeled after Smith and Osborn’s (2003) description of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

The broad steps of analyzing the data using IPA include: (a) getting a sense of the whole by comprehensively reading the focus group transcripts, (b) re-reading the transcripts multiple times (more slowly) and taking notes in the left margins, (c) reading the transcripts again, using the right margin to code preliminary themes, (d) listing preliminary themes sequentially, (e) clustering similar themes and identifying superordinate concepts, (f) comparing clustering themes against the original words in the transcripts, (g) developing a table of themes with identifiers linking to the original data, and (h) creating a master table of themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The initial clustering of themes was done using the cut-and-paste function on my word processor. Initial themes were printed so that I could move them around and re-group as needed. I used 4x6 note cards to sort and organize the initial themes and I color coded themes based on the focus group they came from. Whenever I reorganized a theme I first checked the content of that theme with the original data. The process of constantly

comparing the emerging themes with the original data helped to maintain the conceptual thread between the original data and the more abstract themes.

At the point of developing a table of themes, the superordinate themes were listed with the related theme under it. Participant codes and page numbers were listed in the adjacent column that links the theme with the original text. This helped to maintain a balance between my abstract interpretations of the data with the original voices of the participants. The result of the data analysis process is the descriptions of superordinate themes that capture the essence among the participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In Chapter 4, these themes are integrated into a description that relates to my broad question about how gender policing is experienced within the LGBTQ community of Riverdale.

Social Contexts of the Focus Groups

In the data analysis section I will first describe the social contexts and interpersonal dynamics within the focus group discussions as a supplemental analysis of the data. The main reason for this is that the interviews were set within the context of a group discussion rather than individual interviews. Guidelines for this analysis were informed by Hollander's (2004) methodological article on the social contexts of focus groups. This work is based on Hollander's history of using focus groups to examine the social construction of gender within the context of conversations about violence (see Hollander, 2002). Hollander (2004) indicates that when researchers use focus groups there are three primary levels that need to be observed, described, and incorporated into the data analysis and interpretations. These include (a) the relationships among the participants, (b) the relationships between the participants and the researcher, and (c) the broader social structures in which the focus groups take place.

This supplemental section reports the themes related to these three social contexts. For example, themes related to the interpersonal context of the focus groups can include things like the ways in which certain kinds of statements were challenged, dismissed, minimized or ignored. Patterns related to dominant voices that guided the discussion and topics that were left out, based on the follow-up questionnaire, are also included. The goal is to provide readers with a sense of the process and social context in which the data was collected. This offers readers a more complete understanding of the emerging themes that are presented. This supplemental data analysis is presented before presenting the five emerging themes to provide a framework for understanding the themes.

Trustworthiness

In contrast to quantitative research that uses constructs like internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity to evaluate the rigor of a study, the integrity of qualitative research is based on the construct known as trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005; Wang, 2008). There are a variety of perspectives and opinions across qualitative scholars about how to establish trustworthiness. The criteria that are most often used were established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Their criteria (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability) are intended to help researchers and consumers of research to judge the rigor of a qualitative study. Morrow (2005) uses the constructs (a) social validity, (b) subjectivity and reflexivity, (c) adequacy of data, and (d) adequacy of interpretation to determine the trustworthiness of qualitative data. She proposes that these four criteria are particularly functional because they transcend strategies of establishing trustworthiness that might be specific to a particular paradigm.

Strategies that are specific to a constructivist paradigm include evaluating the authenticity of participants' described experience, the use of systematic procedures, triangulation of the data (e.g., use of an external auditor and checking the results with the participants), and constant self-reflection by the researcher (Patton, 2002). It should be noted that using an external auditor to review interpretations being made by the primary researcher is not a requirement for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2003) or qualitative research in general (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Wertz et al., 2011). An external auditor was not be used for this study. Instead, reflexive discussions with the process observer and faculty research supervisor and the use of a member check contributed to the trustworthiness of this study.

Morrow (2005) proposes that a more complete evaluation of trustworthiness should include (a) an examination of how deeply the meaning of the participants' experiences are understood and (b) the extent to which these meanings were mutually constructed. This second criterion reflects empowerment from the point of view of the participants to be involved in the construction of their narratives that are reflected in the themes of data analysis.

Morrow (2005) also indicates that there is an ideological overlap between the constructivist and critical theory paradigms and how these two paradigms recommend that a researcher establish trustworthiness. However, an additional criterion for establishing trustworthiness unique to critical research is the *consequence* of the study. More specifically, there is an explicit goal within critical research to raise consciousness about issues of power and oppression and a potential for initiating change through the research process. As stated earlier in my philosophical assumptions, I did not expect that this project would change

participants' view. Therefore, consequential validity was not included as part of establishing trustworthiness. Instead, a critical discourse about how the data fit within systems of power was presented in the document for the reader.

Strategies for establishing trustworthiness. The current study used Morrow's (2005) review of trustworthiness in qualitative research within counseling psychology as a foundation for developing strategies for establishing trustworthiness. The intention is to be explicit about how I maintained the integrity of the study such that the resulting interpretations are of value and worth. Strategies that I used to establish the trustworthiness of this study reflect common themes across different methods for establishing trustworthiness, including (a) reflexivity, to address the subjectivity of the researcher, (b) participatory consciousness, to account for the subjectivity of the research participants, and (c) immersion and prolonged engagement, to enhance the credible representation of the data.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the way in which I managed my subjectivity through constant self-reflection. I kept a continuous written, electronic journal in order to keep an ongoing record of my thoughts, feelings, reactions, biases and experiences throughout the research process. I also engaged in self-reflection through the process of debriefing with the faculty chair of this project and the process observers. My emerging self-understandings were consciously set aside to the extent that this is possible or incorporated into the text of analysis when relevant. This process is known as "bracketing" (i.e., explicitly identifying preexisting values, assumptions, experiences, and expectations) (Morrow, 2005). Being explicit about my own assumptions and experiences did two things. First, although an objective distinction between the researcher and participants is impossible, stating my position ahead of time helped to make this flexible line more visible. Second, discussing my

own experience through the process of bracketing and through taking personal notes throughout the research study allowed me to validate my own experience so that I could make space to be open and available to the experiences of others. It allowed me to be more curious about the experiences of others rather than using the data to confirm my own experience.

Throughout the data analysis I also took extra steps to identify disconfirming evidence within the data in order to minimize confirmation bias. When a theme emerged I compared it to the original data to make sure it fit with that theme but also looked for instances in the transcript that contradicted the emerging theme.

Participatory consciousness. It is particularly important to me that the data represent the narratives of participants in a co-constructed manner. I do not believe that I am the authority on the lives of the participants. The term “participatory consciousness” is borrowed from Heshusius (1994) to reflect the aspiration of the researcher to include participants in the research process and interpretation of their experiences. One way that I worked toward creating a balance between the voice of the researcher and the voices of the participants was to include direct quotes from the data whenever I made interpretations.

Furthermore, I did not assume that I could separate myself from the data or the interpretations. The connection between the participants and me was understood as a reality within the context of the study. In order to minimize (but not erase) my subjective influence, I used approaches such as providing a thick (i.e., detailed) description of the data, using multiple sources of data (e.g., referring to documented notes and process observations) (Morrow, 2005), and asking participants to provide feedback about their direct quotes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005; Wang, 2008) through member checking.

My connection with the participants continued beyond the focus group interviews. I also attempted to take on a “naïve” perspective and maintain an open and curious stance by asking clarifying question to avoid assuming an understanding. This was particularly important given that I am an “insider” to the phenomenon being studied (Morrow, 2005). Consciously using my background in counseling psychology and trained skills in active listening also helped to minimize the influence of my preexisting assumptions and maximize an open and curious perspective.

Immersion and prolonged engagement. Immersion and prolonged engagement within the context and cultural setting of the phenomenon can contribute to the credibility of the interpretations. I have been a part of the LGBTQ community in the location being studied for a few years. I have participated in a variety of LGBTQ community events and established close relationships. This offers both advantages and disadvantages to this study. My involvement in the community provides a context for a complex understanding of the phenomenon and access to the community being studied. However, it also raises the possibility of confirmatory bias. Reflexivity and participatory consciousness (as described earlier) were used to minimize this consequence. During each focus group, I also used a process observer who identified as ally but not as a member of the community.

Another aspect of immersion and prolonged engagement has to do with the researcher’s engagement with the data itself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005; Wang, 2008). I immersed myself in the data through continuous readings of the transcripts and comparisons of the emerging themes to the original data. Furthermore, memos were used to document how the emerging themes were generated. The memos documented my hunches, observations and tentative interpretations that eventually lead to the final interpretations.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study is a qualitative exploration of the social construction and enforcement of gender with a specific focus on how gender policing is experienced in social interaction within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale (pseudonym), the specific location of this study. Gender policing refers to the implicit or explicit feedback that one is accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms, expectations, and ideals with the implied meaning that not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences. Gender, as a system of meaning and power, has a pervasive influence on how we see ourselves and how we relate to others (Wilchins, 2004). One of the consequences of gender policing is that it maintains perceived differences between two socially constructed categories, man and woman, which reciprocally reinforce a binary system of gender in which masculinity holds more power in relation to femininity (e.g., Lorber, 1994).

Two focus groups comprised of five people who self-identify along the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context in their lives were used as the primary method for data collection (see Table 1 and 2 for demographic information). Extra effort was taken to de-identify the individuals who participated in this study. For example, I assigned each participant with pseudonyms rather than using their real names. The focus group questions attempted to elicit participants' experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale as they negotiated a sense of self in relation to others in the LGBTQ community.

The following chapter will present the social context, results and discussion of the current exploratory study. As detailed in Chapter 3, I will first describe the social context of

the focus groups based on the suggestions outlined by Hollander (2004). Next I will present the five emerging theme across the focus group discussions. The content of the focus group discussions was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborn (2003) and detailed in Chapter 3. Given the nature of qualitative research, the results from the qualitative data analysis will be integrated with the discussion. I will do this by incorporating connections to the literature as I describe the emerging themes. Finally, I will present a brief summary and conclusions.

The Social Contexts

As detailed in Chapter 3, describing the social context of the focus groups helps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the emerging content themes. Hollander (2004) suggests that there are three important levels to describe when analyzing data from focus group discussions. These include (a) the relationships among participants, (b) the relationships between the participants and the researcher, and (c) the social structures and setting in which the focus groups took place. Each of these levels is presented in this section. The information used to create these descriptions is a combination of my observations while conducting the focus groups, listening to the audio recordings, close readings of the transcripts, consultation with the silent group process observers, multiple reviews of notes from the process observers, my observations as a participant observer in Riverdale and information gathered from the 2010 census. Some of the information included in this section has been altered, without significantly changing the meaning or context, to protect the identity of participants. For example, I assigned each participant a pseudonym and changed the names of cities and establishments to which participants referred.

Dynamics Among The Participants

Focus group one. The first focus group included, Kate, Emma, Aiden, Josh, and Joanna (pseudonyms). Four of the participants self-identified as White while one did not report her race. The ages of the participants ranged from early 20s to late 40s. The median age was 23 years old. Two of the participants self-identified as lesbian and female, one reported that gender and sexuality “depend,” one self-identified as a bisexual and transmale, and one participant identified as gay and male. Four participants identified their nationality as American, and one did not report her nationality. The occupations within the first group were broad and included parent, cook, student, grocery clerk, military factory worker, personal assistant, teacher, poet and writer, with some participants reporting more than one occupation. The reported educational background of the participants included “scattered,” some college, bachelor’s degree, freshman in college, and graduate student. One participant identified her social class as poor, two identified as lower-middle class, and two identified as middle class. The length of time that each participant reported identifying with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale ranged from 1 to 30 years, and the amount of time that participants reported identifying with the LGBTQ community, in general, was either the same or longer.

Four of the participants, Kate, Emma, Aiden, and Josh, grew up in the areas surrounding Riverdale. During the discussion these participants would sometimes find points of connection through a shared interest in a local establishment or in discovering that they knew the same person in the Riverdale community. They referenced local restaurants, coffee shops, high schools, the local gay bar, a local non-LGBTQ affiliated bar, a local bisexual musician, and a local well-known drag queen. Three of the participants, Kate, Emma, and

Josh, knew each other coming into the group. Kate and Josh were siblings, and Kate and Emma were partnered. Kate would often prompt the others to share stories.

Joanna was new to the area and moved to Riverdale about a year prior to the focus group meeting for graduate school. In the follow up questionnaire she reported having a good experience in the focus group but “felt like [she] didn’t have a whole lot of stuff to contribute that was recent and local.” During the discussion Joanna would often reference being new to town and not knowing the social “rules” of Riverdale or the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. During the discussion it was clear that she wanted to contribute to the conversation but sometimes struggled to relate to some of the experiences others shared. At times Joanna had a non-verbal facial expression of shock or surprise when listening to others. When I asked about this she reported having a different experience but not being surprised by the others’ more negative experiences. Joanna identified herself as different in terms of being both new and feeling as though she has never really been connected to “the” LGBTQ community. The idea of the LGBTQ community having an “inner circle” was referenced a few times in this group as a way of understanding the experience of “not fitting in,” not meeting expectations, and simply not feeling connected the LGBTQ community.

Kate and Aiden were the leaders of the group discussion. Both had the most talk time compared to the other participants. Kate was often the first to respond to my prompts or to others’ responses. She made jokes, encouraged laughter, and related to others by verbally or non-verbally expressing agreement or sharing a similar story. She rarely disagreed with any of the other participants. A few times Kate would end her comments with a positive shift about how things are getting better or how she hopes for change. The sentiment of things “getting much better” and “how bad” they used to be became the centralized theme on which

everyone in the group agreed. Kate also promoted a desire for more solidarity within the LGBTQ community with a specific focus on being more inclusive of transgender identities. On the follow-up questionnaire, Kate reported experiencing the focus group discussion as “deep and important.”

Aiden was the oldest member in the group. He contributed the most in terms of talk time compared to the other group participants. Many of his comments related to past experiences from the 1980s and 1990s. He discussed some of his reactions to past attempts for solidarity in the community, consequences of the community being centralized around the bar scene, disbelief and excitement about change, and struggles specific to social class barriers and transgender experiences. Aiden also focused on the theme of fear, needing protection, and the importance of privacy. In the follow-up questionnaire, Aiden reported feeling “comfortable” during the focus group discussion but also reported: “Sorry if I talk too much – when I’m tired I tend to ramble.”

Josh and Emma remained mostly quiet during the discussion. In the follow-up questionnaire Emma explained that it was “good to learn a little about other experiences” but indicated that she did not have many stories that related to the Riverdale area. Emma’s contribution to the discussion focused on feeling less comfortable with her sexual identity due to being in the military but also on being surprised to find acceptance within the military.

Josh’s contribution to the discussion focused on growing up in a small town as a gay male and around specific values and expectations in the gay bar scene. Josh also shared that he does not worry about the expectations of others and does not pay attention to social rules. In the follow-up questionnaire, he reported that the focus group was an “interesting

experience” and stated: “I tend to be more talkative around people I know well so I feel like I didn’t contribute much.”

Focus group two. The five members in the second focus group included Scott, Jenna, Chris, Hector, and Riley (pseudonyms). The ages of the participants ranged from early 20s to early 30s. The median age of the participants was 25. Three of the participants self-identified their race/ethnicity as White, one as Latino, and one as mixed race and first generation. Two identified their nationality as American, one as Latin American, one reported that ze (preferred gender pronoun) does not define hir (preferred gender pronoun) nationality, and one participant did not report her nationality. One of the participants identified her gender and sexual identity as a bisexual female, two as gay male, one as fluid and transgender/queer, and one identified as queer and Trans*/genderqueer. Occupations within this group included teaching, writing, and doing research. Two of the participants self-identified their social class as working class, two identified as middle class, and one identified as being raised upper-middle class.

All of the participants in the second focus group had recently moved to Riverdale ranging from one month to just over a year before the focus group meeting. Four of the participants reported being in graduate school in Riverdale and one participant did not disclose her educational background. The amount of time that each of the participants reported identifying with the broader LGBTQ community ranged from 1 to 15 years. Each of the participants referenced the experience of “being new” to town, being new to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale and the difficulty of “starting over” to build community. Three out of the five participants, Riley, Chris, and Scott, knew each other coming into the focus group. Riley and Chris were partnered, and Scott was a mutual acquaintance. All of

the participants were attentive and respectful of each other. Humor was used in the beginning of the group, which seemed to lighten up the formality of the group dynamic. Later, humor was used to lighten the mood and to connect multiple members to a shared experience.

Chris and Scott were the leaders of this group discussion in terms of their amount of talk time in the group and initiating topics. During the discussion, Chris reported that ze (Chris's preferred pronoun) often feels like a "Mother Hen" who is focused on the unmet needs of others in the LGBTQ community. This Mother Hen dynamic seemed to play out in the room. Chris served as an advocate, defender and protector in the group. Ze was often the first to talk but would also ask other people questions, and attempted to connect or relate to what others had shared. For example, when Hector discussed his struggle of being rejected by his religious community after deciding to identify with the LGBTQ community, Chris responded by sharing hir own struggles with religion and the silencing of religion in the LGBTQ community generally. Jenna shared that she sometimes feels excluded from the community because she identifies as a bisexual woman, Chris validated and reflected the "bi-bashing" culture within the LGBTQ community throughout the discussion.

As another example, when Hector asked what "queer" meant, Riley gave a brief explanation and then encouraged Hector to do his own research on the topic. Soon after Chris brought up some critiques of "queer" by explaining that queer may not work for everyone and that White middle class individuals are often dominant in queer communities and queer culture. Chris identified as mixed race and working class but also reported identifying with queer. The group's critiques of queer communities seemed to follow Hector's (a self-identified Latino middle-class gay male) question about what queer meant

and Riley's (a self-identified White upper-middle class transgender individual) response.

Chris acted in a way that both defended queer and defended why some people may not feel included within queer culture. Similarly, Chris validated Scott's experience of not feeling "queer enough."

Throughout the group, Chris highlighted problems within the LGBTQ community that echoed this group's main themes of not feeling supported by the LGBTQ community and not feeling like "enough" to authenticate their inclusion. Chris also emphasized the difficulty of including other oppressed identities and experiences such as religion, race, culture, immigration status, class, and body size. Toward the end of the group, Chris focused on a call for solidarity and inclusion that centered on the shared experience of gender oppression rather than sexual identities. Chris also focused on the context of living in a small town. On the follow-up questionnaire, Chris reported, "as problematic as the urban / rural divide is, urban spaces are easier to traverse when you're (a) not White & queer and/or (b) when you're trans* & need medical / health resources." Chris described hir general experience in the focus group discussion as "fine."

Scott was the second leader of this focus group in terms of talk time and the number of topics he introduced into the conversation. The predominant themes that Scott brought into the discussion surrounded the struggle to meet the ideals and expectations of masculinity in predominantly gay male spaces, not feeling supported by the LGBTQ community, and not feeling like "enough." Scott also emphasized that many of his interpersonal experiences within an LGBTQ community occurred within the context of the bar scene which heightened certain perceived expectations such as body image, youth, promiscuity and sexual dominance. Scott often used humor when talking about gay male stereotypes and when

talking about painful experiences of not feeling supported or not meeting a particular group norm. His humor seemed to diffuse the intensity of the mood but also served as a tool to communicate support toward others in the group. In the context of this discussion the shared laughter among participants seemed to come from a place of knowing, relating, and understanding the particular struggle that Scott described. On the follow-up questionnaire Scott described his experience in the focus group as, “very helpful to know that I’m not alone in my experiences.”

Riley focused on conceptualizing her and others’ experience of not feeling supported by the LGBTQ community within the context of an oppressive culture. Riley introduced the concepts of cis-supremacy, hetero-normativity, and shaming femininity as the dominant context to which everyone in the group is held accountable. She emphasized the pressure to “pass” (being read by others) as cis-gender or heterosexual and to fit within these dominant models. She shared observing the pressure to conform to dominant norms re-emerge within the LGBTQ community. She also emphasized the context of fear that keeps people afraid to express difference and afraid to break silence. Riley had a balance of directing her responses directly to me as the moderator and responding to others in the group with minimal encouragers (short statements to encourage other participants to continue, such as “wow,” “yeah” or “well said”). Toward the end of the group discussion, Riley strongly supported the call for solidarity, inclusion and collaboration within the LGBTQ community through communication and confronting the hate directed at femininity. On the follow-up questionnaire, Riley described her experience as, “wonderful, thank you!”

Hector appeared engaged but was also the quietest person in the group. Hector focused most on being new to Riverdale and the LGBTQ community. He talked about not

knowing the “rules” and how people within the LGTBQ community interact with one another. His dynamic within the focus group discussion seemed to be more of an observer and learner. In the times he did speak, he shared examples of feeling disappointed, let down, or hurt by certain expectations within the gay male community. On the follow-up questionnaire he reported, “It was very pleasant to be able to connect with other people from a similar background.” Despite being a quieter participant, Hector felt connected to the participants and the stories being shared in the group discussion.

Jenna was also quiet in the group but often showed non-verbal signs of agreement with other members. Jenna spoke in a softer voice compared to the other participants. A few times Jenna apologized for changing the subject, “going off track,” or for asking other participants’ questions. For example, at one point she apologized for “taking over my job” as the moderator. Similar to others in the group, Jenna focused on not feeling supported by the LGBTQ community and having hard time finding community. Jenna also discussed struggles specific to identifying as a bisexual women such as feeling invisible, less valued within the LGBTQ community and feeling expected to fit within a butch/femme model when dating women (though she shared that she does not enact this model). On the follow-up questionnaire, Jenna described her experience in the focus group as “refreshing.”

Dynamics Between the Participants and the Researcher

Given the formal nature of the pre-screening interview and informed consent process, it seemed like the participants related to me in a more formal way. One of the process observers noted that the dynamic during the focus group mirrored a teacher – student dynamic. This may have been related to the context of being in a conference room on a college campus, the artificial nature of starting a conversation, and participants’ awareness of

the conversation being related to a research study. As another example, during one of the pre-screening interviews, one of the participants stated something to the effect of, “Whoa, why so formal?” In general, it seemed as though participants related to me more as a graduate student associated with the local university and less as a Riverdale community member and member of the LGBTQ community.

Scott was the most aware of and attentive to me as the moderator. At one point he interrupted the discussion to look at me and ask if they were helping my study. After the focus group discussion ended, he asked me more questions about being a graduate student and about my timeline for my dissertation. He seemed to relate to my status as a graduate student, and it seemed important that he be helpful. This feeling generalized to other participants as well, a sense of wanting to be helpful.

I disclosed my sexual identity during each pre-screening interview and at the start of each focus group. I also discussed the possibility of knowing participants and/or knowing the same people. Each participant reported feeling comfortable with participating in the study despite the small size of the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. I did not personally know any of the participants in this study. However, many of the participants and I knew some of the same people within the LGBTQ community in Riversdale. I had also seen a few of the participants in Riverdale before starting this research study. Some I had seen at local restaurants or local community events. One participant referenced seeing me at a reoccurring lesbian event and at an AIDS benefit in Riverdale.

Another context that was relevant to this study were participants’ reactions to my interview questions. With the exception of some resistance against the use of my phrase “within the community” (see Subtheme 2.b.: Unsupported), participants in this study did not

appear confused or “put off” by the interview questions. In both the first and second focus group, participants were quick to respond to my prompts, and the discussions seems salient to some of their experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. It is also important to note that participants in both focus groups began talking about gender stereotypes, gender conforming, and gender non-conformity early on in the discussions without me guiding the conversations in that direction.

The Setting of the Focus Groups

The place and time. The focus groups took place on a Thursday and Friday night in the Fall of 2012. The focus groups corresponded with the start of the academic school year. Five out of the ten participants had moved to Riverdale for graduate school and one had moved to Riverdale to be with her partner. Four of the six who had moved to Riverdale had been there a year and two had been there for 1-2 months. The context of it being the beginning of an academic year may have influenced who would be more likely to respond to the advertisement for the research study and why there may have been a larger focus across both groups about being new to town, being new to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale, and the struggle to find or build community.

Both of the focus groups were conducted in the same room. They were held around a large rectangular table in a small conference room on a university campus. There were a specific number of chairs for each participant, the process observer and myself. A sign-in sheet and food were placed at one end of the table and the chairs were placed at the other end of the table. The participants and I all sat around the table and the process observer sat outside of the group in a chair in the corner.

The Setting. Both of the focus groups were conducted in Riverdale and all of the participants were recruited from Riverdale. Riverdale is a Midwest, rural college town. According to the 2010 census data, the population of Riverdale was 26, 241. About 4% were under the age of 5 years, 12% were under the age of 18 years, and 7% were 65 years and over. About 62.4% identified as White, 25.6% as Black, 0.4% as Native American, 5.7% as Asian, 0.1% as Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, 5.4% as Latino, and 3.3% as mixed race. In 2010, 11.1% of Riverdale reported speaking a language other than English at home. Among those 25 years or older, 92.8% graduated high school or higher and 52.1% obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher. Between 2007 and 2010 there were 985 veterans. The homeownership rate between 2007 and 2011 was 29.3% and the median value of an owner-occupied housing unit was \$107,700. The median household income within the time was \$18,813, and 47.4% of persons were below the poverty level.

Historically, Riverdale was known as a mercantile and transport center. Riverdale's economic foundation grew from the transportation of coal and produce by railway and the establishment of a teachers' college, which later became an accredited state university. The university in Riverdale is currently the only university within a 45 mile radius. The university is comprised of 19,000 undergraduate and graduate students and 1300 staff members.

The state in which Riverdale is located also tends to be more liberal with respect to social issues and support for some LGBTQ rights. For example, between 2010 and 2013 the support of same sex marriage among registered voters in the state that Riverdale is located increased from 33.6% to 45.5% (Jackson & Leonard, 2013). Riverdale voters also tend to align more with the Democratic Party. However, areas surrounding Riverdale tend to be

more politically conservative. Some of the community members in Riverdale sometimes refer to Riverdale as a “liberal bubble” surrounded by a more conservative climate. This is consistent with what some of the participants referred to in terms of feeling somewhat safe being “out” in Riverdale but feeling significantly less safe being “out” in some of the areas surrounding Riverdale. Some people in Riverdale attribute this “bubble” context to the presence of the local university. The university also had a history of political activism such as large anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam War.

The LGBTQ community of Riverdale originally grew out of a community centered on the bar scene and organizations connected to the local university. In the 1950s and 1960s the only visible gatherings for lesbian and gay individuals to connect with each other was at one gay bar in town. In the early 1970s students at the local university in Riverdale chartered a gay alliance group, which is one of the oldest groups of its kind across the country.

Today, there is increasing visibility of gay and lesbian events, social gatherings, and organizations, both in the university and in the Riverdale community. For example, in addition to the gay and lesbian student organization, in 2007 the local university opened an LGBT Resource Center that continues to provide support and advocacy for LGBTQ students. There is a coalition for LGBT staff, faculty, and graduate assistances that developed in the 1990s in support and advocacy for the rights of LGBT employees at the local university. There are also self-run online networks for queer, lesbian and gay graduate students.

In the community of Riverdale there has also been a gay bar present over the past 30 years, changing names and ownership over the years. More recently, there was an “alternative” bar downtown that was referred to as the “gay bar” (this bar closed down in the summer of 2013). There is an occasional lesbian event hosted at a non-LGBTQ affiliated

bar, an annual community Pride picnic hosted at a local church, an annual AIDS walk, a weekly support group for LGBTQIA youth, and the local high schools now have a gay-straight alliance. The community of Riverdale can also tune into a weekly queer radio show supported by a local public radio station. Additional opportunities for community building come from local social networks such as groups that meet up at a particular restaurant one night a week or at someone's home for special events.

Despite the growing number of spaces for lesbian and gay individuals to gather there are still some limitations. This struggle of community building in Riverdale happened to be a topic on the local queer radio show in Riverdale in May 2013. The show was run by two co-hosts and they had on two additional guests. One person talked about the limitations of the LGBTQ community in Riverdale being centered around a local bar. One host noted that although there is an "alternative" bar where LGBTQ individuals can localize there is no external signifier, such as a rainbow flag, to make this space more visible to the broader Riverdale community.

The hosts also mentioned the limitation of connecting with those who do not drink alcohol or do not wish to socialize at bars. They mentioned that the bar is also geared toward younger gay men. Other spaces for building community included the annual pride picnic and informal gatherings at allied restaurants and bars. One host talked about the trouble of communicating community events between the local university and the Riverdale community, illuminating that there can sometimes be a divide between the two. A resistance toward acknowledging transgender issues was also brought up on the show. One of the co-hosts said that in response to this resistance there is a new radio show that started in the summer of 2013 dedicated to issues surrounding transgender identities and ways to move

beyond the sex/gender binary. When one of the co-hosts asked the others what the current issue is in the LGBTQ community of Riverdale, the first response was the lack of solidarity and sub-division of identities within the LGBTQ community.

Qualitative Findings

The data collected from two focus groups, comprised of five participants in each group, yielded five superordinate themes (see Table 3). These five themes are: (a) Gender oppression, (b) Discouragement with community, (c) Attempts to cope, (d) Queer, and (e) Change. The sum of these five themes captured the essence of the group discussions and these participants' experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. These results are not meant to generalize to all who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer nor to the entire LGBTQ community in Riverdale. The intention of this study was to describe the experiences of those who participated.

Reflected in the five themes is a connected storyline of experiencing gender oppression, the different struggles associated with trying to build community within a gender binary, responses to these struggles and negotiating the experience and possibility of change. In this section I will present the five superordinate themes stated above along with the associated subthemes. I will also use direct quotes from the interview transcripts to help illustrate each theme.

Theme 1: Gender Oppression

Each of the interview questions focused the discussion on interactions “in the community,” among individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer in Riverdale. However, a reoccurring theme that emerged was the experience of oppression from outside the community. Participants shared multiple experiences of oppression in

response to social identities such as age, body size, race, ethnicity, religion, class, sex, gender, and sexual identity. As Collins (1993) explains, individuals are constantly in a state of oppressing and being oppressed based on the interlocking matrix of social identities. Each participant's identities and related status of privilege and oppression extends beyond their gender and sexual identities. Experiences of intersecting oppression are therefore included throughout the themes wherever they came up. However, this theme focuses primarily on the experience of oppression based on gender identity and sexual identity.

In this document I refer to gender oppression as oppression in response to someone's gender and/or sexual identity moving away from the expected norm. This is not to say that gender and sexual identities are the same thing but rather that the mechanisms of oppression are similar. Pharr (1997) describes gender oppression as the link between sexism and homophobia and explains that it is those "who violate gender roles who are most severely punished, and ... the enforcement of gender roles and designations is vital to the control of people, especially women, lesbians, gay men, transgendered, bisexual, questioning people, and ultimately, everyone" (p. 117). Identities and bodies that are not perceived as cisgender and heterosexual are often policed for not accomplishing gender appropriately. Cisgender and heterosexual identities become the dominant model to which all other identities are compared to and seen as less valued, through systems of cis-supremacy and hetero-normativity. Sexism, transphobia, and homophobia then become the violent tools to keep the gender system in place, keeping White, cisgender, male, middle class, heterosexual, temporarily able bodied, and young as the prevailing privileged norm in the United States (e.g., Pharr, 1996).

Pharr (1997) refers to three common elements of oppression: (a) a defined norm, (b) institutional and economic power, and (c) institutional and individual violence. Participants referenced some of these common aspects of oppression as they discussed their experiences in the LGBTQ community. They referenced (a) cisgender and heterosexual identities being the privileged norm (i.e., Cis-supremacy and hetero-normativity), (b) specific examples of experiencing institutional and interpersonal enforcement of these norms, (c) internalized fear and self-policing. These examples help to illustrate the context of developing community within an oppressive climate.

Subtheme 1.a.: Cis-supremacy and hetero-normativity. The defined “norm” within a society becomes the “standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all others are judged in relation to it” (Pharr, 1997, p. 53). Participants in each focus group reflected an awareness of cisgender and heterosexual being the norms to which they were compared. They also referenced masculinity holding more power in relation to femininity within the gender system. For example, after listening to participants share their experiences Riley observed a common theme of devaluing femininity in the gay community and how this reflects a broader system of sexism, cis-supremacy, and hetero-normativity.

There is so much shaming of femininity. And, you know, when [pause] obviously I was bullied. And when gay people, gay men in specific, I'm only talking towards that experience, are made fun of it's always because of our inherent feminine nature maybe that is somehow seen and made fun of, and insulted. I've noticed a lot of people in the LGBT community shunning gay men that are feminine. You know? Like they're an embarrassment, they're not representing correctly. (Riley)

Here, Riley referenced the assumption that there is a “correct” way to be based on someone assumed sex category and that people are held accountable to that standard. To be more specific, she highlighted the assumption that men are not supposed to “act” feminine. Defining and appropriately accomplishing what is male comes from defining what is *not* male. Within the sex and gender binary, being male means not being female (e.g., Han, 2008; Pleck, 1995; Wilchins, 2004). Therefore, anyone who is assumed to be male is held accountable to masculinity and often punished for displays of femininity (e.g., Han, 2008; Wilchins, 2004).

Riley also brought up the association between femininity and stereotypes about gay men. Riley observed homophobic remarks as attacks on gender non-conformity but more specifically on femininity, which reinforced masculinity as the dominant norm in relation to femininity.

It’s so easy to agree to hate femininity, because you know that’s how you make fun of us, right? Like, especially gay men, is to, you know, make fun of the voice, the gay voice, you know the hand gestures. It’s to make fun of any sort of femininity.
(Riley)

Male gender transgressions have been conceptualized as a larger threat to the gender system (i.e., the patriarchy) and are therefore policed more often than female gender transgressions (Wilchins, 2004). Riley also shared how the experience of “pushing away femininity” reinforces the message that the goal is to appear in alignment with cisgender and heterosexual expectations.

It’s trying to be as heterosexual as possible, as hetero-normative as possible, you know so we’re not ‘outing’ [identifying others as not cisgender and/or not

heterosexual] each other maybe in public. Like even with trans folks, like I've noticed in groups if one person is not 'passing' [consistently read as either male or female], it's outing everybody else as trans. And, you know like I was kind of going on before, there's no pride in being, you know, where you are in the LGBTQ community. Like, I want to be proud to be transgender and queer. I want to look transgender and I want to look queer, but in so many of the larger spaces they're pushing that away. (Riley)

Riley struggled with the task of experiencing pride in her identity as both transgender and queer. The idea of "looking" transgender and "looking" queer was experienced as unacceptable.

Chris shared another example of reinforcing the dominant norms within the LGBTQ community through representations of gay and lesbian individuals in the media. Chris stated, "there's such a respectability component. I meant that's the only way we're going to 'make it' is if we only put masculine-looking gay men in ads, and feminine-looking women in ads." Chris referred to the assumption that acceptance or "making it" is predicated on appearing "not" gay or "not" lesbian by conforming to the expected gender norms and ideals associated with the assumed sex categories male and female. Riley referred to the enforcement gender conformity as cis-supremacy.

There's almost like this [pause] for in the trans community, what I've noticed, this [pause] I guess you could say cis-supremacist way of looking at things. And when I say 'cis' I mean cisgender, which is not being transgender, which I guess you can say being normal gender. Then there's not being proud of being trans, which I really don't [pause] I don't know how to understand for myself. So, there's also that

pressure that [pause] and that feeling that you have to [pause] the goal is to be cisgender, to be normal gender. (Riley)

Across both of the focus groups, there was a consensus that cisgender and heterosexual are the dominant norms. These are the norms that each of the participants and those in the LGBTQ community are held accountable to regardless of how they might identify. Western society continues to assume that male and female are the only “true” sex categories, which are then linked to cisgender and heterosexual expectations (Wilchins, 2004). The sex and gender binaries are the foundation for how society orients to and organizes people in institutions and in social interactions (e.g., Hollander, 2013).

Subtheme 1.b.: Institutional and interpersonal enforcement. Pharr (1997)

suggests that the second and third common elements of oppression are (a) institutional and economic power, and (b) institutional and individual violence. Institutional power and violence keep the dominant group in power. Institutional power is often reflected in the ways in which institutions and individuals exert power to reinforce the dominant norm. It is the enforcement of gender (based on someone’s assumed sex category) that makes the often invisible power structure of gender more visible (Hollander, 2013). In both focus groups, participants provided examples of institutions (e.g., the military, high schools, or health care services) and individuals enforcing cisgender and heterosexual norms. Emma, for example, shared how being in the military inhibited her ability to be more open about her sexual identity.

I think a challenge for me is not being able to be more open, at first, because like the military part, like, three years ago felt a little overbearing. So, that kind of like [pause] I can’t think of the word [pause] it just made it hard for me. I don’t know, I

mean things have changed, obviously, since then. But, even though that was like two or three years ago, I also had to get comfortable too. (Emma)

Here Emma referenced how her experience in the military during enforcement of the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy reinforced the message that identifying as a lesbian is something that she should hide. If, three years ago, she openly identified as a lesbian, she could have endured the consequence of losing her job, possibly leading to feelings of discomfort about her identity.

With respect to high school experiences, Kate shared the example of being prohibited from starting a Gay-Straight Alliance at her high school. She also shared noticing that the administration at the high school policed and interrupted public displays of affection between same sex couples but not heterosexual couples.

Yeah, I had a girlfriend in high school and, like, the principal, and this is going to sound so like slutty, but whatever, the principal would always tell me like, ‘You need to stop making out with Alice [pseudonym] in the hallways.’ I’m like, ‘Do you say anything to the straight kids? Go say something to the straight kids.’ [laughter]

Right? (Kate)

Kate went on to recall Josh (one of the participants in the group) getting kicked out of class for kissing his boyfriend Jason (pseudonym). Josh shared that in addition to getting kicked out of class, his boyfriend was administratively removed and placed in a different class to separate the two of them. Josh shared feeling like the display of a gay couple in particular seemed like a threat.

Jason, the guy she was talking about, and I dated for like four or five years through high school and then after. And when [pause] he was a couple of grades ahead of me,

it was like while he was still in high school it was a really big deal because we were a gay couple, and then after he graduated it was like nobody cared anymore. So, it's like if it's just me and I'm gay, it's fine. But, it's like, 'Oh, a couple.' (Josh)

Both of these experiences highlight examples of institutional power and how the people who make up institutions policed the norms and expectations of appropriate gender behavior. The display of affection between same sex couples challenged the gender ideals associated with the male and female sex categories. Both Kate and Josh were held accountable to these expectations, and as a result their identities as lesbian and gay were silenced.

A related sub-theme was men being policed more than women. Kate was scolded for showing her girlfriend affection but Josh and his boyfriend were administratively separated. Kate explained that this trend also appeared outside of high school, "In our town, and I feel like in most places, especially as a younger crowd, the scrutiny is on the gay males, not the gay females, for the most part, you know?" She went on to give an example of one of the ways her friend, Todd (pseudonym), was frequently harassed in response to being a gay male.

[Todd] was walking to my mom's one day and some redneck threw a bucket of fish on him as they were driving by, you know? And like that kind of stuff never happened with me and my girlfriend, but like the gay men were always getting, like [pause] I felt like they were getting picked on in high school. (Kate)

This relates to the statement that Riley made about the shaming of femininity. Participants observed those who were perceived to be male being "picked on" and bullied more than those who were perceived to be female. This relates to a theme that emerged in McGuffey and Rich's (1999) study of gendered interactions at a children's summer camp. In their

study, boys in particular were bullied when they were not accomplishing masculinity appropriately. McGuffey and Rich (1999) also noted that the pressure to accomplish masculinity appropriately, such as devaluing femininity, among the boys at the camp often came from an attempt to avoid the threat of group isolation or to avoid physically and emotionally harassed. In a system that reinforces masculinity holding more power in relation to femininity, there is a greater threat to this system when men are perceived as not conforming to masculine ideals and expectations (Wilchins, 2004). The notion of femaleness being inferior to maleness is what Serano (2007) refers to as trans-misogyny.

Chris, a graduate student at the university in Riverdale, shared an example of students in hir classroom reinforcing gender oppression through violent language.

Like in my classrooms when a student says, ‘That’s gay,’ and I say, ‘Well where was the anal sex happening,’ they get real real weird. [laughter] I’m like, ‘Yeah, you fucking said it. You said that’s gay, where’s the anal sex happening? Use your fucking language, and don’t oppress me. Right now you’ve oppressed me.’ And so I think marking that is a really big sign of, ‘We don’t talk about sex and so let’s find it somewhere else.’ (Chris)

In this example, “gay” is used to label something that is “bad,” but what also comes up is the assumption that gay equals male. Statements like “that’s gay” reinforce heterosexism and sexism.

Similar to Chris, Aiden shared his frustration with feeling like the dominant culture sexualizes LGBTQ identities by assuming that gay only refers to “anal sex” as noted above.

I just [pause] I don’t understand why the [pause] it’s the sexualization and sort of the fetishes that you get, I think too. In the community everybody’s like, ‘Oh, well, it’s

gay. It's all about homosexuality. It's all about sodomy.' Well, you know, I work for a living. I've never taken my pants off at work. You know? (Aiden)

Aiden expressed frustration with gay being associated with an act of sex and wanting others to recognize that his gender identity and sexual identity are more than his sexual practice. Aiden experienced this sexualization as a reinforcement of his "otherness" in comparison to the dominant norm.

The enforcement of gender norms and expectations was also experienced through peer to peer bullying in high school, which is often supported by the educational institutions that do nothing to prevent the bullying (e.g., Pharr, 1997). As an example, Aiden shared that he was often bullied, experiencing interpersonal violence, for having a queer mom.

I used to get the shit beat out of me because my mom's queer. You know? It's, you know? I just - people spitting in my hair damned near every day, getting thrown down stairs, and this was at [Riverdale High School]. You know? Because my mom's queer. And then I didn't [pause] . . . I tried to be female, but I'm sorry, born trans is born trans. I knew when I was four, I faked it as best as I could, but I got to play [a female character] in the [elementary school] play and I just never quit. You know? Because it was that or get the shit beat out of you? You know? (Aiden)

In addition to experiencing violence for having a queer mom, Aiden learned to conform to gender norms and expectations by continuing to "play" a representation of what others expect "female" to be and look like to prevent the real threat of physical violence. As noted in Chapter 2, bullying and gay-bashing in the school system is closely linked to negative reactions to gender non-conformity (e.g., Klein, 2012).

Aiden also shared an example of receiving a clear message that not complying with gender norms and expectations is not acceptable when he visited a mental health center and reported identifying as transsexual.

I went to [a community mental health center] and was told that, well, I was probably only doing it to get back at my mom for the divorce and that the only - and this is the [community mental health center] mind you in 1983. And that the only jobs that 'those people' get are usually in prostitution. But, that basically I would never be able to marry, never be able to have children, never be hired. 'They have to work in prostitution or drug dealing.' [These] were [the] only options for a transsexual, is to be [pause] and I'm thinking, 'I was going to go into [a specific science major], really?' [laughter] (Aiden)

The message, enforced by individuals within the institution of health care, was very clear; moving away from one's sex assigned at birth will lead to real or assumed negative consequences. Even today, Aiden explained that the dominant message in society is that being transgender is not acceptable. When referring to dominant messages in the media he shared, "I just stopped watching all of those Family Guy things, and Fox cartoons in general, because I just got sick of the tranny jokes."

Subtheme 1.c.: Fear and self-regulation. Fear speaks to internalized oppression and the self-regulating component of how oppression works. Individuals are programmed to take on the role of oppressor, internalizing the perspective of how those in power perceive and objectify the "other" (Pharr, 1996). Participants shared how the anticipation of real or assumed negative consequences often maintained their fear of being "out" and fear of being seen as anything other than heterosexual or cisgender. Fear becomes a weapon to maintain

the power and status quo of the dominant culture. As Riley explained, “we’re afraid, and that has to do with the system that’s hard at work as we speak to maintain our fear and to make sure that we’re afraid of coming out.” Aiden similarly shared his observation that, “nobody wants to stand up and go, ‘Well, damn it, I’m a transsexual.’”

Riley explained, “when moving to Riverdale, I was afraid to come here, because I was developing a community back home and coming here [pause] going anywhere new and being queer is scary. I was just flat out scared.” Both Aiden and Riley referenced the fear associated with not fitting the dominant norm or expectation. Their fear came from past experience of negative consequences (e.g., institutional and interpersonal violence) associated with not complying with the dominant gender norm.

The fear of negative consequences can range from social isolation, to loss of job and financial resources, to fear for one’s personal safety (e.g., Pharr, 1997). Aiden shared his fear about losing his job, “When I was first thinking about transitioning and everything, even dating a woman I could have lost my job at the freaking fast food restaurant because it’s a family restaurant, you know?” He also shared his fear for personal safety.

The thing about being trans and outside of Riverdale was if you ‘get made’ [become identified as transgender to an observer], you’re screwed. You know, you are screwed. I actually don’t travel - I don’t leave Riverdale without my freaking knife, you know? Because, yeah, you either, you know, yeah. I just don’t feel safe “out.” So, yeah, when I do get validation that I’m passing [identified as male by observers], it’s pretty damn important because that means there’s nobody that’s going to be following me out to the parking lot [of the grocery store] yelling shit. You know, which is always a possibility. (Aiden)

Aiden also explained the complexities of trying to “pass” within the gender binary.

It’s just kind of a weird space. You know, my teenager still calls me ‘Mom’ and so, I’ve kind of got to be careful about turning around in the [store] seeing who’s looking, you know? There’s little things about that you just don’t quite - you still negotiate. (Aiden)

Here Aiden referenced the importance of feeling like he is identifiable as fitting within the gender binary in order to maintain his feeling of personal safety. However, he also shared how this is complex as someone who identifies as transmale with a history as a mother. For Aiden, living in the in-between space of the gender binary can sometimes leave him feeling vulnerable and hyper-vigilant about any signs of external threats. As Hollander (2013) explains, the “anticipation of the accounts that others may develop is one motivation for doing gender” (p. 23). Aiden was aware that others might be watching and ready to hold him accountable to the gender system.

Theme 2: Discouragement with Community

Feeling discouraged or disappointed with the LGBTQ community was the second theme that emerged across both focus groups. This theme reflects the different ways in which the idea and/or experience of community failed to meet participants’ needs. It also highlights the complexity of building community among an oppressed group in a small college town. Trying to find others who share their gender or sexual identity and who share common interests was a challenge for both those who grew up in small towns surrounding Riverdale and those who moved to Riverdale for school.

Among those who did find community, there was a common sub-theme of finding the community unsupportive. Participants described a feeling of disappointment when

interacting with those who identify with the LGBTQ community because of the re-inscription of the sex and gender binaries within the LGBTQ community. Accountability to the dominant norms and values of cis-supremacy and hetero-normativity continued within the community, leading to sub-fracturing within the community and barriers toward achieving solidarity. Theme 1: Gender Oppression, provided the groundwork for understanding the recapitulation of oppression within the LGBTQ community. Participants described experiences of oppression through (a) institutional regulation, (b) interpersonal regulation, and (c) self-regulation. These three levels are interconnected and constantly in play and impact dynamics within the LGBTQ community. Forming a community with others who are marginalized in society does not inoculate that group from internalizing the context of living in a society that enforces conformity to sex and gender binaries.

Theme two, Discouragement with Community, starts to unpack the ways in which power and oppression recapitulate within the community through the process of inclusion and exclusion (e.g., Fischer & DeBord, 2013; Pharr, 1996). I have broken the second theme of discouragement into four sub-themes: (a) feeling disconnected from the LGBTQ community, (b) feeling unsupported, (c) invalidation and rejection of transgender and bisexual identities, and (d) feeling “not enough” and not fitting expectations of specific sub-categories within the LGBTQ community.

Subtheme 2.a.: Disconnection. There were different ways that participants shared the experience of feeling like they were not connected to the community. For some it was about feeling like they did not know enough people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. For some, it was about feeling invisible or not knowing how to identify others as being part of the community. For others it was about being new to town, not

knowing the rules of the community, or somehow not fitting the assumptions about where the community meets or localizes. In this sub-theme it became clear that part of the experience of disconnection from “the” community came from assumptions about what the community “is” and what it should look like. For example, some assumed that being part of the LGBTQ community meant connecting with a large number of people, and others assumed it meant that if you did not want to go to the gay bar then you could not connect with the community. In this section I have broken down the subtheme of disconnection into the following: (a) not knowing other LGBTQ people, (b) feeling invisible or having a hard time identifying others, (c) being new to town, and (d) not connecting with the bar scene.

Not knowing others in the community. Those who grew up in areas surrounding Riverdale and those who moved to Riverdale for school shared a common experience of having a hard time identifying others who share their sexual or gender identity. For Kate, Josh, and Emma, questions about the community were sometime hard to answer because it brought up the question of, “what community? And where is this community?”

Josh, for example, explained, “I came out when I was like 15, and there was only like two gay kids at the school. So, there wasn’t a community to try to fit into.” Kate, had a similar experience, and shared how growing up, “there wasn’t a whole lot of connection as a young person.” Later she explains,

We grew up in Danville [pseudonym], ‘Try not to tell anybody.’ [laughter]
 But, [it’s a] small town and for the most part homophobic. It was my brother, and Kyle, and it was me, and my girlfriend, and this other kid named Todd. We were like the whole five gay kids in the school. (Kate)

Kate went on to recall that while she was in high school she would think to herself, “OK, what do I do? What are the resources? I know five whole gay people in the whole world. Like this is my web and I think I’m hot shit because I know five whole other gay people.” Knowing five other gay people at school translated to being the only other gay people she knew in the whole world. The idea of community was hard to imagine or relate to.

Invisibility. In the first focus group, there was a reoccurring theme of discussing gaydar. The participants referred to gaydar as the ability to identify someone else as a member of the LGBTQ community. The idea of having gaydar was talked about in a joking manner but highlighted the experience of not knowing how to identify others or even identify oneself to others as a member of the LGBTQ community. The following exchange is a good example of how the conversation about gaydar played out.

Aiden: I think gaydar is a myth.

[laughter]

Kate: I don’t know I’ve been tuning my up lately.

Joanna: I always feel like I have the word ‘lesbian’ written across my face, and like people are always –

Kate: Right, dude.

Joanna: – shocked that I’m gay, and I’m like, ‘Really?’

Aiden: It’s like where’s your dog, where’s your truck, you know? Yeah.

Joanna: Dog’s at home.

Aiden: Oh. But, you know what I’m saying.

Joanna: She's from San Francisco. She's a good dog. But, yeah, I don't know. I probably need to step it up somehow, so other people know more, I don't know.

Aiden: Switch to flannel, or something.

In this exchange Aiden referenced lesbian stereotypes with the assumption that Joanna would understand, but the comment fell flat. Kate was eager to jump in, facilitate humor, and express agreement, but in doing so she interrupted Joanna before she could finish her statement. Aiden is someone who grew up in Riverdale and Joanna was very new to the area. This exchange is a good example of why it can sometimes be hard to connect on shared LGBTQ identities because these identities are not static. They are informed by the moment-to-moment context in which they play out. Again, in this exchange there was a disconnection between Joanna and Aiden's assumptions about common stereotypes that would code someone as lesbian. Joanna did not pick up on Aiden referencing the stereotypes of owning a dog and driving a truck that would authenticate Joanna as a lesbian to others in Riverdale.

In the second focus group, Jenna referenced the experience of women who are read as feminine feeling invisible as lesbian, bisexual or queer. She shared, "This hasn't been my experience, but a lot of my friends...I've seen them, like, once they identify as lesbian feel like they need to butch up." Signaling lesbian to others and "butching-up" often relied on gender stereotypes and more specifically was about portraying masculine stereotypes. For example, Kate described trying to become identifiable as a lesbian by presenting in ways that were masculine or "not feminine."

For me, personally, when I first came out I was probably about 16, I want to say. I

think I really, like, tried to like fit in the stereotype of masculinity, as an identification method. For like, ‘That’s a hot chick. I want her to know that I’m gay.’ (Kate)

Later she explains that this was a physical change to try and be recognizable by others.

I don’t feel like my personality changed, but I felt like physically like in order to be noted I was like on fire with rainbows, like I wanted to scream it like, ‘You need to know I’m a lesbian.’ So, of course, I was like, ‘I want to shave my head like Sinead O’Connor.’ (Kate)

For Kate, disrupting gender assumptions associated with femininity, such as having long hair, became a tool for communicating her sexual identity to others, it became a way to be “on fire” with rainbows. This relates to Goffman’s (1959) use of the term “front stage” performance, which refers to using clothing, language, and behavioral patterns to communicate an identity. Kate shared that she did not change her personality; she changed the way she looked to communicate something about her sexual identity to others. Her use of gender expression to communicate her lesbian identity also highlights the gender binary at work. If being read as a lesbian means not complying with the expectations of women, then the only other option for gendered expression is masculinity. This starts to complicate and intertwine the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual identities (e.g., Wilchins, 2004).

Within the first focus group there was awareness that gender stereotypes are sometimes used to communicate a sexual identity but also a struggle with not wanting to rely on stereotypes. Joanna, for example, explained how using gender stereotypes no longer became a reliable tool for identifying lesbian and gay individuals.

I have terrible gaydar. I just [pause] so yeah [pause]. I think a lot of it, I think, just had to do with places that I’ve lived. I think it’s really hard in San Francisco because

everyone seems like they're gay and it's the same thing in Seattle. It's just – there's something about, I don't know, the way people are that [pause] because it's not like when I was in [a Midwestern state] - it's like everyone is all [pause] with the make-up and the, you know, big hair or whatever. And so people look more straight, I guess, in certain areas, then in other areas not so straight. And, so it's very hard to [pause] I'm just like, 'Everyone is gay.' That takes care of it. (Joanna)

In this example Joanna expressed her struggle to come up with a reliable method for identifying others a lesbian or gay. One of her own assumptions that she challenged was the idea that gender conformity (e.g., women having big hair and wearing make-up) is associated with being straight and gender non-conformity is associated with being lesbian or gay. This rule for categorizing others into either box (i.e., gay or straight) failed to work as she moved to different geographical locations. The norms and expectations within the gender binary shift as the context shifts (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1987). Kate similarly shared feeling like gender non-conformity could not be used as a reliable method of identifying lesbian and gay individuals.

I know plenty of straight women who look like they stepped straight out of the '80s with a fucking mullet. And, I'm just like [pause] but they're straight, you know. They're just like punk kids and I'm just like - I just don't think that it's a big deal anymore. You know, I don't really like to use it as a source of identification, which a lot of people do. (Kate)

Kate expressed a conflict around recognizing that she labels people as gay using stereotypes but not wanting to do this, "because style shouldn't be a representation of who you're sleeping with, or what your personality is like, or if you're an asshole, or if you're sane." At

the same time, not relying on stereotypes has to be a conscious decision because the automatic thought of associating sexual identities with gender non-conformity is still present. As Kate explained, “not saying that I haven’t seen a chick and been like, ‘That girl is gay,’ because I definitely have, you know?” The presence of gender is ubiquitous. Without our conscious awareness of doing so, we orient toward someone’s assumed sex category and make judgments based on our assessment of expectations associated with that sex category (Hollander, 2013).

An important context to the subtheme of invisibility is that the participants in this study who identified as cisgender women also presented in a way that would likely be seen as congruent with expectations associated with the female sex category. The struggle with feeling invisible would likely be very different for someone who identified as lesbian, or a bisexual woman, or a queer woman and presented in ways that are read as gender non-conforming. What the experience of invisibility highlights, though, is the assumed link among sex, sexual identity, gender identity, and gender expression. Someone who is read as a cisgender male or cisgender female is assumed to be a heterosexual man or a heterosexual woman respectively.

Being new. Being new to Riverdale and/or new to the LGBTQ community was another way that participants felt disconnected. This experience involved being unsure of the social rules and norms in Riverdale’s LGBTQ community and unsure of how to fit in. In the following exchange Joanna described her struggle to connect to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale.

Joanna: I don’t know, here I’ve been pretty disconnected from the community and not really sure how to connect. So, I don’t know. It’s hard to kind

of [pause] I don't know. It's like I've been living in tiny towns for the last ten years. So, it's just [pause]

Kate: Yeah, I can –

Joanna: I don't know, it's hard to figure, because I grew up in big city and then moved to another big city [pause]

Kate: Oh yeah, you came to podunk, didn't you?

Joanna: – and then I moved to another big city and then I moved to the middle of nowhere in [a Midwestern state] so, I don't know. And, I've never been in like the 'in' group.

Not being able to connect with the "in" group within the community was something that was referenced often in the first focus group. Some of this had to do with living in a small town. The "in group" or "inner circle" became the reference group for understanding the governing force within the LGBTQ community that dictated the rules of who could and could not be included. Although no one specifically articulated who in fact made up this "inner group," the participants assumed that there was an inner group that held more power. Aiden described this as a recapitulation of high school social hierarchies.

Back in the '80s when I was first coming out the big thing was either this solidarity, in-group kind of cliquishness thing that was centered around like the bar scene. You didn't [pause] the whole conformity sort of thing from high school really transferred over, it seemed. There seemed to be a lot of - especially among the kids in their 20s and such, that were maybe first coming to town, or coming from the outlying areas and such, it still seemed like there was a lot of rigidity, who could be friends with who, if you're talking to so and so you can't be friends with so and so. So, yeah, it

was [pause] I don't know that that's changed much. (Aiden)

Kate related to the idea of not connecting to the community because of not being "cool" or connected to the "inner circle." Kate stated, "I don't know I feel like, just like every circle has, like a circle within it, do you know what I mean? And, it's like if you're not in that inner circle you're kind of like not the cool kid."

In the second focus group, Hector shared his struggle of being both new to town and new to the LGBTQ community.

I come from a very religious background and I tried to do the ex-gay therapy and all of that kind of stuff. I was hanging out with people who were in that same process. I decided that I didn't want to do that anymore. So when I decided I wanted to live my life inside my sexuality I struggled with people from my religious community, who basically rejected me because I didn't want to follow those guidelines anymore. And, so I guess my challenge now is finding where I fit now, because I'm still new to town and I don't know many people. I don't really know how to act in the LGBT community, like religious standards, the way that gays, or lesbians, or queers are supposed to interact with each other. So, it's still pretty new to me. (Hector)

In this statement, Hector described wanting to connect with community but not knowing how. He also referenced the idea of there must be specific rules and guidelines for how social interactions within the community should occur. Not knowing these rules left him feeling disconnected from the community he wanted to be included in. Knowing the rules or codes that define a group membership is one component of identity work (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Throughout the focus group Hector was often quiet but engaged. He did not verbally participate as much as the others but made eye contact and often nodded his

head in agreement. A few times he asked other questions. His behavior reinforced his statement about not knowing the rules but wanting to learn them so that he may be able to make connections with others. He was learning from others in the group.

Not connecting with the bar scene. In both focus groups the “gay bar” was referenced as a key point in centralizing the LGBTQ community, which is consistent with the broader history of LGBTQ communities in the U.S. (e.g. Pharr, 1997; Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 2004). As Josh explained, “the gay community in Riverdale and [the surrounding area] in general kind of revolves around the bar scene.” For those who did not want to go to the bar there was sometimes a perception of not being able to connect with the LGBTQ community. As Joanna stated, “I don’t know, the bars never did it for me.” The bar scene was also associated with a particular look, social class, type of music and age group, for example, which reinforced feeling disconnected from the bar scene and consequently from the community if one did not match these expectations. Josh described the bar scene as “really trendy and I don’t know, I don’t really get too into that. I listen to country music and I’m really nerdy.” Later, Kate expressed agreement with the bar scene being “trendy” by saying, “Yeah, and we’re rednecks, so [pause] ‘They don’t take kindly to our kind’ [laughter].” The clash between the assumed to be “trendy” bar and being “redneck” brought up the dynamic of social class. Kate described experiencing the gay bar scene as associated with accomplishing a different social class from how she identified.

Kate: We all kind of like localized in Riverdale. And then we like, our whole gay bar here, like our one whole gay bar or whatever – well, two I guess, but – correction, sorry. And so I think that’s really cool, but I also think how Josh was saying, like if you don’t wear the right

Kenneth Cole Reaction underpants, like, you know? While you're dancing in the cage -

[laughter]

Aiden: What Fruit of the Loom isn't good anymore?

[laughter]

Kate: Yeah, or you know, you don't wear like - you know, you don't spend your whole paycheck at the mall buying like really nice clothes and an iPod to plug into your new car, I feel like it's - you're not hip, you're not with the young gay scene. And, I feel like that's a really negative impact that our particular, like, age group is making on the younger crowd, you know, like the younger ones trying to come out.

The bar scene was recognized as a centralized location for bringing community together not only in Riverdale but also in the surrounding area. But as Kate emphasized, the expectations associated with fitting into the bar scene can sometimes leave individuals disconnected.

Subtheme 2.b.: Unsupported. The interview questions for this study attempted to elicit supportive, unsupportive and neutral experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. My intention was to provide space for multiple experiences rather than filtering to only emphasize negative ones. In the focus groups, I observed some of the participants pushing against the notion of community and the notion that the community offers a place of support. Scott, for example, described that for him, the LGTBQ community brings up a feeling of "discomfort, and dis-ease, and not being able to connect, and not having any type of affirmations with each other, I mean just this constant struggle."

Chris talked about hir complex relationship with the community in terms of feeling

pushed out and hurt by the community but still wanting to be included. Chris shared, “It’s like you get slapped on the hand and keep doing it anyways, creating this really weird like BDSM [Bondage and Discipline, dominance and Submission, and sadism and Masochism] relationship, that sadistic thing of, ‘Ooo, that feels good. Hit harder.’” To elaborate on the subtheme of feeling unsupported by the community I will present participants’ experiences of (a) competition, (b) not fitting under the LGBTQ umbrella, (c) silencing of intersecting identities, (d) not helping each other, and (e) feeling surprised by others’ experience of being unsupported.

Competition. One way the community was experienced as unsupportive was the association between community and competition. In the following exchange I asked Scott to clarify what he meant when talking about the feeling of competition.

Scott: When it comes to the LGBTQ community, for me, it’s just been a very hyper-competitive space for the better part of a decade.

Me: Can you say a little bit more about what you mean in terms of competitive?

Scott: Well [pause] OK, so, ‘My experience is worse than yours.’
‘My woes are worse than yours.’

Riley: Kind of like an oppression hierarchy?

Scott: Yeah! Yeah. [laughter]

For Scott and others, the community was associated with a place of proving “who has it worse” and associated with the perception of needing to compete for scarce resources. Scott went on to explain, “when it just comes to the competition it’s all around [pause] I think sometimes as a community we’re just starved for support for one another, when it’s

constantly like this battlegrounds.” The idea of the LGBTQ community feeling like a battleground was something that Jenna, Riley, Chris, Kate, and Aiden related too.

Not fitting under the LGBTQ umbrella. The LGBTQ umbrella refers to the idea of lumping multiple non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities into one category. Many of the participants articulated feeling frustrated with the assumption of sameness and simultaneously frustrated with the consequence of sub-grouping under the “umbrella.” In the following exchange, Scott and Chris discussed some of the problems associated with grouping diverse experiences under the same umbrella term of LGBTQ.

Scott: When we take LGBTQ as a community and we just say, ‘Well, you are a community,’ that almost starts creating some of the problem as well, I mean as much as I’ve used that acronym for a long time now, you know? There’s a very different thing between a lesbian situation, and a gay situation, and a bisexual situation, and even within individuals within those groups there’s going to be varying degrees of difference, but because we’ve kind of just lumped sexual orientation/identity into one fell swoop, it’s almost as if it’s been created that way to keep us fighting amongst ourselves. I don’t know.

Chris: Sure. You know I found solace in always [pause] I never refer to it in singular, it’s always LGBTQ communities, plural, always. And, primarily around this notion, which tends to get conflated that the ‘T’ is a primarily gender and/or sex experience, not sexuality. And so there’s this notion of, ‘How’s your sexual orientation?’ And then looks to the trans person, we’re like, ‘I don’t know right now, it

depends on where I am on the transition spectrum and who I'm dating at that time,' because we're not bi [bisexual], gay, or straight. It's somewhere else entirely, right?

Jenna agreed with Chris and Scott and shared, "I think so much time is spent carving out your own, you know, letter or whatever." The message is that of needing to protect one's own subcategory by distinguishing one's own sub-group as different from the "others." Riley explained that this fracturing of the community into sub-groups could leave those new to the community unsure of where or how to fit in and connect with others.

I mean it's just so separated, like the gay community is separated between [pause] there is feminine gay men, then it goes by age - I mean it can get so, like, sectioned out. Yeah, it's interesting, because even when you 'come out,' you have to find out where you belong, It's not just like, 'Welcome,' it's more of like – [laughter] - There's cattiness. There's no - yeah, there's so many like [pause] you're just lost the moment you come out. And there just needs to be more community, it's really sad. Yeah, it's just really sad. (Riley)

Chris elaborated on the experience of not fitting under the umbrella and pointed out the limitation of lesbian and gay politics not meeting the needs of everyone assumed to fit under the LGBTQ umbrella.

That pain, that isolation, this umbrella isn't working, the way we even frame politics today around these staples - repeal 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell;' check. Marriage equality; uh [pause] And then maybe adoption? But, we're not getting to, 'Where's your self care?' 'How do you feel about this?' How is marriage equality as like the forefront not helping us individually within this larger community, in terms of people

who don't have relationships, and don't have things to pass on to spouses, like those of us, the majority of us are poor. We don't have these [pause] marriage doesn't do much for us [pause] I mean [pause] it kills me. Like, at the deep core, like I just want to hug everyone and say let's work through this, but we don't, it's very individual and it's very much shoring up support for own letter in the alphabet train, like, 'This is my car full of us,' whatever that metaphor is supposed to mean. And say like, 'You're not allowed here, I'm trying to protect us,' but that really means that it protects me, instead of trying to see this as one big group trying to, I don't know just - it's so anti-coalitional and it really kills. (Chris)

Here Chris emphasized how the umbrella term “ LGBTQ community” and the politics associated with this community are limited and non-inclusive. When “LGBTQ” is used as superordinate category it conflates the experiences of sexual identity with gender identity and can cause unique experiences to become dismissed or made invisible (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007).

Similarly, the politics on the frontline of the lesbian and gay movement are not representative of this diverse group. The funded leadership within this movement tends to be White, male, and middle class (e.g., Han, 2008; Pharr, 1997), and more often than not the expressed needs of the movement reflect this demographic, leaving out those who do not fit the norm. There is also a divide within the LGBTQ community, in the U.S., about what the political movement should look like, with some questioning the value of fighting for access into historically oppressive institutions like the military and marriage (e.g., Pharr, 1997).

Silencing of intersecting identities. Part of participants' frustration with the umbrella term, LGBTQ community, was the idea that it lumps diverse sexual and gender identities into

one category. In addition to the assumptions that everyone under the umbrella has the same “issues,” participants experienced a resistance toward acknowledging intersecting identities. Scott, a White gay male, explained, “if you are LGBTQ of color – ‘You’ve got too many issues, I don’t have time for you. I don’t have time for you.’ It’s so [pause] it’s so frustrating.” Later, Chris, a mixed race, first generation, trans* and queer individual, reported agreeing with Scott. Ze shared that intersecting identities such as race, class, or religion become silenced.

I would say as a mixed race person, we don’t talk nearly enough about racism within the LGBT communities. And, it’s such a present menace everywhere, and it really hurts in terms of solace, a space to turn to where that’s still a problem, particularly with, I don’t know, just a complete [pause] there’s a lack of desire to want to have the dialogue because we’re already oppressed, like this becomes a ‘card’ to not have the discussion, and that to me is an important point that needs to be brought up constantly in discussions about LGBT politics, because we’re not allowed to. (Chris)

The silencing of difference under the LGBTQ umbrella reinforces the feeling of there not being enough space to support the needs of those who are different from the assumed group norm (Han, 2008; Pharr, 1997; Wilchins, 2004). When the community focuses on a single-issue identity and silences intersecting identities, the community is working toward meeting needs of White middle-class gay men (Pharr, 1997) and White middle-class lesbian women.

Han (2008) explains, “gay activists want to believe that there aren’t issues of racism within the gay community” (p. 87), and the message received by queer people of color is that including race into the dialogue might “muddy the waters of the primary goal” (p. 88).

Silencing differences within the community supports the efforts of assimilating or

“mainstreaming” gay and lesbian identities within the dominant culture by demonstrating that they are “just like everyone else” (e.g., Han, 2008; Pharr, 1997). Consequently, fighting for the needs of one oppressed group is achieved at the cost of oppressing another, and forgotten is the history that it was predominantly people of color at the frontlines of the Stonewall rebellion in 1969 (Pharr, 1997). As Pharr explains, “divisions within our queer movement will not be overcome nor solidarity achieved until White queers stop participating in White privilege and domination” (1997, p. 114).

Not helping each other. “We’re not helping each other” was a common sentiment across both focus groups. Participants struggled with trying to understand why the community is not a place of support. Chris suggested that this experience is a result of not knowing how to support each other.

I don’t think we learn how to take each other’s responsibility and say, ‘Stop that - that right there is shit. We get enough of it from the outside. We don’t need it inside.’

And so that’s where I’ve typically got it, normally from there. Certainly in high school there was bullying here and there, I got beat up quite a few times, but I’ve had it more painfully within the community. (Chris)

Some of the “shit” on the “inside” that Chris and other participants referred to were things like gay men making fun of another gay man’s voice and behaviors for being “too feminine”; lesbian and gay individuals making transphobic comments and being an offender of violence toward transgender individuals; and lesbian and gay individuals “bashing” bisexual individuals for not being able to “pick a side.” Chris’s statement captured the general sentiment of feeling unsupported by the community. For these participants, the community was a place that unexpectedly recycled hurt and pain of an oppressive culture. Even in the

community there were instances of gender enforcement and constructions of difference in response to accountability to the sex and gender binaries.

Represented in these stories is the process of inclusion and exclusion, which recapitulates feeling unsupported. The assumption of differences within the LGBTQ community (e.g., gay men and lesbian women are different, have different needs and cannot relate to one another) and the perception of needing to fight for limited resources (e.g., we're fighting for our own issues and cannot take responsibility for your issues) keep the community divided. As Pharr (1997) explains, "solidarity is the enemy of all oppressions. Divisions support them" (p. 114). The lack of mutual support and solidarity is a function of the oppressive system of gender that reciprocally maintains the status quo.

Surprise. There was one participant, Joanna, who expressed feeling surprised by comments about the community not being a place of support.

It's just surprising, but again, I've never really been like going to the clubs and doing that, it's just been groups of friends. So, I have good friends, we're kind people, and so it's just [pause] I'd be shocked if there was that kind of intolerance and that kind of - I don't know. So, it's always amazing. I mean I'm not super surprised. I know that exists. (Joanna)

Although Joanna was the only participant to express being surprised by the community's lack of support, her statement highlighted the more dominant narrative of sharing negative experiences within the community. She was hesitant when sharing her perspective and minimized her statement by explaining that she was not really "part" of the community. This does not invalidate the negative stories shared by the other participants but helps to provide a

broader range of perspectives within the focus group discussions.

Subtheme 2.c.: Invalidation and rejection of transgender and bisexual identities.

Another sub-theme within discouragement with community was the experience of transgender and bisexual identities being invalidated by lesbian and gay communities. This experience went beyond feeling disconnected or unsupported by the community. Chris, Riley, Aiden, and Jenna, for example, expressed a common feeling of being unwelcomed and unseen in lesbian and gay spaces. Aiden recalled being encouraged to go to the gay bar by a friend because he was trans and there were people at the gay bar doing drag. However, Aiden found that people's inability to distinguish gender identity from a drag performance left him feeling invalidated and as if he did not belong there.

A friend of mine dragged me out to the bar and there was some drag kings... And so it was like, 'How did you get your beard like that?' It was like, 'Well, I kind of quit shaving it for months at a time.' 'Oh, well, where do you perform at?' It's like, 'Uh, well, I don't - you know, they couldn't quite get it through that my life wasn't [pause] like this wasn't something that I did in my off time and I did something else, you know? That I'm actually just who I am from when I wake up to when I go to sleep. I get to be the same person. I don't have to modify anything or anything like that. They just couldn't get it through their head that this wasn't, you know, drag. It's like, 'Do they not work?' It's like it says male on my driver's license, what? I – There was just this disconnect there that [pause]. Yeah - I looked at my friend and said, 'Yeah, the drinks here are overpriced. I need to go back to [a local bar] and get a good beer.' (Aiden)

Aiden was encouraged to go to the gay bar because it was a place where he should be able to

relate and connect with others. However, what occurred was an invalidation of his identity as a transmale. His identity and experience was equated to a performance or impersonation.

Chris shared an example of being uninvited to lesbian and gay events and a general resistance toward transgender issues in Riverdale.

There are strategic ways in which I find out after the fact that my partner Riley [one of the other participants in the group] and I are not invited to those, because we're not gay or lesbian and that's how it ends up being kind of deployed, in this very fascinating, interesting way. So, whether it's prospective graduate students who are gay, you know we're not invited to meet them, because I guess we're not gay enough or lesbian enough, because we have traversed in both of these spaces in our bodies. So, there's a sense of kind of exclusion there in terms of like how am I supposed to act, and not knowing what that acting looks like, but knowing that in some way you're not supposed [pause] what I've found here in Riverdale is that you do not mention the trans issues, because it's assumed particularly by the "old guards" in this area, that all people within the LGBT umbrella have the exact same problems. And so for them when they say, 'Oh, it shouldn't be an issue at all,' that's not true when your body is ambiguous, and someone might like murder you because it's a very real reality for ambiguous bodies. (Chris)

For Chris, the exclusion and invalidation of transgender identities within the lesbian and gay communities of Riverdale was hurtful. It also minimized and dismissed the fear and real threat of being transgender in Riverdale.

The resistance that Chris described against acknowledging transgender experiences within the community relates to the historical shift that Stryker (2008) and Wilchins (2004)

refer to in the lesbian and gay civil rights movement. The separation of “gay issues” from “gender issues” reflects the political pressure for gay men and lesbian women to conform to gender norms and expectations in order to accomplish “normalcy” and appear to be “just like” heterosexual people but just happen to date the same sex (e.g., Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 2004). The assimilation of same sex couples within the dominant norm, however, meant separating the gay and lesbian experiences from transgender experiences. Enforcement of the gender binary prevails and the experiences of those on the margins of the binary are excluded (Wilchins, 2004).

Kate, a cisgender individual who sometimes identifies as lesbian, similarly expressed frustration in response to the rejection of transgender identities within the lesbian and gay communities in Riverdale.

Yeah, I actually [pause] I have a friend who's been off and on transitioning, and she is just like having a really hard time with it, socially. I feel like she has a hard time making her own thoughts count. And, I feel like it is more scrutinized in the LGBT community as opposed to like ‘the straight world,’ which is really sad because it’s about, like, you know, ‘OK, we want to be free, we want to be who we are,’ and I feel like it’s really scrutinized way more, which doesn’t make any sense to me, but I would really like to see that change because, you I know I mean I think we should stand together and not punch each other in the face emotionally. (Kate)

Aiden, who identifies as a transman, tried to explain Kate’s observation of “punching each other in the face emotionally” as a mechanism of an oppression hierarchy within the LGBTQ community. He stated, “I think it’s sort of the ‘dickal down theory,’ everybody gets to be a dick to the person below them. And you know, since the intersex community tends to

be invisible, I think the quickest thing is tyrannies.” Aiden went on to share, “I think the thing with the trans is just - it’s not as visible and there is such a huge switch, people feel like they’ve been [pause] there’s this whole thing of duplicity, you know?” Aiden explained that from his perspective, people sometimes feel justified in their hate and violence toward transgender individuals because of their assumption that they were somehow “deceived” or “duped” based on the assumptions they were making about someone’s sex category and gender identity. People assume that there are two and only two sex categories that are immutably linked to two distinct gender categories.

Aiden, like Kate, Riley, and Chris, observed that moving across, between and outside of sex and gender binaries sometimes leaves others feeling uncomfortable. This occurred both inside and outside of the community, which highlighted the larger system of gender oppression. Aiden shared feeling like others exert a sense of entitlement to treat transgender individuals with hostility and enforce accountability to the gender binary. If everyone is held accountable to fixed sex and gender binaries then any perceived movement between or beyond these binaries might leave others feeling entitled to correct the perceived to be gender inappropriate behavior. The mechanism of gender and the way in which individuals orient to themselves and others as male or female usually goes unnoticed until there is a disruption in expected norms (Hollander, 2013). Aiden explained, “it does feel like people get more of a vote, or they feel entitled to weigh in according to how well people pass.” Feeling entitled to police and enforce sex and gender categories is the way Aiden made sense of the “scrutiny,” that Kate referenced, toward transgender individuals within the community. The norm is to hold oneself and others accountable to the sex and gender binaries (e.g., Hollander, 2013).

The reinforcement of the binary similarly related to the rejection of bisexual identities

within the community. Aiden shared,

Gays and lesbians, I think the thing is [pause] the narrative has been that, ‘We’re born this way,’ ‘We’re born this way,’ ‘We’re born this way,’ bis [bisexual individuals] you get a little more sort of suspicion, because it’s like, ‘Well, if you can be with both, then you can’t really say that you could commit to either,’ there is a lot of suspicion in both communities for bisexuals. (Aiden)

Feeling pulled to “prove” inclusion in the LGBTQ community also connected to Jenna’s experience. She shared, “It’s almost like you have to prove that you are, in a lot of ways. And, I want to say like lesbian-up almost. [laughter].” Jenna went on to share an example of being approached by a woman in a gay bar who reinforced the norm that because she is bisexual, she is not lesbian enough to be included.

Jenna: She came to me and she was like, ‘Oh, you’re part of the family,’ to me. And, I was like, ‘Yeah, I’m bisexual.’ And she goes, ‘Oh,’ she’s like, ‘Oh, you’re the redhead stepchild of the family,’ put a little, you know, next to the trannies, or something like that. So put me down with the redhead stepchildren of the family. That was like, you know, like yeah. It was like –

Scott: Ouch.

Jenna: – yeah. So even somebody who is part of the family, it’s like, ‘Oh, you well, you don’t really count,’ just the invisibility of it is what kills me.

Bisexual individuals are highly stigmatized both within heterosexual communities and lesbian and gay communities (Firestein, 2007; Ochs, 1996). Within lesbian and gay communities, bisexual individuals’ perceived ambivalence about their sexual identity is seen

as a threat to political gains (Rust, 2003). Bisexual identities destabilize the argument that a sexual identity is something one is born with, that is fixed, and that is not a choice (Currah, 2001; Firestein, 2007; Potocznak, 2007). The idea that someone could move between or outside of the categories “gay” or “straight” sullies the argument. The experience of invalidation and rejection highlights the re-inscription of the gender binary within the lesbian and gay communities.

Identities and experiences that challenge the binary notion of being gay or straight, male or female, man or woman were, at times, overtly rejected or not recognized at all. This is not to say that the experiences of transgender people and bisexual people are the same. Ambiguous bodies, for example, are policed differently than bisexual identities. There is a different threat of violence when it comes to navigating society in a body that is perceived as gender ambiguous. There are also differences in the ways institutions police transgender identities such as identity documents and sex segregated restrooms. However, what I am arguing is that there is a similarity of challenging sex and gender binaries and that this complicates community building. As Chris explains, “the resistance is just astounding to me [pause] astounding. Yeah. Poisonous even, I would go that far. It can be poisonous.”

The experience of resistance also emerged in Cashore and Tuason’s (2009) semi-structured interviews with nine bisexual and/or transgender individuals. Many of the participants in their study felt frustrated with the invisibility and invalidation of bisexual and transgender identities within LGBT communities. Pharr (1997) reminds us that the community’s resistance of accepting bisexual and transgender individuals into the movement keeps the community divided and inhibits growth.

Subtheme 2.d.: Not “enough.” Wilchins (2004) states, “to re-stabilize the binary,

we shift the boundaries of meaning and re-erect them” (p. 36). The re-inscription of the sex and gender binaries within the LGBTQ community was most evident when participants shared a common feeling of not being “enough.” For example, Scott shared:

You know, when you try to set up your own kind of idea of what you want your own standards to be and your own ethics to be, and then people are going to try to impose - groups are imposing their standards of what is supposed to be your ethic, but then when you don’t meet their standards you’re not good enough, or you don’t fit into this group. (Scott)

The theme of feeling “not enough” was met with different emotional reaction such as feeling inadequate, disappointed, confused, hurt, or angry. But the experience of not fitting expected norms was the same. The experience of not being “enough” also relates to the process of identity work. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) suggest that “emotional and cognitive equilibrium” requires the ability to effectively negotiate group membership to establish a sense of congruence between how people are seen by others and how they see themselves. Ineffective identity work could result in experiencing “feelings of anxiety, isolation, insignificance, confusion, and inauthenticity” (p. 122). In this section, I show that for these participants, policed boundaries of LGBTQ group identities were often organized on gender lines.

In this section I will present examples of not fitting expected (a) lesbian norms, (b) gay male norms, and (c) transgender norms. These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all expected norms and ideals within sub-communities in the broader LGBTQ community. Rather, these examples illuminate the ways in which people’s automatic orientation to the sex binary and gender expectations informed community norms

and the enforcement of those norms among participants in this study.

Lesbian norms. Although many of the participants reported feeling like “butch/femme” dynamics are not as prevalent in the lesbian community, Jenna shared that even today she feels expected to fit within this model. She reported feeling like people expect a masculine-appearing (e.g., butch) woman to be paired with a feminine-appearing (e.g., femme) woman when she dates women. She shared, “I’m only expected to be with a masculine woman because I’m more femme, or whatever. So, you still have those norms and gender pairings.” Jenna explained noticing this expectation when she is in a bar based on the type of person she is introduced to by her friends. She shared, “It’s like, ‘Let me get my friend for you,’ and it’s always like a - it’s always big, butch lesbians. It’s like, ‘Oh, that’s great, but that’s not exactly what I’m into.’” Jenna also shared that when she dates women who appear more feminine this relationship often goes unrecognized in public. She shared that others sometimes give her and her partner confused looks when she and her girlfriend express physical affection because they were not expected to be partnered. This feedback from others reinforces both hetero-normativity and cis-supremacy. It reinforces the idea that an authentic relationship should involve a masculine and a feminine partner (e.g., Wilchins, 2004).

Aiden shared his experience of stereotypes in the lesbian community before identifying as transmale. He explained that when he was read as female and part of the lesbian community he was often corrected when displaying gender inappropriate behavior. Aiden recalled lesbian women telling him, “Well, if you’re going to wear that skirt you have to wear pumps.” He went on to talk about how he came up against the enforcement of butch/femme stereotypes in the lesbian community.

Aiden: I wasn't really dykey, I wasn't really [pause] I had really long hair, which evidently you can't be butch and have long hair. I just had long hair because I was lazy, because I could just put it out of the way and then I wouldn't have to mess with it until like the next morning, where you know - and so they're like, 'Oh well, if you're going to be femme, then you've got to learn how to walk in pumps, you've got to learn how to dress the part.' But, it was all drag to me. You know? And the lesbians would get really angry that I thought it was just kind of play-acting, and that I'm not really femme. [pause] I had a girlfriend that got really upset that I changed my own tire. I had a flat on the way over and she's like, 'You're late.' I was like, 'Yeah, I had a flat.' She goes, 'Well, where's your car, I'll fix it.' I was like, 'I had to fix it on the way over, that's why I'm late.' 'Well, you're not supposed to be doing that, I'm the butch.'

Kate: Cliché stereotypes.

Aiden: Yeah, and it was like, Really? ...

Joanna: Yeah. I could see my first girlfriend saying the same kind of thing.

In this example, people oriented to Aiden as female and then as being "butch" or "femme" based on his physical appearance such as having long hair. The length of hair, which is neither inherently male nor female, became a gendered code. Being butch meant not being feminine and therefore not having long hair. Since Aiden had long hair he was placed in the category of femme and others enforced the expectations associated with the femme category such as wearing certain clothes and not performing certain tasks that are categorized as

masculine.

Aiden also recalled his experience of trying to negotiate lesbian norms with his gender identity.

Well, I thought because I liked women that meant I had to be lesbian because [pause] but that really wasn't the answer either, because I didn't get along with lesbians very well because I'm not female. And they pick up on that after a while - that whole complete lack of empathy and the fact that there's only one thing going on in my head at one time. You know? And sometimes it's just about pizza. (Aiden)

Here empathy and being able to focus on multiple things at one time were associated with femininity. Thus, fitting within the lesbian community became dependent on more than who he partnered with; inclusion and exclusion were dependent on his accountability to the gender expectations of the female sex category. If he does not identify as a female and does not meet the expectations of femininity, then he does not fit within the label of lesbian.

Gay male norms. Josh, Hector, Scott, Riley, and Chris all brought up examples of masculine norms being enforced in all-male gay spaces. The specific norms they referenced included (a) not being feminine and controlled affect, (b) look centeredness (i.e., young and physically fit bodies), (c) sexual promiscuity, and (d) competition. The group norms in all-male gay spaces are similar to the masculine group norms that Bird (1996) found in his study of heterosexual men. Bird (1996) looked at homosociality (i.e., nonsexual attractions and interactions between individuals who are assumed to be within the same sex-category [Lipman-Blumen, 1976]) to examine the ways in which social interactions between heterosexual men perpetuate a hegemonic masculinity. Bird (1996) found that accomplishing masculinity appropriately was based on not being female. In addition, Bird

(1996) found three themes that are crucial to the social construction of masculinity through social interactions: (a) emotional detachment, (b) sexual objectification of women, and (c) competitiveness with other men. These were the norms that men held each other and themselves accountable to in group settings. The enforcement of these norms came from individuals wanting to avoid rejection or isolate from the group. This is similar to what participants in the current study reported. Scott explained, “the second you fall off of the masculine train, forget it.” Participants described different negative consequences associated with not complying with masculinity group norms, which ranged from social rejection and isolation, to losing shifts at work.

Not being feminine and controlled affect. Scott shared an example of feeling accountable to the norms of masculinity when he was in predominantly gay male spaces.

You know if I go out to a bar all of a sudden as people see me representing in this masculine way, and then all of a sudden Dancing Queen comes on - [laughter] - You know? And, my - the metaphoric tutu comes out. You know, I just want to fail my arms and really just kind of let loose and have a good time. I instantly then see, like as you were mentioning Chris [one of the other participants], some of the bear communities saying, ‘Whoa, you can’t act like that.’ (Scott)

There are a few important components to Scott’s experience of gender policing. The first is that Scott was in a predominantly male space. This intensified his accountability to masculine group norms. The second is that Scott perceived that others oriented to him as both male and masculine. The third is that Scott was aware of the group norms of masculinity and that not complying with these norms might result in social rejection. Accountability to the gender system involved Scott’s knowledge that others will evaluate his

behavior, which then shaped his thoughts, and behaviors (e.g., Hollander, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The idea of needing to restrict and control one's affect to comply with masculine norms is also consistent with Gilbert's (2011) experience of restricting her emotional expressiveness to successfully be read as male by other men.

Although Riley and Chris do not identify as gay or male, both have been perceived by others to fit within the gay male category and consequently have been held accountable to gay male norms. In the following exchange, Riley, Hector, Scott, and Chris all come to a consensus that not acting feminine is a norm that they have experienced in gay male group settings.

Riley: Why is the norm not to be feminine? I have no idea? Like why can't [pause] why is the norm to be masculine? Like why? I don't understand why natural femininity is so shamed, like I just don't. That's why I think it's just so inherent. It's just in this system of hate that I don't even know how to deal with.

Hector: I see that in like online circles, and like dating websites, you're always getting the question, 'Are you masculine or straight acting?' That's a question that always comes up. 'If you're not then I don't want to pursue you, because that's not what I'm into.'

Scott: You can see the line, no-femmes.

Chris: Right.

The systemic value of masculinity holding more power in relation to femininity becomes infiltrated into the norms and expectations in gay male spaces, even into the most intimate spaces of dating preferences. The message is clear, "no femmes." The consequence of not

complying could be isolation from the dating pool. Han (2008) notes, “so ingrained is the image of the ‘ideal’ man within the gay community, ‘straight-acting’ is a selling point in gay personal ads” (p. 89). Also noted here is an example of conflating gender conformity and heterosexuality. “Straight acting” is associated with being “not feminine” and complying with expected norms and expectations associated with the male sex category. Chris explained that the way media portrays images of gay male cultures perpetuate the devaluing of femininity to preserve the accomplishment of masculinity.

Chris: I don’t know, just like an example in the media, that even media produced in the community, like that same problem of misogyny, it’s just always present there.

Scott: Have you seen the movie *Broken Hearts Club*?

Chris: Yes.

Scott: Same situation, everybody wants to be Dean Cain because he’s the masculine one and he’s the muscular one, and everybody else falls somewhere along a more effeminate spectrum. I can’t reconcile that. Yeah.

Chris: These become, I guess, the architects for our communities, like how we’re supposed to perform. Like, these are our role models, is film, unfortunately. We don’t have others to look up to.

Again, social cues that signal the “male” sex category are often defined as being “not female” (e.g., Han, 2008; Pleck, 1995; Wilchins, 2004), and participants reported seeing this expectation within the gay male community such that certain behaviors were coded as feminine and were therefore less desirable or acceptable.

Fit bodies and youth. Pressure to appear a certain way within the gay male community was another expected norm that participants discussed. Hector explained, “I see in my community also the pressure to have a perfect body image, and like six pack, and muscles. To be physically attractive is a big pressure.” Every participant in the focus groups endorsed identifying with the LGBTQ community as part of the inclusion criteria, when Hector references “my community” he is talking about the gay male community. This reflects the theme discussed earlier about not fitting under the LGBTQ umbrella and the sub-fracturing of communities.

With respect to gay male norms, Chris agreed with Hector and added that the physical expectations also include age. Chris shared, “I think there’s that pressure that you can like feel it, like it pushes on you, like the look-centeredness of this larger community, it just [pause] and like the youth centeredness of it, like you can’t age in this community.” Later, Scott, Chris, Riley, and Hector joked about the expectation of youth and the experience of “gay death.”

- Scott: I mean how many people say that you’re dead at the age of 30 in the gay world.
- Chris: The gay death.
- Scott: The gay death.
- Riley: I heard it at 25.
- Chris: It’s 25 now.
- Hector: Whoa, I’m dead now.
[laughter]

For these participants, aging beyond 25 years meant no longer fitting expected norms in the dominant gay male culture. This experience also related to Josh's experience in the bar scene described earlier. Participants described the gay male community centering on the bar scene and part of what was expected in this setting is youth and having a body perceived to be physically fit. These were codes for affirming the gay male identity and accomplishing masculinity appropriately.

Promiscuous. A norm of promiscuity within the gay male community also came up. Josh, for example, shared that when he had long hair men would approach him at the bar and directly ask if he is a "bottom." Here a bottom refers to being sexually submissive. He explained that because he had long hair others assumed that he was more effeminate which is associated with sexual submission (e.g., Wilchins, 2004). Josh reported thinking, "If I am it's none of your business anyway." He described thinking that others should not assume his sexual preference. For Josh, this is private, but it does not change the norms and expectations in group dynamics.

The pressure to engage in casual sexual activities with other men was a norm that felt most salient for Scott and Hector. For them, this expectation was difficult to reconcile.

Scott: One thing that I've struggled with personally, ever since I came out, which now that I look at it has been almost 12 years now, is this expectation of promiscuity. You know, that when I moved [to Riverdale] initially it was like I could already see the ears pop up and the nose come out, and the look of, 'There's fresh meat in the room.' You know? 'Who is this?' You know? Then you all of a sudden I start seeing the competition amongst others saying, you know, 'Who's

going to get him first? Who's going to get there? What's going to happen?' You know? And, it's just beyond problematic for me because it just buys right back into that hetero-normative, 'If you're a man you're only meant to be sexually driven.'

Riley: Well said.

Scott: You know? And [pause] don't get me wrong, I enjoy sex, but it's the promiscuity of it that I find difficult. I'm not the person who can bring someone home every night of the week, and in fact I'm not even the person who I can say, 'Pleasure to meet you, wanna go fuck?' You know? I can't do that. In some respects there have been times where groups of men have been like, 'What is your fucking problem?' Like, 'My God, I mean your penis is driving the train, right? You should be' [pause] you know, [pause] 'what is wrong with you?'

Scott explained that having casual sex with other men was associated with authenticating him as both a man and gay. Not complying with this expectation resulted in social feedback from other gay men that something must be wrong with him.

Scott went on to explain that being read as more masculine and therefore more dominant further complicated this expectation. Scott reported receiving the message of, "Let's go, fag. Let's do this." You know? 'You present masculine, you should be dominant, I'm throwing myself at you, why aren't you taking this on? Like, what is your problem?' You know?" Again, social rejection and reinforcement of having an individual problem became the consequences of not complying with the expected gender norms. Scott

shared a specific example of this social rejection when he ran into someone after turning down a sexual invitation.

... even trying to be polite and turning down a sexual act, the next time you see this person, which was interesting that I just saw this person two hours [before the focus group meeting] - you now are no longer [pause] 'I'm going to look at you, but then I'm going to turn away. And then I'm going to look at you, and I'm going to growl. And then I'm going to look at you, and I'm going to look pissed. And I going to stare at you, but the second you look at me and try to say hello, I'm going to turn my body away, I'm going to back away because you violated the norm of promiscuity.' That's got to be a law somewhere, right? Like the law of promiscuity. (Scott)

Like Scott, Hector was able to relate to the pressure to be sexual and to engage in casual sexual activity with multiple partners. For Hector, this brought up feelings of pain, disappointment, and social isolation. In the following exchange, Hector responded to Scott's struggle with the norm of promiscuity in the gay male community.

Hector: I can relate to what you've been saying. So, I came out last year. The first thing that I wanted to do when I came out is go meet people. I wanted to meet people, go out on dates, maybe have a relationship with someone. I discovered that when I'm with someone, sometimes things got a little bit out of hand, and they ended up being very physical. So I was told that's what was expected. But, I was looking for something else, and they were just looking for a moment. So, that was very disconcerting for me at first, very emotionally painful. The

same when I got here to Riverdale, I would get like 20 messages on Grindr [a location based social network for men].

Scott: Yes.

Hector: ‘I want to meet you.’ And I was like, ‘Look, I’m looking for friends,’ but they expected something different. So, they were upset with me because I wasn’t what they wanted. There were times when, yeah, I was what they wanted. But, it was difficult to establish a relationship, a friendship based on this physical initial interaction with someone, so [pause] it’s a problem that I see within the gay community, is how I’m supposed to establish friendship with someone who I know is gay, and maybe likes me, and I like them, but I don’t want to start with sex, I want to start like actually having a conversation and get to know the other person. So, it’s difficult. If that makes sense.

[multiple participants expressed agreement]

Again, the enforcement of gay male norms is backed up by the perceived consequence of social rejection. Hector described this experience as emotionally painful. The norm of promiscuity inhibited his ability to connect with other gay men in a way that is different from the expectation of a sexual contact.

Competition. The norm of promiscuity also related to the experienced norm of completion. Scott shared, that many of his gay male friends say things like, “‘Wow, he’s attractive,’ who would then instantly be like, ‘I saw him first, back off.’” For Scott, one of the ways the expectation of competition played out is through the sexual objectification of and competition for other men in the gay male community. The sexual objectification of and

competition for other men is similar to how others have described the gay male community, particularly with respect to the sexualization of gay Latino men for the consumption of gay White men (e.g., Han, 2008).

Transgender norms. Within the transgender community both Riley and Aiden experienced a pressure to “pass” as a cisgender woman or cisgender man respectively. For Riley, this brought up feelings of hurt, confusion and disappointment. For her, it reinforced a sense of shame associated with being and looking transgender.

At the few support groups that I’ve been to, there’s been this, I guess you could say subtle implied feeling that ‘passing’ is really important. And, when I say ‘passing’ I mean passing as a woman, which would be for me, when I don’t necessarily even really want to pass. So, there’s this almost - they call it a trannier-than-thou kind of ideology, which is, ‘You’re not transgender enough if you don’t want to pass as a woman,’ or pass as a man, the gender you’re transitioning to. And, I’m just really trying to understand that for myself. (Riley)

Riley went on to explain how the enforcement of gender conformity in the transgender support group in Riverdale led to feeling like she had to prove to other group members that she is transgender.

When I was trying to identify more as a transwoman, more in the woman side of that, rather than just trans, and I was going to groups [in Riverdale], I felt the pressure to wear make-up, to do my best to look exactly maybe like a passing woman. You know, I just tried to prove - it was all about that proving. It was all about that proving. I remember when I got there, I was even questioned about whether or not I am trans. I couldn’t figure why, so I always - that was really offensive to me ... It was

like ‘are you even trans?’ you know, I felt very invalidated, you could say. I felt my experience was very invalidated and wasn’t being heard. I just didn’t feel - I didn’t feel good. I didn’t feel safe, I didn’t feel happy to be where I was, and I wanted to leave, basically. I did, I left very uncomfortable, you know? Certainly. And also you hope to make friends in those spaces, especially somewhere - you know, you’re in Riverdale, you’re just thankful that there is a trans meeting at all. [laughter] Then you go and it can be pretty disappointing if you’re not meeting certain standards that have been set by the group before you went. You don’t know where they are. (Riley)

Here, Riley highlighted the sort of collision of hoping to enter a space of support but feeling met with the kind of gender policing she was looking to find relief from. The message that Riley received is that she is not a “real” transwoman unless she is identifiable as a woman by others using certain gendered cues such as wearing make-up. Gender is an accomplishment in social interaction; it is assessed, affirmed and enforced by others (Hollander, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey’s (1997) observed a similar dynamic in their study of transgender identity formation. Participants in their study often felt pressure from within transgender communities to be perceived as cisgender and consistently read as either male or female. Pressure to conform to gender expectations within the transgender community sometimes comes from trying to protect the legitimacy of transgender identities within a cis-supremacy culture that punishes gender non-conformity. Safety sometimes depends on successfully accomplishing gender within a binary system (Spade, 2006). The pressure to conform to the gender binary may also be an artifact from the historical context of

gender conformity being required for transgender individuals to gain access to medical services (e.g., Denny, 1992; Stryker, 2008).

Aiden experienced a similar pressure to transition and pass as a cisgender male. Aiden explained, “I get more guff, static, and questioning from the LGBT community than I ever do from any of the other social circles.” But for Aiden, he experienced these exchanges as an invasion of privacy, as a sexualization of his body and as a disregard for his own basic needs.

You know, it’s like, ‘Well, when are you getting your surgery?’ And it’s like, you know, ‘Have you got \$60,000?’ OK. Well, hand it over - I’m going to pay off my student loans you know? And then we’ll talk about it, after my kid gets through college, after, you know? See, I’ve got [a spouse with a chronic health condition]. What’s the last 20 years going to look like? Really? I want to [pause] yeah, why are you asking about what’s going on in my pants when I am never going to date you anyway? You know? It’s - yeah, at least my friends from the other social groups, just they really don’t care. You know? I’ve had a couple of questions, you know, like, ‘Which bathroom do you use?’ ‘The men’s room, duh.’ You know? Then there’s the kind of a look around room and they’re like, ‘OK,’ nobody actually asks how. (Aiden)

For Aiden, privacy was an important value and his experiences in the LGBTQ community are associated with an entitled invasion of that privacy.

Chris shared an experience similar to Riley’s experience. Ze described a lack congruence and acceptance between how ze sees and understand hirself and how others perceive hir.

What comes off the top of my head is being read as a bear, and being accepted as a bear in many ways, but not being a bear. And being a non-transitioning trans person. And when that kind of comes up in those spaces that I'm too femme for that hyper masculine anti-woman space. And so while there's this paradox – I have a large body that gets kind of accepted there and not in other spaces, but I'm also not welcome there. And because I'm not transitioning, that I'm not also accepted in trans spaces as easily. So, there's these subtle cues that I've had to create my own space by – just to survive, to create my own defined space, I suppose. So [pause] and I've gotten that through non-verbal like turn-aways when I show up to spaces like - 'Oh, I'm clearly not welcome here.' So, I get that. So, for me, it's I guess generally, it's not performing femme in gay male spaces. Certainly, yeah. (Chris)

The consequences of not complying with expected group norms are again social rejection and isolation. Despite how Chris identifies, Chris is held accountable to the expected norms and ideals associated with hir assumed sex category. Chris explained, "I still struggle with that still, in terms of like where my identity fits ... based on what my body will allow me access to, at all. Oy vey, as they say." Identifying beyond the sex and gender binaries does not in and of itself change the prevailing assumption of the gender binary. Wilchins (2004) describes this oppression of those on the margins of the binary and the incongruence between how they identify and how they are identified by others as "a kind of crime – an assault of meaning that forces people to live as gendered impossibilities" (p. 38).

Theme 3: Attempts to Cope

Across both focus groups participants shared different ways that they responded to and attempted to cope with gender oppression and discouragement within the LGBTQ

community. Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, and DeLongis (1986) define coping as an individual's "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (reduce, minimize, master, or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment interaction that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (p. 572). An example of a chronic stressor is minority stress (e.g., Meyer, 2003).

Minority stress refers to excessive stress that individuals from a marginalized group experience in society as a result of their stigmatized identity. Meyer (1995) poses that there are three different modalities through which minority stress can occur: (a) the direct experience of external stressors (e.g., discrimination), (b) the expectation of and vigilance about external stressors, and (c) internalizing negative attitudes held by society about one's marginalized group. Coping mechanisms can serve as a buffer against the psychological distress which may result from minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) also suggests that coping can occur on an individual level and a group level. An example of group level coping among LGBTQ individuals is seeking out connection and support from community members (e.g., Haldeman, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Peck, 1998; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest that there are two broad types of coping: emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. Budge, Adelson, and Howard (2013) refer to these two categories of coping as (a) facilitative coping and (b) avoidance coping. According to Budge et al. (2013):

Avoidant coping occurs when individuals try to prevent an emotional response to the stressor, for example, using avoiding behaviors or cognitions, minimizing the problem, trying to detach oneself from the outcomes of a problem, or overeating or drinking. Facilitative coping occurs when an individual seeks social support, learns

new skills, changes behavior to positively adapt, and finds alternative means to seek happiness. (p. 546)

In the current study, some of participants' strategies appeared to be less adaptive and did not lead to finding the support they desired, but other strategies were successful in getting their needs met. In this section I will present some of the common ways that participants discussed coping with or responding to gender oppression and/or not feeling supported by the LGBTQ community. These include (a) substance use, (b) supporting others, (c) pride and confidence, (d) validation, and (e) creating supportive spaces.

Subtheme 3.a.: Substance use. Both Scott and Aiden referenced the perceived high prevalence of substance abuse and addiction within LGBTQ communities. As Aiden shared, "I mean there's kind of [a] disenfranchisement going on." He went on to share that he sees this disempowerment of LGBTQ individuals as contributing to feelings of "despair, drug abuse, [and] alcohol abuse." Scott similarly shared that "needs aren't being met . . . And I just see it playing out in unhealthy ways. As the communities have been faced with a lot of drug addiction."

There is some evidence to suggest that there is a slightly higher prevalence of some types of mental illness and substance abuse among lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals, as compared to heterosexual individuals (e.g., Cochran, Mays, Alegria, Ortega, & Takeuchi, 2007). Transgender individuals are also considered to be vulnerable to some mental health concerns in comparison to the general public (e.g., Nuttbrock, Rosenblum, & Blumenstein, 2002). The disparity with respect to substance abuse tends to be greater among lesbian and bisexual women, as compared to heterosexual women (e.g., Cochran, Keenan, Schober, & Mays, 2000). However, gay and bisexual men do not seem to be a higher risk for

substance abuse and dependence, as compared to heterosexual men (e.g. Cochran, Mays, & Sullivan, 2003). Participants in the focus groups understood the *perceived* prevalence of substance abuse in the LGBTQ community to be an impact of disempowerment and “not getting needs met.” This relates to Meyer’s (2003) conceptualization of responses to minority stress among LGB populations.

Subtheme 3.b.: Supporting others. Another common response to gender oppression and discouragement within the LGBTQ community was focusing on the needs of others. Scott shared, “I often find myself, perhaps because I don’t get a whole lot of support, being the support that some others need, and then I end up becoming that magnet when people need support. All of a sudden they gravitate.” For Scott, he often found himself providing others with the kind of support he hoped to receive.

Chris similarly shared, “I feel like a damn Mother Hen all the time.” Chris went on to explain hir role as the “Mother Hen” as someone who is often looking out for and protecting the needs of other. Chris stated, “I’ve always seen my experience in this community as a hand extended back and trying to, like [pause] the moment I hear someone’s like, ‘I feel lost,’ I go, ‘Oh, come with me.’ And then I want to fix things.” Although Chris described enjoying supporting others, ze, like Scott, was still not getting hir own needs met. Chris explained, “that reflects my own problems with wanting to fix people. I’m not [in my 30s] understanding this, but it hurts because that cycle never ends.”

Subtheme 3.c.: Pride and confidence. Showing pride and confidence was a strategy that some of the participants used to buffer negative messages and beliefs about LGBTQ individuals. For example, Riley explained that her response to cis-supremacy and heteronormativity is to show pride in being transgender and in being queer.

My response to [cis-supremacy] has been being aggressively more and more proud to be ‘queer.’ And for that - I love that ambiguous space that I get to travel in. I like to speak about it, because I want other trans people who are transitioning to hear that, that it’s safe to be in-between. (Riley)

In this particular example, Riley was responding to what she described as the “trannier-than-thou ideology” that she observed in some transgender communities and transgender support groups. She shared noticing a high value being placed on appearing cis-gender and wanted to communicate to others and herself that there are other ways of being beyond the binaries of male/female or gay/straight. For Riley, pride was a tool for subverting binary constructions of sex, gender, and sexual identities and consciously resisting conformity to these categories.

Riley’s push against conformity to the dominant norms supports the literature on intergroup relations and movement toward social change. Empirical studies by Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, and Pratto (2009) suggest that overemphasizing commonalities and positive contact between dominant and subordinate groups can inflate perceptions of “fairness” among members of the subordinate group. This shift in attitude and perception of fairness can undermine the group’s movement toward social change for equity. Pride can be a political act of resistance against oppression from the privileged group.

Kate talked about pride in terms of self-confidence. She shared, “if you’re more confident about yourself I feel like you’re more apt to receive compliments and support for the simple fact that probably the person giving you the support had someone in their life give them the support.” This relates to Lakey’s (2013) conceptualization of the link between social support and happiness. People’s subjective report of the availability of social support

relates to their subjective experience of happiness. For Kate, demonstrating self-confidence was associated with drawing in and having access to social support from others.

Subtheme 3.d.: Validation. Validation was another coping mechanism that emerged. Participants talked about finding support through connection with others. This is an example of what Budge et al. (2013) consider facilitative coping. For participants in this study, validation came from the visibility of seeing or knowing of others who share a similar identity and from being seen.

Jenna, Joanna, and Emma focused specifically on visibility and finding others “like me.” For Jenna, validation came from finding an accessible language that helped her connect with others. Jenna explained, “as I got older, to hear people say they even identified as bisexual, [that] it’s almost like that option [pause], like I just almost didn’t even realize it was an option until I heard the term.” Knowing that bisexuality was an option and knowing that other people actually used this term was encouraging and validating for Jenna. She went on to say, “visibility was something that was really helpful to me.” Jenna explained that visibility came from having an accessible term and identifier that she could then use to identify herself and others with the intention of “seeking out the community.” Using connection with others who share a similar identity is an example of what Meyer (2003) refers to as group level coping and what Budge et al. (2013) refer to as facilitative coping. Connection through building community can provide support and validation within a society and/or social group that marginalizes one’s identity (e.g., Haldeman, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Peck, 1998; Pettigrew, 1967; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

For Joanna, just knowing someone in her graduate program who identified as a lesbian was enough to help her feel supported. She shared, “I guess coming [to Riverdale],

because I'm in a masters program, and knowing that my advisor person, my contact point was a lesbian, that was nice." Joanna explained that she was nervous about moving to a small town because any time she moves she is unsure of what the climate might be like for LGBTQ people. Knowing that she was coming into her graduate program already connected to at least one person who identified as a lesbian provided her with reassurance.

Emma had a similar experience in the military. She stated, "it's crazy because I think everyone knows someone that is gay in the military. So, I mean even like during 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' and stuff like that, we all like knew someone." She went on to say, "and they were cool with it, because everyone was just like, you know, 'Do your job,' that's what you're there for." Knowing someone who shared a similar identity was a tool for feeling connected, validated and not alone.

Group affiliation and support can serve as a buffer against minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Jones et al. (1984) suggest that there are two functions of coping through group affiliation: (a) to provide a social context in which people are not stigmatized as a result of their identity and (b) to obtain support around negative social evaluations as a result of their minority status. For Joanna and Emma, both aspects of support were achieved through knowing someone who shared their same identity as a lesbian in the context of their workplace. "Knowing someone" served as a buffer against any anticipated discrimination as a result of their sexual identity.

Aiden's experience of validation came from being seen and recognized by others in a way that felt congruent. He shared an example of walking into a gay bar in Riverdale after transitioning.

Walking into the club and [one of the drag queens] looking me up and down and going, ‘Well, no wonder we could never teach you to walk in those pumps.’

[laughter]

I’ve known her since she was 16... it was funny because they would dress me up, and they would dress up, and I would get clocked as trans more than they would, and I was bio-female. You know, but I couldn’t walk in the pumps. I couldn’t, you know, I didn’t have female mannerisms . . . I looked like more of a drag queen than they did. I mean it was kind of tragic. So, you know, [she] went, ‘Well, no wonder.’ - [laughter] - It’s like, ‘See, I knew there was something wrong with you. You’re a boy.’ You know, it’s like, ‘OK, well, yeah.’ (Aiden)

Aiden smiled and laughed, and others laughed with him as he talked about being told something was “wrong” with him before while simultaneously being validated as male. In this example, there was a shift in how Aiden talked about his experience in the gay bar and in LGBTQ spaces, and I clarified what he was feeling.

Me: You’re laughing, but when you got that feedback, what did that feel like?

Aiden: I was great... I mean it was somebody that I’ve known for years, you know, and to just be like, you know, that whole justification of, yeah, I wasn’t crazy, even my friends twenty years ago knew that there was, you know, something a little up with it, and they’re like, ‘What is wrong with you, why can’t you swing when you walk?’ You know, it just throws me off balance, you know? But, yeah [pause] so, yeah, just them turning around and saying, ‘It’s about time,’ you know, was

a big thing too. And seeing people – having some of my queer friends telling me just that my energy is better, that I just seem way more relaxed and happy, and stuff, which wasn't true even five years ago.

(Aiden)

Earlier in the discussion, Aiden told stories in which lesbian women and drag queens tried to correct what they perceived as his gender inappropriate behavior. He did not fit their expected norms based on their assumption of his sex category. Here he talked about being told that "something was wrong" with him, but this time it felt like a validation because he was being read, recognized and understood as male. It was particularly important to Aiden that friends whom he had known for a long time saw him in a way that felt congruent with how he saw himself. A congruent reflection of self through others is an important aspect of developing a positive self-concept (Cooley, 1922). The creation of one's identity is often a group process through the affirmation of one's identity in social interaction (e.g., Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Aiden went on to explain that he was glad that he decided to transition and identify as male. He stated, "I'd rather, like go ahead and live like the next 40 years rather than kill myself, which was the crux that I had been at." Concealing one's identity can be an adaptive way to cope with the threat of loss and violence associated with disclosing one's stigmatized identity. However, this mechanism of coping can also lead to increased psychological distress (e.g., Smart & Wegner, 2000), which is similar to what Aiden described in this statement. Part of this distress can come from receiving continuous incongruent feedback about one's identity (e.g., Burke, 1991). Before transitioning, how Aiden saw himself and the self that was reflected through others was incompatible. Aiden also stated that support

and acceptance of his gender identity from friends helped when his family of origin was less supportive of his transition. This connects to Budge, Tebbe, and Howard's (2012) finding that, in their study of gender transition in the workplace, having access to social support related to transgender individuals having a smooth transition experience and to their overall well-being.

Aiden's example of receiving validation as a man highlights the complexity of how the gender binary can sometimes get reinforced. Aiden's important experience of acceptance and validation came from a shift in how others oriented to his assumed sex category. Based on their assumptions of appropriate gender behavior, he did not meet the expectations of the female sex category, but he did fit within their expectations of the male sex category. The binary continues to be the assumed center and foundation. People continuously orient toward someone's sex category with the assumption that male or female are the only options (e.g., Hollander, 2013). Complexity is often reduced to a binary system of understanding gender (e.g., Wilchins, 2004). The message he received was, "well no wonder you did not fit this box, you're supposed to be in the 'other' box." Enforcement of the gender system was covertly packaged in with the compliment that he received and experienced as validation.

Subtheme 3.e.: Creating supportive spaces. Another common coping strategy that participants discussed was creating smaller supportive networks. Seeking out and creating social connection that feel supportive is an example of facilitative coping (e.g., Budge et al., 2013). Participants in this study talked about creating supportive spaces as a reaction to not initially finding support within the LGBTQ community. For example, Chris explained,

For me, within like the larger community it's never been overtly like support. It's me having to seek and create those spaces to make the support possible for me. And, so

it's been labor on my part to say, 'This doesn't work, and I stand behind you.' But, for my mental health I need to create this space here of this very motley crew group often, of just like weirdos, literally, which is the most beautiful way of putting it. In a very positive way, of course, right? Me, being like a weirdo. And I think being able to find mutual support with people who have body image issues... it's meeting through that queerness, but finding that the offshoot ... Like, we have religious traumatic pasts, or because we have body image issues, or it's because of some sort of artistic pursuits that we support each other on, as opposed to around, I guess, this LGBT identity. (Chris)

Chris talked about wanting to find a way to stay connected to the LGBTQ community while still getting the kind of support ze needs. For Chris, this is something ze had to intentionally seek out and develop on hir own.

Aiden, Riley, and Scott similarly talked about strategies they used to create supportive networks when this was not readily available. Like Chris, Aiden talked about finding connections through shared interests or experience rather than a shared LGBTQ identity.

I belong to a couple of cliques now, but they're not centered on sexuality, they're more centered on the fact that, you know, we really know a really killer ukulele player and we follow him to every band he plays with, you know? (Aiden)

In this case, music became a more accessible point of connection with others. For Riley, it was the Internet.

I get a lot of support off the internet, and that's where I searched for a lot of my support before meeting Chris, just being out on my own, I was 18 and looking for

gender therapy. I went to a lot of Internet forums online, which you know you go on there and there's a lot of people you can connect with. (Riley)

Using the Internet became a creative way of accessing support and community that was not accessible in person. In Chung's (2013) study of 152 individuals who currently use online support groups for health-related concerns, results indicated that participants were more likely to prefer online support groups when there were dissatisfied with the social support they received offline. In a national survey of 1,197 self-identified LGBT individuals in the U.S., conducted by Pew Research Center (2013), 55% of the respondents reported meeting a new LGBT friend online or through a social media website.

Scott focused on creating supportive spaces through allies, outside of the community. Scott shared, "for me, the letter 'A' that's not necessarily in the LGBTQ community is where I've found most of my personal support, it has been in my allies who typically avow being heterosexual or straight." Allies became a safe place for him to voice his concerns and feel validated, which he explained, "is maybe why they're allies to begin with."

Each of these strategies emphasizes participants' need for support but also the resiliency for finding it. Not every strategy was effective. However, there were multiple strategies that participants did use to successfully create the kind of supportive relations they needed. Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs (1995) suggest that humans have a necessary and adaptive need for a sense of belonging. This speaks the importance of social support, connection, and affiliation. For example, in their study of 351 transgender individuals, Budge et al. (2013), found that the "less social support a transgender individual has available, the more avoidant coping he or she will use, and in turn, more depressive and anxiety symptoms will be reported" (p. 554). Social support can buffer some of the consequences of

experiencing oppression (e.g., Meyer, 2003). In addition, individuals' *perception* of having social support and access to help from others in a time of need has been associated with lower levels of psychological distress (e.g., Lakey, 2013).

Theme 4: Queer

The fourth emerging theme was queer. Queer has historically been a derogatory term used to refer to those who are perceived to be LGBT. Wilchins (2004) explains:

Tellingly there is not a single word for people who don't fit gender norms that is positive, affirming, and complimentary. There is not even a word that is neutral. Because all our language affords are strings of insults, it is impossible to talk about someone who is brave enough to rebel against gender stereotypes without ridiculing or humiliating them at the same time. Language works against you. It is meant to, because the language of gender is highly political. (p. 38)

In the early 1990s, the term queer was reappropriated as an affirming identity label by some members of the community. Queer represented a political act to communicate resistance against the dominant culture and hetero-normativity (e.g., Pharr, 1997; Stryker, 2008).

Participants in this study defined queer in multiple ways. Their definitions ranged from queer being a socio-political statement about moving away from viewing heterosexual as the norm to definitions that include all those who feel like they do not fit within the boundaries of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Riley explained that she experienced queer as "denying the hetero-normative model of being in a relationship with someone, or being in a community," and she went on to explain that using queer as an identity label has "been really super-beneficial for me, as a non-traditional trans person." Riley's notion of queer connects to Wilchins' (2004) depiction of queer as a political statement against hetero-normativity and

as a term used to affirm and legitimize identities that are pushed to the margins of the sex and gender binaries.

A common theme throughout participants' definitions of queer was an attempt to destabilize the sex and gender binaries. Destabilizing the sex and gender binaries was often accomplished by preserving the concept of queer as something ambiguous and non-definable. In this way, some participants perceived queer as a possible solution to prevent the replication of exclusion within the LGBT community.

Curiosity and excitement about queerness unified the group discussion in the second focus group. For example, Jenna, who was quieter in the discussion, shared, "I really like that there's so much queer talk in here, because I haven't experienced [pause] or a lot of my friends don't identify as that. And, so it's a really interesting space." In the first focus group, participants talked about ambiguity and moving beyond identity boxes but focused less on using queer as an identity compared to the second focus group.

For some participants, queerness became a response to some of the problems associated with the LGBT community such as exclusivity or the conflation of sex, gender and sexual identity. Queer was seen as a pathway for finding inclusion and flexibility while staying connected to the LGBTQ community. However, participants also talked about some of the problems with queer, such as not having a shared language to define it, having a hard time applying queer in practice, not "measuring up" to the standards of being "queer enough," and some of the privileges associated with being queer. In this section I will present participants' views of (a) benefits of queer and (b) their critiques of queer.

Subtheme 4.a.: Benefits of queer. For some participants, queerness was seen as a tool for solving problems within the LGBT community such as not meeting the expectations

of certain identity categories, not feeling supported, or noticing the recapitulation of gender oppression through sex and gender binaries. There were two common benefits that came up when participants talked about queerness (a) inclusion and (b) ambiguity.

Inclusion. Queer as inclusive was a common benefit that participants talked about. Jenna shared that her impression of queer is that it is a category you can move to when you do not fit one of the other identity labels such as gay or lesbian or more generally if you do not fit into the “straight box” or “gay box.” Jenna shared that if you are “shunned from that ‘box,’ I guess, you identify as queer.” Jenna and Chris shared the idea that queer could be the “catch-all” for including the “scraps” and those “shunned” from their identity box along the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender spectrums. Chris explained that a sense of inclusion allowed hir to feel like ze was still connected to the LGBT community.

For me, and my experience, queer has been for the scraps, those of us who do not fit the L-G-B and T the right way, queer has been the net that has caught me in a way where I still feel like I still have a place in this dialogue. I still have a place at least at the table to continue the discussion, otherwise I just don’t perform gay man right, or I don’t perform trans right. But, I can perform queer, because for me it can be a lot of things. It can be the non-transitioning bearded woman who passes as a man, and I’m OK with that. I don’t know, I always see it, like, as the scraps, I don’t know. If you ever feel like you’re a scrap- [laughter] - on the train, right? If you feel like you’re like the leftovers, come play the game, right? You can design that. For me at least, that’s how it’s worked. (Chris)

The train that Chris referred to was a metaphor that participants in the second group used to describe the fracturing of identities within the LGBTQ community and the pressure to “get

on board” with the expectations of one’s designated sub-category. Image a train connecting separated cars that represent subcategories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or even sub-categories within categories. The metaphor also represented the rigidity of expectations to fit a particular category. If people fail to meet the expectation of a certain protected identity then they are subject to being “kicked off” the train. For Chris, identifying as queer allowed hir to stay on the train and feel connected to the community because of hir notion that queer represents inclusion. Based on participants’ definition of queer, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to accomplish queer as an identity. Furthermore, from their perspectives, if there is not a consistent code by which to define queer, then the identity cannot be policed in terms of who is include and who is excluded.

Multiple participants shared the idea that queer is associated with inclusion and acceptance. Riley shared that for her, queer allows for openness and dialogue about differences rather than basing inclusion on everyone being the same and excluding those who are different. She explained:

I think a lot of people can fit into the queer community because the queer community will accept you most likely, no matter how you’re defining. If you say you’re gay, ‘Welcome,’ you know? ‘Talk to us, you may change your mind.’ [laughter] Or you know, maybe you’ll just stay solidly identifying as gay, and you’ll still be accepted, because it’s that ambiguity that allows your dialogue and your experience as a gay person, or as a lesbian, or as a bisexual to take place, right? Like, it’s that queerness that I love. (Riley)

Riley described queer as a tool for approaching dialogue about differences within the LGBTQ community and accepting diversity.

Ambiguity. Ambiguity represented the fluidity and self-definition of queerness that allowed some participants to feel included. Riley explained that it is in queer spaces that she has found acceptance, community, and feelings of belonging. She went on to explain that queer is “so ambiguous and undefined I can continue changing, and it’s really nice, or just growing, not changing necessarily. But, it’s just a - it’s cool. I love it.” For Riley, queerness was productive because of the ambiguity, and the undefined space allowed her the ability to move and change without the consequence of social exclusion.

Kate also talked about valuing ambiguity and feeling unrestricted by the boundaries of an identity category. She talked about feeling empowered to not “fit in some box” and to “kind of walk over that line and do whatever and be whoever.” Kate did not identify herself as queer, *per se*; she preferred not to take on any single identifying label to represent her sexual identity. But her notion of valuing ambiguity, not confining herself to a single identity box and “walking over that line,” fits with the way others talked about the benefits of queer.

For some participants, queer was undefined and therefore allowed for flexibility, movement, and self-determination. It subverted the sex and gender binaries by consciously not requiring accountability to gender categories. Riley and Kate’s description of ambiguity and inclusion is similar to Feinberg’s (1998) notion of trans liberation. Feinberg (1998) suggests that individuals have a right to self-determination and that restrictive gender norms, ideals, and expectations inhibit the freedom of self-expression. As Pharr (1997) explains, the “work against gender classification and gender oppression is at the revolutionary heart of our work. It is this work that promises to change the world by dismantling a primary structure of oppression and exploitation” (p. 118).

Subtheme 4.b.: Critiques of queer. Despite some of the benefits of queer as an identity construct, such as moving beyond the sex and gender binaries, participants also discussed some of the problems associated with queerness. Participants discussed the paradox of trying to construct a category that is non-definable and some of the ways in which queer might not work for everyone. To illustrate this subtheme I will present the following criticisms of queer, as voiced by participants: (a) trying to define queer, (b) difficulty of applying queer in practice, (c) feeling “not queer enough,” and (d) privilege.

Defining queer. One of the common critiques of queer was trying to define and understand it. As Chris stated, “this term ‘queer’, which I certainly fly – whatever that ‘fly’ looks like, which is often a non-flag - is a very interesting term that can be used in so many ways.” Participants described some benefits to the flexibility of queer but also a struggle around trying to communicate a shared understanding of queer. Consider the following exchange in which Hector asked Riley what she meant when referring to the queer community.

Hector:	Pardon my ignorance, but what do you define as ‘queer’?
Riley:	Queer [pause] I use the word ambiguous, right? That's pretty much it. [pause] I would hope that you do your own research. You'll learn a lot more, but it's a community of people that are defined [pause] that are not really defining themselves as gay, or as a lesbian, or as bisexual, maybe, but as fluid, right? Like, constantly changing and defining themselves. And because of that very ambiguous [pause]. That's how I see it, and that's been my experience, and that's what I've liked. But, you'll learn more if you look it up yourself.

Hector: OK.

This exchange exemplifies how trying to understand queer could be difficult when it represents something ambiguous and undefined.

Chris talked about some of the complications associated with defining and not defining queer. Chris stated, “I think one of the mistakes that generally people fall into is using it without defining how you mean in it in a moment.” Later in the conversation, ze explained that queer should be defined when someone is using it but not defined for other people.

Chris: I think part of that problem is like when you [pause] like you’re asking what queer is, right? [Hector nodded in agreement] For me to define it I think is where the problem might fall in, and being able for me to say, ‘I can’t define it,’ because when someone does, then I’m now setting the terms of what it can look like.

Riley: Yeah.

Chris: And I think that’s where you run that risk of being able to say, ‘Well, you’re not queer enough, because you’ve not met my standards.’ But, who am I to set the standards of an identity?

Chris seemed to be communicating that queer should be defined when it is being used, because one cannot assume that everyone uses the term in the same way, but that it should not be defined *for* someone else, because this sets up boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This makes sense given that some of the participants in this study understood queer to be self-defined, inclusive, and flexible. The constant change offers flexibility but also makes it hard to communicate a shared understanding of what queer represents.

The problem that participants described, in terms of trying to maintain queer as something that is undefined, relates to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's (1996) conceptualization of identity work, which is the "joint creation of the symbolic resources upon which those presentations depend" (p. 115). According to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, successfully constructing and maintaining a group identity must include (a) defining the meaning of an identity, (b) coding the set of rules that define its boundaries, (c) deciding who has the authority to affirm the identity, and (d) policing those who violate the set of rules to reaffirm the group boundaries. The lack of shared understanding to define queer can make it difficult to access queer as an identity option. As Wilchins (2004) explains, "social groups cannot exist without shared norms of structure and meaning" (p. 100). This related to another one of the participants' critique of queer, which was having a hard time applying queer in one's daily life.

Difficulty of applying queer in practice. Another problem of queerness that came up was the struggle to put queer in practice beyond thinking about queer as a theoretical concept. For example, Scott explained that he is still trying to negotiate his own use of queer in his life.

You know philosophically I can avow to it in that moment, but outside of the philosophy of it, I have a very difficult time walking that line, whatever that line even looks like. You know? So performing in a more masculine way, you know that expectation that I don't [pause] ... It's hard for me to even define what I'm supposed to be as queer in that moment. (Scott).

For Scott, identifying as queer does not change how others read and react to him, and it does not change his awareness of male norms and expectations when he enters all-male gay

spaces. His awareness of gender expectations left him unsure of how to “be” queer or how to accomplish queer in spaces that read him as masculine, gay, and male and hold him accountable to those norms.

Scott’s experience is consistent with West and Zimmerman’s (1987) perspective of gender being something that is constantly accomplished in ongoing social interactions. The construction of gender involves Scott’s knowledge, awareness, and anticipation that others will evaluate his behavior based on his assumed sex category even before the interaction occurs. This process is consistent with Hollander’s (2013) conceptualization of gender accountability. Scott’s internalized sense of “appropriate” behavior complicated his ability to accomplish queer and do gender differently.

Aiden had a similar reaction. Consider the following exchange among Kate, Joanna, and Aiden about androgyny.

- Joanna: I’ve never identified as femme or butch. I’ve always been just like, I don’t know, it depends on what we’re talking about.
- Kate: Yeah, I really appreciate androgyny quite a bit.
- Joanna: Yeah.
- Kate: In both males and females I appreciate androgyny.
- Aiden: But not to the point where somebody is yelling, ‘Oh, he/she/whatever,’ at you in [the craft supply store].
- Kate: Right.
- Joanna: In the [craft supply store].
- Aiden: That’s kind of where I draw the line.

For Aiden, the idea of androgyny and ambiguity was fine, but it did not change the

expectations of gender conformity in his environment. It did not change the threat of violence associated with presenting in a gender ambiguous way.

This experience of gender accountability calls into question whether consciously subverting the sex and gender binaries can actually change the structure of gender represented in one's environment. Butler (1990), Llical (1999), Jackson (2005), and Risman (2009) argue that it does not. They suggest that acting in opposition to the gender binary only maintains that it exists. Jackson (2005) argues that short-term changes in the way we "do" gender are naïvely hopeful of significant long-term change. Having more options for doing gender does not change the power structure of gender and serves to hide or obscure those who continue to hold the most power. Similarly, Wilchins (2004) asserts:

Trying to be inclusive won't help when it comes to binaries. For instance, take the ever-popular 'spectrum of gender.' It's an effort to be more inclusive when it comes to gender. But it's inevitably anchored by the only two *real* genders – man and woman. All those 'other genders' are either strung out between them, like laundry drying on the line, or circling around them in orbit like some kind of errant sputnik.

(p. 41)

Some individuals report finding great benefits from the empowerment and community in claiming a queer identity. At the same time, the theorists cited above suggest that it takes more than subverting the binary to dismantle structural power differentials between masculinity and femininity.

These dynamics are complex, particularly when dealing with someone's right to self-determination and to identify in a way that feels congruent (e.g., Feinberg, 1998). My acknowledgement that *some* theorists believe that structural change is not possible from

individual and interactional changes is not meant to undermine or minimize the lived experience and value that participants reported in terms of using “queer” as an identity. Some participants identified clear benefits to using queer as an identity in ways that helped facilitate a more positive experience of themselves and their relationships with others. Furthermore, some theorists believe that changing the structural system of gender *is* possible by doing gender differently on an interactional level. West and Zimmerman (1987) for example, argue that the accomplishment of gender in moment-to-moment interactions becomes the “scaffolding” of the gender structure. If the gender system is subverted with a conscious awareness of how an individual’s actions contribute to the larger system of gender, there is a possibility for undoing gender (e.g., Risman, 2009).

Not queer enough. Another critique of queer was the feeling of not being “enough.” Scott shared that he sometimes feels not queer enough, which he viewed as a recycling of competition that he experienced in the gay male community. Part of the problem with not feeling queer enough comes from some of the issues discussed early about trying to define queer. If someone else attempts to define queer for another person, that definition can become a set of standards, codes, or expectations to accomplish, which are then affirmed and policed by others (e.g., Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Consider the following exchange between Scott and Chris about trying to accomplish queer.

Scott: I appreciate the queer space, I appreciate the fact that we’re going to decenter and un-binariize [undo the binary], if ‘binarize’ is a word.

[laughter]

Chris: It is now.

[laughter and whispering]

Scott: It's one of those like [pause] yeah, I have had those experiences, you know, where it's fascinating to just really be able to break down those binaries and not have to fit into a box – fabulous. But, I've also – and this is not with everyone who avows with queer, whatsoever. But, I've found smaller circles of folks who now all of a sudden take on that role of, 'You haven't transcended your gayness yet?'

[laughter]

'You haven't [pause]'

Chris: Oh, you're there.

Scott: Oh, I'm still there. Right. And that's how it feels like, that's exactly what it feels like. It's like, 'Oh, how second wave feminism. You're not third wave yet?'

[laughter]

You know, and it becomes, again, a condescension. It's like, you know what? For me, personally, in this moment, in this time period, sexually, gay works for me.

Chris: That's right.

Scott: Right? Yes, maybe I do want to make out with a woman tonight. Let's play Spin the Bottle, but I mean does that put me in that queer space?

Scott identified his struggle of trying to negotiate his own and others' expectations of queerness. Although he has not had this experience with all who identify as queer, with some, he reported feeling judged and shamed for identifying as a gay male. This contradicts

participants' theoretical concept of queer being a flexible, all inclusive category that allows for difference. However, as I mentioned earlier, this process is consistent with group level identity work. If queer is a community and an identifiable reference group, there is likely going to be a negotiation of boundaries to define it, that are affirmed and policed by others who identify with this group. The development of an identity is often a joint creation through a group process (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Privilege. The fourth critique of queer was the awareness that queer may not work for everyone. Chris was the first to point out that there is privilege associated with accomplishing queer.

I will say like in terms of critiquing the queer, I have to put this out there, because the racism is terrible there, just like everywhere else in the LGBT community, it's very White-centered, and defined by this very White middle class identity. And, like that's very [pause] that's been a problem, even in the queer spaces I've created in terms of always having mostly White turnout, because it certainly is, again, it ends up being like a privileged way of being, in terms of not being able to have stability. So for some people that stability of like a gay identity is also very necessary, right? And so it's like while I have found solace in queer, I also understand that's not for everybody, and so like some of the people who identify as queer here refuse to accept people who are so old-school with their gay identities, which is just so ridiculous to me. It's more competition in a new way. (Chris)

Chris explained that some of the privileges associated with being White and middle class include the ability to separate, individuate, and be self-defined. Chris shared, "White people tend to have a tendency or overwhelmingly have the ability to more disengage from families

in ways that like I can't from my Asian family. It's part of my life." Scott added that individualism and the ability to disengage from family also applied to class privilege. He explained, "I mean even as someone who is White, who comes from very working-class roots, you know? Collectivistic style, communal family is where it is at."

These examples of race and class privilege highlight why adopting queer as an identity label, may not be accessible or even applicable to the lives of some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Like other norms and expectations within the LGBT community (e.g., Han, 2008), the norms and expectations of queer communities are predominantly based on the needs of White, upper-middle class individuals who experience privilege outside of their gender or sexual identity. Namaste (2009) offers a similar critique of feminist theory and queer theory in academic settings in which theories are constructed from a privileged position without acknowledging the impact on the lives of marginalized people. Namaste argues that without an awareness of power and privilege, feminist theory and queer theory can act as systemic violence. She asserts that knowledge must be created and disseminated in collaboration with marginalized people.

Theme 5: Change

Participants also talked about *noticing* change and *wanting* change. Although there were some similarities across both focus groups regarding change, the first group focused much more on how much things have gotten better since the 1980s and 1990s. The sentiment in this group was that progress is slow but possible. The second group focused more on the relentless struggle of change and how much further there is to go. For some of the participants in the second group, battling systems of sexism, hetero-normativity, and cis-supremacy felt big, overwhelming, and hard to tackle.

One difference between the two groups that helps to illuminate why each group may have focused on different aspects of change is the length of time that members had been in Riverdale. The first focus group was comprised of mostly people who grew up in the area. Every participant in the second group, however, recently moved to Riverdale from out of state. Contrasted were the perspective of witnessing the slow progress of change in one's own geographical community and the perspective of moving to a rural town and having to rebuild community. In this section I will present the different ways that participants talked about negotiating the process of change with respect to the LGBTQ community. This will include (a) noticing change and (b) wanting change, wanting unity.

Subtheme 5.a.: Noticing change. The perspective of noticing change focused more on the LGBTQ community's relationship to the dominant culture. Rather than emphasizing problems within the community, some participants focused on structural changes within the dominant culture that have improved the lives of LGBTQ individuals. For example, Joanna shared, "I'm always amazed by how much stuff has changed. I mean it just blows my mind."

Aiden similarly shared, "I'm glad to see that it's a lot easier for people these days, because it was ridiculous back in the '80s." Aiden went on to say, "you couldn't get these kids being productive citizens if they're getting - if they can't even graduate because of the bullying and the hassling." Amazement that things are getting better and referencing how bad things used to be in the past was a reoccurring response among participants within the first focus group. Toward the end of the focus group, I asked participants to reflect on the common ideas they noticed coming up in the discussion. Aiden shared, "the sense that things are improving, I mean that's been the consensus." He went on to say, "it's actually measurable improvement, you know, with legal rights and such like that."

This response is similar to results from a recent national survey of LGBT individuals. From April 11 to April 29, 2013, the Pew Research Center (2013) conducted an online survey of 1,197 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals living in the United States. In their survey, 92% of the respondents reported believing that society has become more accepting of LGBT individuals over the past decade. Similarly, 92% of the respondents reported believing that acceptance will continue to grow in the next decade.

Some of the “improvements” that participants referred to were things like increased visibility of people who were “out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.

- Aiden: You know, it’s really edifying to hear that somebody actually came out [and] in [Danville] no less.
- Kate: Oh god.
- Aiden: And isn’t dead.
- Joanna: Yeah.
- Aiden: You know, because that didn’t happen when I was a kid.
- Joanna: No.
- Aiden: You didn’t come out. You know? You just didn’t, or you had to move away. You know?
- Kate: Well, I feel like pretty much after you and I came out [pointing to Josh], and after we left high school like half the school was like, ‘I’m gay,’ and I was like, Really? I’m gone and now everybody wants to come out? [laughter]

The visibility of more people being “out” and the perception that it became safer to be “out” contributed to the sense that things were improving. Pharr (1997) similarly argues that

change requires relinquishing the fear of visibility with respect to one's sexual and/or gender identity.

Visibility also contributed to the validity of these identities. Kate shared that she feels like her straight friends are more accepting and supportive "now that they see like there are more than just this [one] gay person in the world and that it's a real thing or whatever." Visibility of LGBTQ individuals shifted the perceptions of Kate's heterosexual friends such that they viewed her identity as "real" rather than something specific to just her.

Participants in this study also experienced a shift in how they negotiated a sense of being "out" in multiple domains of their lives based on a shift in how the dominant culture perceives lesbian and gay identities. This is consistent with Seidman's (2002) interviews with 30 lesbian and gay individuals in the U.S. between 1996 and 1998. He reported seeing a shift in the degree to which participants felt a need to hide their sexual identities compared to historical accounts of gay men and lesbian women leading "closeted" lives. Seidman (2002) explained that gay men and lesbian women are becoming increasingly more incorporated into dominant society and models of "conventional" living. This is not to say that being "out" is safe for everyone, in all contexts nor does this mean that becoming "mainstreamed" into the dominant culture is the ultimate goal of all who identify as LGBTQ (e.g., Pharr, 1997).

For some participants, visibility also extended to noticing an increase in resources for LGBTQ individuals in Riverdale and in the surrounding areas. Kate explained, "for me, I felt like the resources really helped me just like kick back and take a chill pill and be like, I don't have to fit into this box." Kate shared that when she was in high school the administration told her that she was not allowed to start a Gay-Straight Alliance but explained that things changed after she graduated. Kate stated, "I'm pretty sure [Riverdale]

and [Danville] high schools, they both have GSAs [Gay Straight Alliances] now, which is awesome, because that's redneck town, redneckville." The overall sentiment about noticing change was hope. As Kate stated, "I feel like things are changing, sometimes slowly, but I do feel like things are kind of starting to take a turn, which I'm pretty happy about." Later she stated, "it's going to be awesome one day."

Subtheme 5.b.: Wanting change, wanting unity. The second predominant perspective about change focused on problems within the LGBTQ community and how these problems maintain an oppressive culture. This perspective came up more often within the second group and focused on how to respond to the lack of solidarity within the LGBTQ community. As Riley explained, "there needs to be more love in the communities, and there's just not enough care towards each other. We just need to be more of a community rather than the separate communities." Many participants explained that they wished for more unity. The four main ways that participants talked about wanting change and unity included (a) can't stop fighting, (b) needing communication, (c) ambivalence about change, and (d) unifying under shared experience of oppression.

Can't stop. Although the topic of wanting change and wanting unity was most prevalent in the second focus group, it also came up in the first group. Consider the following exchange between Kate and Aiden.

Kate: Yeah, I have this almost worry that I don't want, especially within like the younger crowd, that just because it's getting better doesn't mean we have to stop working on issues, because I feel like a lot of times things get better, they're like, 'Oh, it's almost there, it will take care of itself,' and then it doesn't.

Aiden: Prop 8 comes along. Yeah.

During the discussion Kate (early 20's) and Aiden (late 40's), both reported observing change in Riverdale and progress around LGBTQ rights, visibility and the perceived safety to be "out." But Kate also acknowledged a need to keep fighting and worried that LGBTQ youth might not see the need to keep fighting due to not being aware of how things used to be and what the community has done to push for change.

Political action and social changes require members of oppressed groups to be aware of injustice, recognize their minority status, and experience personal discontent about inequality (e.g., Simon & Klandermans 2001; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004) argue that a false consciousness about equity between groups maintains the status quo of privileged groups. Change requires continuous movement by the oppressed given that those who have power are unlikely to give it up. Pharr (1997) asserts that "power has been reshaped and redistributed through the growing strength and demands of the oppressed" (p. 83).

Communication. Some of the problems participants identified within the LGBTQ community (see Theme Two: Discouragement with Community) included things like sub-fracturing of communities under that LGBTQ umbrella, the exclusion of perceived differences, and not knowing how to support one another. Better communication became a reoccurring solution to some of these perceived problems in the community. Riley explained that more communication across the LGBTQ community could help unify and strengthen the community.

I would like to see the community come together more, you know? I would like to see them join together more, you know gay people talking to [pause] gay men talking

to gay women, trans people talking to gay people, lesbians, just more of that, because I even see in the trans community a lot of trans people having the opinion that they don't even want to be a part of the LGBT community, they want to be separate. I feel like if there was more dialogue that went on between each other we'd be a bit stronger. (Riley)

Riley argued that more communication across the community could help to break down the social rules around each identity box. Riley shared, "I don't know why there's so much exclusiveness, for a lack of a better word... I really don't know why we're not communicating more. It would just be so much better, the letters would soften, they wouldn't be so rigid." The letters that Riley referred to were the subcategories within the LGBTQ community. In her metaphor, each letter represented thick walls and social barriers that inhibit unity across the community that might soften and melt away with more communication. Johnson (2001) asserts that diversity and difference, in and of themselves, are not the problems. "The trouble is produced by a world organized in ways that encourage people to *use* difference to include or exclude, value or devalue, leave alone or harass" (p. 19). Participants in this study advocated for more communication across differences within the LGBTQ to combat the replication of oppression through the process of exclusion on the bases of difference.

Chris and Scott similarly felt that more communication could help those in the community learn from each other's differences to take responsibility for supporting the needs of one another.

Chris: I wish that we could learn to talk to each other more. I don't know, learn through those differences more. I don't know [pause]

- Scott: Maybe the things we probably should be pissed off about we're not getting pissed off about as a community or communities.
- Chris: Because it's not seen as 'my issue,' right?
- Scott: Right.
- Chris: Like access to hormones is other people's issue.

Here, Chris argued that part of the reason people are not unified and not supporting each other is because of the perception of difference. If lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer become separate groups then "their issues" become separate too. Chris went on to explain that this needs to change and that "your issue needs to be my issue and I need to hear that, and I need to - whenever you're angry I need to be angry with you." For Chris, part of being able to take responsibility to help one another comes from being able to listen to and hear the needs of other.

Dovidio, Saguy, and Shnabel (2009) suggest that there are always going to be competing motivations between dominant and oppressed groups. Those in a privileged position are motivated to maintain the status quo and aim to reinforce the prevailing hierarchy. Those in a position of privilege accomplish this by concealing or distracting the reality of inequity and systematically silencing the voices of marginalized groups (Dovidio et al., 2009). Conversely, those within an oppressed group are motivated to destabilize and shift the power hierarchy. Some of the differences within the LGBTQ community are related to differences in terms of intersecting social identities (e.g., sex, gender, sexual identity, social class, ability, etc.) and reflect competing motives with respect to positions of privilege and oppression. Dovidio et al. (2009) suggest that confronting these power differentials within a group may lead to conflict within a group but note that conflict can be healthy.

Conflict can lead to including minority voices which ultimately benefits the group as a whole.

Ambivalence. In the first focus group, there was some ambivalence about whether or not unity within the LGBTQ community could be possible. During the discussion, Kate repeatedly brought up the problem of excluding transgender identities.

A flaw in the LGBT community, and I left the ‘Q’ off specifically ... I think the flaw comes from, well, there was a time when straight people looked at the gay and lesbian community the same way. I feel like we should be, you know, be the baseboards for equality, and as a community, as a whole, and I feel like that’s kind of just being spit in the wind, you know, because it’s really like, ‘OK, we’re where we want to be and we’re going further, so let’s leave the transgender [community] like that.’ And I feel like that’s really shitty, and there’s a huge lack of intelligence there and a major source of selfishness. (Kate)

Kate’s statement reflected what others shared in terms of problems within the community such as the perception of difference under the LGBTQ umbrella term and feeling like sub-groups within the community are not supporting each other. Her observation also reinforces the idea of gay and lesbian rights movements progressing at a cost of differentiating “the gay rights” from the transgender community and seeing gender as “their issue.” Kate did not elaborate on why she left off the “Q” (queer community), but within the context of the dialogue she alluded to the idea that separation and exclusion on the bases of differences is less likely to occur in queer spaces.

Later in the conversation, Kate brought this up again and shared that she wanted to see more empathy and understanding toward transgender individuals within the lesbian and

gay community. Aiden acknowledged this desire but expressed some ambivalence about whether or not empathy is possibly within an oppressed community.

Aiden: I think empathy is hard for injured people too, though. You know? People go through, especially older people, they've been through a lot more isolation and such, and the younger [pause] especially coming from smaller communities will have that too, but I think it's - some people get so damaged by it, it's hard to be empathic.

Kate: Yeah.

Aiden: And they end up being more attacking than anything else.

Aiden suggested that those who are injured by an oppressive system go on to injure others. Aiden wondered if the prolonged experience of pain and isolation from an oppressive culture might inhibit someone's ability to feel empathy for the pain of others in a way that would encourage supporting the needs of others who are perceived to have "different" problems.

Han (2008) raises a similar question in his essay, *Darker Shades of Queer: Race and Sexuality at the Margins*. In this essay, Han (2008) explains:

A shared history of oppression rarely leads to coalition building among those who have been systematically denied their rights. More devastatingly, such shared experiences of oppression rarely lead to sympathy for others who are also marginalized, traumatized, and minimized by the dominant society. Rather, all too miserably, those who should naturally join in fighting discrimination find it more comforting to join their oppressor in oppressing others. (p. 86)

This echoes Aiden's statement about empathy being more difficult for injured people.

Intuitively it makes sense that empathy should foster mutual understanding, but it may be more complicated than that.

Ambivalence about change is also reflected in the differences within the LGBTQ community about what change should look like (see Subtheme 2.b. Unsupported, under Theme Two: Discouragement with Community). There is a perceived conflict between working toward assimilation within the dominant culture and maintaining a distinct identity. In a survey of LGBT individuals in the United States (Pew Research Study, 2013), 49% of the respondents reported believing that the best way to achieve equality is to have LGBT identities integrated into the dominant culture (e.g., marriage or the military). Interestingly, an equal share of the respondents reported believing that LGBT community should be able to achieve equality while still maintaining distinct cultural identities such as maintaining LGBT neighborhood or establishments (e.g., gay bars). Brewer (1991) suggests that humans have competing needs for being both the same and different from others. Feeling "lumped" into a broad category as being the "same" as everyone else, could threaten the need for distinctiveness.

Shared experience of oppression. Contrary to Aiden's statement about empathy being hard to foster in oppressed communities, Riley and Chris argued that if the community *could* unify, the best chance would be to connect on the shared experience of oppression rather than fighting for resources to protect one's own sub-category. They argued that the community could unite against the systems of oppression such as sexism, heterosexism, and cis-supremacy that are ultimately responsible for the recapitulation of pain and exclusion within the community. Pharr (1997) explains:

If, indeed, homophobia and sexism are inextricably connected, it is imperative that gay men work against sexism. And it follows that if homophobia and sexism are connected because of gender oppression, it is vital that heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men connect with and support the liberation of bisexual and transgendered people. (p. 104)

Pharr's sentiment connected to Riley's argument for continuing to talk about the system of oppression. She shared, "I think it's an inherent problem in such a large system of hate towards femininity that it's going to be really difficult to take that on, and we just need to keep having dialogues about it." Riley suggested focusing on the system that continues to generate hate within the community, such as gay men devaluing femininity. Pharr (1997) explains, to produce systemic change:

We have to find ways to rebel against roles designed to keep us under control or to exert control over others. This takes more than gender bending... it takes resistance to virtually everything the culture has taught us. It takes subversion and outright refusal. Most of all, it takes a commitment to liberation and freedom for all of us.

(p.120)

During the focus group discussion, Chris proposed that the one thing that does unify everyone within the LGBTQ community is the shared experience of gender oppression.

When we call it a 'community' singular, it's not about just sexual orientation, it becomes about gender identity, gender performance. I mean frankly, in my opinion, that's why everyone in this entire broad spectrum is oppressed, it comes down to not properly performing the genders we're supposed to be performing. It's about gay men being with men, it's women being with women, it's bi [bisexual] people not

being about to decide, right? Like, we can't peg you? So that discomfort is like you're not playing gender right, you're not stable enough for us. And, then you have trannies [transgender individuals] who don't know what the hell we're doing anyways. And so I think if we meet anywhere it's no longer always about sexual orientation . . . it's about gender identity I think. (Chris)

Chris argued that moving the focus away from sexual orientation and toward the broader experience of gender oppression could bridge the differences that keep the LGBTQ community fractured, non-inclusive, and non-supportive. This is not to say that everyone under the LGBTQ umbrella should be seen as “the same.” Instead, ze argued that communication and support across differences and a focus on gender as an underlying oppressive structure could help to reengage solidarity and coalition building within LGBTQ communities.

Summary and Conclusion

In this section I will present a summary of my qualitative findings from this exploratory study. To do this, I will provide a brief overview of the five themes that emerged during data analysis process, described in detail in the previous section. These five themes include (a) gender oppression, (b) discouragement with community, (c) attempts to cope, (d) queer, and (e) change. I will then present a statement about me as the researcher. This will be the second part to the “bracketing” that I documented in Chapter 3 in order to continue the process of self-reflection and transparency about how much subjectivity influenced the results of this study. I will then present the strengths, limitations, and directions for the future. Next I will present recommendations for clinical application based on results from this study. Finally, I will present concluding thoughts.

Brief Summary of Themes

Theme 1: Gender oppression. Gender oppression refers to the experience of oppression in response to someone's gender or sexual identity moving away from the expected norms of the dominant model. This refers to things like heterosexism and cis-supremacy, which reinforce a system of sexism. Participants described experiences of oppression through (a) institutional regulation (e.g., losing one's job), (b) interpersonal regulation (e.g., bullying), and (c) fear and self-regulation (e.g., not disclosing one's identity). These experiences connect with Pharr's (1997) description of the common elements of oppression. Theme 1 provided the groundwork for understanding the recapitulation of oppression within the LGBTQ community. Sub-cultures and communities are not immune to internalizing the values of a society that enforces conformity to sex and gender binaries.

Theme 2: Discouragement with community. This theme reflected the ways in which participants experienced the recapitulation of power and oppression within the community through the process of inclusion and exclusion. Participants reported a range of feeling (a) disconnected, (b) unsupported, (c) invalidated or rejected or (d) somehow not "enough" to meet the expectations of group norms. A connection to an LGBTQ community is considered to be an important part of identity development when individuals move away from the privileged status of heterosexual (e.g., Firestein, 2007; Haldeman, 2007; Liddle, 2007; Potoczniak, 2007) or cisgender identities (e.g., Lev, 2007). Reynolds and Hanjorgiris (2000) suggest that communities can offer a place to unlearn hateful messages and stigma about LGBTQ identities and provide a corrective experience for developing a strong self-concept. However, as participants in this study described, the notion of community as a

place of support and solace is not guaranteed.

Some participants experienced a sense of disconnection associated with creating an LGBTQ community in a small town. Some reported feeling disconnected from the settings associated with LGBTQ events such as a gay bar. Some experienced “competition” within the community, a sub-fracturing of identities within the community, and a sense of “not fitting” under the broad umbrella term, LGBTQ.

Furthermore, communities are developed and maintained by deciding who is included and who is excluded. Those who hold the most power often determine the criteria for inclusion (Johnson, 2001). They define the enforceable group norms. Those who are perceived to be different from the group norms are pushed to the margins, and the replication of oppression continues (Han, 2008; Pharr, 1997; Wilchins, 2004). For example, participants in this study talked about group dynamics perpetuating sexism, racism, ageism, and classism within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. Participants reported that this was often accomplished through the implicit and explicit message to silence intersecting oppressed identities. Those who identified outside of the sex, gender, or sexual identity binaries, such as transgender and bisexual individuals, similarly experienced rejection and exclusion from the community.

Theme 3: Attempts to cope. Participants talked about different ways of coping with gender oppression and their perceived lack of support within the LGBTQ community. Participants’ attempts to cope included (a) substance use, (b) supporting others, (c) pride and confidence, (d) validation, and (e) creating supportive spaces. Each of these strategies emphasized participants’ need for support but also their strengths and resiliencies for finding it.

Theme 4: Queer. Queer has historically been a derogatory term used to refer to those who are perceived to be LGBT. In the early 1990s, this term was re-appropriated by the community as a political act to communicate resistance against hetero-normativity (Stryker, 2008). Since then it has been used in many different ways. For some participants, queerness became a response to solve some of their perceived problems associated with the LGBT community such as exclusivity or the conflation of sex, gender and sexual identities. Queer was seen as a pathway for finding inclusion and flexibility while staying connected to the broader LGBTQ community. Participants also felt that it represented a resistance to dominant models of sex, gender, and sexual identities. However, participants also talked about some of the problems with queer as an identity, such as not having a shared language to define it, having a hard time applying queer in practice, not “measuring up” to the standards of being “queer enough,” and some of the privileges associated with being queer.

Theme 5: Change. Participants also talked about *noticing* change and *wanting* change. The first group focused on how much things have gotten better since the 1980s and 1990s. Participants in this group seemed to support the sentiment that change is slow but possible. In the second group, participants focused more on problems within the community, the struggle of change, and how much further there is yet to go. Those who focused on *noticing* change acknowledged some of the structural changes in Riverdale and the surrounding areas that contributed to the increased visibility of LGBTQ identities and the perceived safety of being “out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer in multiple domains of their lives.

Those who focused on *wanting* change talked about the need to continue fighting against the oppression of the dominant culture, to improve communication across sub-groups

within the LGBTQ community, and to possibly unify under the shared experience of gender oppression to promote social change and within-group solidarity. There seemed to be both a desire for and uncertainty about the possibility of solidarity within the LGBTQ community.

Researcher-as-Instrument Statement: Part Two

Continuously engaging in self-reflection is an important part of the qualitative research process. Although complete objectivity is impossible to obtain as a qualitative researcher (Morrow, 2005), self-awareness can provide a context for understanding the ways in which the researcher influences the findings (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, Morales, 2007). As is true for all researchers, my personal biases affect the way I read, analyzed and interpreted the data for this study.

Before conducting the focus groups for this study, I reflected on my personal biases, observations, and expectations that I brought to this study. A summary of this reflection is outlined in Chapter 3. As I conclude this study, I believe it is important to revisit some of my personal biases that may have influenced the results.

I am aware that my interest in this study came out of personal experiences and observations within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. This study was also informed by my critical curiosity about the structure of gender as an underlying system of oppression. This lens influenced the way I interpreted and understood dynamics within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale.

A bias that I brought to this study is my belief that the gender binary is problematic and needs to be adapted in order to allow for greater diversity and to challenge the power hierarchy. But as options begin to expand, it seems that there may be a social tendency for categories to reemerge. New categories often mean that there are new borders to protect, and

that protection often leads to policing those who do not fit the group norms. It is this policing of others who do not “fit in” that feels complicated for me. It seems like the protection of social identity borders comes from the need to create and maintain a connected community. I have observed and experienced the benefit of feeling connected to a community, and yet it is still hard for me to reconcile the identity policing that ostracizes those who do not fit the norms. The implicit message or assumption is that the perceived “other” must change or “adjust” to be included. The message that one must change in order to fit within the community seems to conflict with my value of connection and relatedness being based on authenticity.

An emotional bias that I brought to this study was my personal experience of anger, hurt, disappointment and betrayal that I associated with the idea of an LGBTQ community, especially regarding (a) the re-inscription of enforcing conforming to the gender binary, (b) the perpetuation of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, (c) the dismissal and exclusion of bisexual and transgender individuals, and more generally (d) the lack of space for complexity and inclusion beyond the binary. As a result of these preexisting biases, I noticed that during the focus groups and while reviewing the transcripts, I found myself strongly identifying with certain participants. While I was analyzing the data I had to take frequent breaks to separate myself, and my emotional reactions, from their words and their stories. The pain, disappointment, and sense of disconnection in their stories resonated with me. I was careful to reflect on these reactions, provide myself with empathy, sometimes call a friend and then, when I was ready, refocus my attention on the participants’ voices. It is their narratives I want to share.

One surprise that came up for me in this study occurred during the first focus group. The participants in this group seemed to focus on “how much better” things have gotten or how much better they will be in the future. It seemed like participants would talk about a painful experience or disappointment and then end with “but it will get better.” My first reaction was to see this as minimizing or dismissing the experience. I also felt myself responding with feelings of frustration because I wanted the conversation to “go deeper.” As I continued to self-reflect on my experience and as I continued to reread the transcripts, I realized that my reaction was coming from an “outsider” perspective. I did not grow up in a small Midwest town and therefore did not have the same experiences that some of the participants in the first focus group had. I did not grow up in Riverdale and did not observe the changes that occurred over time.

I noticed myself aligning more with the participants who moved to Riverdale for graduate school compared to those who had been living in Riverdale or the surrounding area for most of their lives. I think I connected to their stories because of the shared experience of moving to a new place to rebuild community. I also connected to participants who were graduate students in terms of the shared experience of valuing and having the privilege of an education. I recognize that my education and status as a graduate student affords me the privilege to think about gender often. For some participants, this was the first time they were talking about dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the LGBTQ community and how this connects with regulation of gender categories. This was reflected in participants’ comments on the follow-up questionnaire. One participant, for example, described the focus group discussion as “deep and important.” Another participant referred to the group discussion as “refreshing” and one person reported that it was “very helpful to

know that I'm not alone in my experiences." These experiences of the focus group discussion challenged my notion of what it means for a conversation to be "deep" and "meaningful."

I realize that I also created this document while transitioning to a new city and job, feeling disconnected from the LGBTQ community in a new place, and while coping with reactions to a parent with a terminal illness. These experiences may have left me in a position of overemphasizing negative aspects of community and identity policing. There are positive and adaptive benefits to community building. It is possible that I may not have been as open to those experiences.

In trying to minimize the effects of these possible biases, I (a) was careful to ask about both positive and negative experiences during the focus groups, (b) chose not to disclose my personal experiences during the interviews and did not use the term "gender policing," (c) included a process observer in each focus group to observe and document content and interpersonal dynamics, and (d) sent participants their transcripts with associated preliminary themes. My results are congruent with the notes from my process observers, and five out of the ten participants who responded to the member check reported still agreeing with everything they said and did not have any objections to my preliminary themes. Nonetheless, I am aware that I may have focused more on the negative aspects of communities.

Another experience that surprised me during this research process was my sense of hopelessness in terms of where to go next. The process of inclusion and exclusion, the use of binaries to reduce complex information into simple categories, and the tension associated with the slow progress of change seem inevitable. My reaction of hopelessness that came up

while going through the data analysis process influenced my thinking about how participants' narratives might inform (a) community building and programing, (b) clinical applications, (c) education, and (d) future research questions.

Following are some of the recurring questions that arose for me while reviewing the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions: What happens to those who are pushed to the margins of communities? What happens to those confronted with the chronic stress of exclusion from groups? How do we respond to the experience of internalizing shame and unworthiness as a result of social rejection? How do we respond to the experience of internalized oppression within communities? Do we continue to add letters to the end of the LGBTQ alphabet train to reflect distinctive identities? Is solidarity within the LGBTQ community possible if the sex and gender binaries prevail? How do we respond to and prevent the perpetuation of racism and other forms of oppression within the LGBTQ community? I imagine the best place to start is to, whenever possible, include and support the voices of marginalized individuals in these discussions, and to initiate conversations within LGBTQ communities about some of the problems associated with exclusion. Awareness may not change the system, but it may help to open dialogues for continued possibilities of more empathy and compassion within communities.

The idea of strengthening dialogues across the community and moving toward unity was a salient theme throughout both of the focus groups. In Riverdale, it seems that these dialogues also need to occur between those connected to the university and those more connected to the city of Riverdale itself. My questions for future research and practice include the following: How do we best support these dialogues within the community? Where can they occur? And how can we ensure access to these spaces?

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Strengths. Strengths of this study included (a) the use of qualitative methodology, (b) using focus groups, (c) inclusive sampling criteria, (d) providing a description of the social context of this study, and (e) establishing trustworthiness. Qualitative research provides an opportunity to support the narratives of marginalized populations that are often silenced in the literature (Fassinger, 2005). This study supported the narratives of experiences among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals in a small and predominantly working class college town.

Focus groups rather than individual interviews were used to elicit common group norms as well as unique experiences. I intentionally kept the sampling criteria for this study as open as possible rather than focusing on a single sub-identity in an attempt to reflect the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ community where this study took place. My intention was to avoid excluding any self-identified member of the LGBTQ community. I wanted to support the stories of those who were interested in sharing their experiences within the context of identifying with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. I also provided a supplemental analysis of the social context in which this study took place to help the reader situate participants' stories within their social locations.

Another strength of this study is reflected in the steps I took to establish trustworthiness. Components of establishing trustworthiness included (a) reflexivity, to address the subjectivity of the researcher, (b) participatory consciousness, to account for the subjectivity of the research participants, and (c) immersion and prolonged engagement, to enhance the credible representation of the data (Morrow, 2005). Regarding reflexivity, before conducting the focus groups I reflected on and reported my personal biases,

observations and expectations. This process is known as “bracketing” and my initial reflections are summarized in Chapter 3. I continued this self-reflection throughout the research process by maintaining an electronic journal of my thoughts, feeling, and reactions to help differentiate my personal reaction from the stories being shared. A summary of my post self-reflections is documented in the preceding section. I also consulted with both of the process observers who were present during the interviews and the chair of this study about my reactions and the emerging themes to help me minimize imposing a personal bias on the data. Finally, I looked for confirming and disconfirming evidence in the data as themes emerged during the data analysis process.

To establish participatory consciousness and to co-construct a narrative of the data, I used participants’ direct quotes from the interviews, provided thick description of the data, and invited participants to provide me with feedback about their direct quotes, a process known as a “member check.” Immersion in the data and topic being studied was established through my connection to and membership in the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. I was both a participant and observer of the community being explored in this study. This helped me describe the context of the study. Prolonged engagement was established through continuous readings of the transcripts, attempting to take a naïve perspective when reading the transcripts, and keeping analytic memos throughout the data analysis process.

Limitations and directions for future research. Some of the limitations of this study are discussed below, with a specific focus on (a) the lack of diversity among participants, (b) selection bias, (c) social desirability, (d) the lack of responsiveness to the “member check,” and (e) the depth and historical context in the focus group discussions.

First, the sample for this study was not meant to represent the entire LGBTQ

population in Riverdale, nor are these experiences intended to generalize beyond those who participated in the study. However, it is important to note that the majority of participants who responded to this study were White. This contributes to the absence of marginalized voices in the literature. It also perpetuates what participants in this study discussed in terms of silencing intersecting oppressed identities. Experiences of oppression related to race, ethnicity, immigration, and body size, as they intersect with gender and sexual identities, for example, may not have been adequately addressed, and these are the voices that need to be included and supported in the research literature.

There are a few possibilities for why the majority of participants who responded to this study were White. First, Riverdale's is predominantly White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). However, about 25 % of residence living in Riverdale in 2010 identified as Black or African American, and this demographic was not represented in my sample. Another possible explanation could be related to the fact that historically, those in a position of power within LGBTQ communities have been predominantly White (e.g., Han, 2008; Pharr, 1997). LGBTQ people of color often experience racism within LGBTQ spaces (e.g., Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Given that the advertisement for this study only indicated an emphasis on LGBTQ identities, potential participants may have assumed that this would be a predominantly White space. I did not specify the importance of talking about the intersection of other identities on the flyer.

This speaks to a bias I brought to this study. I am White and this comes with the privilege of not having to think about or consider my racial identity. When I was first developing this study I experienced my gender and sexual identities to be more salient aspect of my identity. This may have limited the way I recruited participants based on the

description I presented of the study. As an example, I could have specifically stated an interest in talking about gender, sexuality, and race on the recruitment flyer. As Fukuyama and Ferguson (2000) explain, “one of the primary limitations of recognizing only single identities is that individuals who embrace multiple identities are often invisible members within specific reference groups” (p. 85). Although my intention was to leave the criteria as open as possible to allow for inclusion of diverse intersecting identities, it may have helped to be more explicit about this intention on the recruitment flyer.

LGBTQ people of color also experienced homophobia in their ethnic and racial communities (e.g., Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000), which can contribute to feelings of hyper-vigilance associated with being publicly “out” as an LGBTQ as a person of color. Publicly identifying as LGBTQ could potentially lead to social isolation from one’s racial community (e.g., Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). This study was publicized on flyers posted around Riverdale, in restaurants, coffee shops, grocery stores, on the university campus, and around the community. It was also posted online through a social media website and was announced on a queer radio show. The visibility and attention on LGBTQ identities related to this study may have felt “too public” and not safe. Furthermore, marginalized populations may experience a culturally adaptive skepticism about outsiders requesting to conduct research with members of their community (e.g., Carter, 2007). As a result, some minority populations may not have seen the advertisement for the focus group as a safe space. Cultural communities’ skepticism of researchers and psychologists is consistent with the history of the field of psychology pathologizing normative responses to oppression as problems within individuals (e.g., Burman et al., 1996).

Again, a possible way to recruit more members from marginalized communities

would be to state my explicit and transparent intention on the flyer about wanting to discuss multiple aspects of one's identity and how this is experienced within the LGBTQ community. It may also be important to use snowball sampling and generate recruitment through word of mouth through cultural consultants in the community. A third possibility is to make the research process more collaborative and organize a way to share the results of the study with the participants and the community. This may help to improve transparency between the researcher and the participants and to support trustworthiness of the researcher in terms of how the data will be used. A fourth possibility for improving recruitment strategies would be to offer more options for responding with greater anonymity such as online surveys in addition to running focus groups. This may help to buffer any negative consequences associated with feeling "outed" in a focus group setting.

In addition to a lack of racial diversity, this study lacked diversity in terms of age. Participants in this study were predominantly in their 20s and early 30s. Future studies might consider intentionally recruiting aging populations to broaden the perspective surrounding LGBTQ community building. Specifically looking at ageing populations with the LGBTQ community might also highlights the experience of change within the community and shifts in participants' personal needs in relation to the community across the lifespan.

There was also a distinct contrast between the first and second focus group given that the first group was comprised of mostly those who grew up in the area surrounding Riverdale and the second group was comprised entirely of those who moved to Riverdale for school. This division was not intentional. I assigned participants to a particular focus group based on their scheduling availability. The contrast between the groups helped to contextualize the experience of participants noticing change in their hometown versus the experience of

wanting change among those who were new to the area and trying to find community. Future studies may benefit from nesting focus group based on the amount of time that participants have lived in Riverdale and also from mixing some of these groups to hear dialogue among those who are new to town and who have lived in the area for a while. It may also be informative to create focus groups that include a mix of those who primarily identify with the university in Riverdale and those who primarily identify with the city of Riverdale and are not affiliated with the university. Looking at the content and process of such discussions and experiences may help to illuminate barriers to community building and solidarity within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale.

Selection bias may have also contributed to the results of this study as well. I conducted the focus groups for this study during the beginning of the academic year. This may explain why many of the participants were both students at the local university and new to Riverdale.

Selection bias may have also influenced the type of stories shared within the focus group. The advertisement for recruiting participants for this study reported looking for individuals who were interested in sharing their experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. I did not solicit participants who had specifically positive or specifically negative experiences. However, it is possible that those who felt comfortable or content with their notion of community did not have a reason to or an interest in participating in this study. It may also be that those who felt disconnected from the LGBTQ community saw the opportunity to participate in this study as a means for connecting with others. At the conclusion of the focus group discussions, several participants reported finding it supportive and validating to know that they are not the only ones struggling to connect. Thus, it is

possible that these stories capture more of the perspectives of those who feel like they are on the margins of the LGBTQ community in Riverdale.

Future studies may consider intentionally recruiting members of an intact group. Running focus groups with an existing group of people or friends who identify as a community may have yielded different results. Interviewing those who feel content with the LGBTQ community may help to illuminate the experiences of those who feel resistance to the need for change within the community or who do not see any concern about dynamics of exclusion within the community. Furthermore, results in the current study specifically focused on the experience of feeling policed rather than the experience of policing others. Conducting focus groups with intact groups may help to explore possible motivations and intentions associated with policing social identities and gender categories.

The potential for socially desirable responding is a third limitation of this study. My intention was to conduct group interviews that elicited group level norms and experiences within social interactions. This choice in methodology was a noted strength but also brought the weakness of group dynamics such as “group think,” conformity, and pressure to agree with other participants. Some of the participants also reported wanting to make sure that their contributions were helpful to me and the purpose of this study. I tried to minimize these dynamics by asking participants for experiences that were both similar to and different from experiences already discussed in the group. However, this strategy does not erase the impact of groups on individual behavior. Future studies may consider conducting both focus groups and individual interviews.

Another weakness of this study is that not everyone responded to the follow-up “member check.” Although every participant reported that they would feel comfortable being

contacted for the member check, I only received responses from five out of the ten participants. All five reported having no concerns about their quotes being used and said that they did not have anything else to add. It is possible that low responsiveness to the member check was due, in part, to the delay between the time the interviews were conducted (September 2012) and the time I sent participants their transcripts (April 2013). Future studies may consider following up with participants soon after the focus groups, by phone or in person, while the interviews are being transcribed, to help maintain the collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Finally, another limitation of this study is the amount of contact I had with participants and that participants had with each other. Conducting multiple focus groups over time with the same participants may have deepened the dialogue and historical context of the issues that were brought up in the discussions. For example, participants in this study reported grappling with the frustration and tension associated with having so many “sub-identities” under the LGBTQ umbrella. Queer was also discussed as a possible solution to dynamics of exclusion and identity protection/policing within the LGBTQ community. However, in these focus groups, the conversations did not go to a place of reflecting on the historical context about the evolution of different identity groups within the LGBTQ community. The conversations did not focus on why having different identity labels and categories has been important in terms of creating and maintaining protected and empowered spaces in the face of marginalization such as intentionally using lesbian as an identity label rather than the more generalized term “gay” as a response to sexism within the community. The conversations also did not focus on why having separate identities may continue to be important and relevant rather than using a generalized “queer” identity.

Future studies might consider holding multiple focus groups across a period of time to expand the context of the dialogues and to allow participants more time to reflect on and unpack some of the issues discussed in the group. One possibility would be to conduct a first round of focus groups with a set number of groups, send participants the transcript and/or summary of themes and then hold a second round of interviews to discuss participants' reactions and responses to the themes brought up in their first conversation.

Results from this study also point to the relevance of conducting participatory action research within LGBTQ communities in the future. Action research would involve community members' active participation in developing research questions and evaluating study results along the way (e.g., Brydon-Miller, 2001). This would provide academic researchers an opportunity to empower community members to participate in asking questions and exploring solutions that might lead to community building.

Clinical Application

Results from this exploratory study are not meant to generalize beyond those who participated in this study. However, participants' narratives can provide some insight into possible recommendations for improving services for LGBTQ clients. Increased exposure to knowledge about diverse populations, such as the narratives presented in this study, can help to improve mental health providers' capacity to provide culturally relevant empathy (e.g., Vasquez, 2010). Salient events and experiences that are culturally specific to LGBTQ communities are less likely to be missed and unacknowledged when mental health providers have an increased awareness of what those dynamics might be.

Findings from this study suggest that resources *are* important. The visibility of LGBTQ communities can provide individuals with a sense of validation and an opportunity to connect

with others. Mental health providers are in position of being able to facilitate clients' connection to community by knowing what resources are available. However, results from this study also indicate that support within LGBTQ spaces is not always guaranteed. My recommendation is that mental health providers need to be aware of resources for LGBTQ individuals in their own community, *and* they need to be aware of dynamics within those spaces. For examples, are certain identities invalidated or excluded?

To productively investigate dynamics within the LGBTQ community, I also recommend that mental health providers be aware of their own social locations. Mental health providers need to be aware of what they do not know. Participants in this study found that racism was not acknowledged within the LGBTQ community. A mental health provider who is White, for example, may be in a position of not having to think about race and a result may not consider whether or not the local LGBTQ Resource Center is a safe space for people of color.

Results from this study also reinforce the importance of providing support groups for LGBTQ community members. The structure of the focus groups in this study mirrored some aspects of a support group. Members of the LGBTQ community in Riverdale had a space to openly talk about their experiences within the community and to connect with others who may have had similar experiences. On the follow-up questionnaire for this study, multiple participants reported finding the focus group discussion to be supportive and affirming. For example, one participant stated it was "very helpful to know that I'm not alone in my experiences." Another participant shared that "it was very pleasant to be able to connect with other people from a similar background." Providing LGBTQ individuals with a space for open dialogues is important.

Finally, results from this study support the need for institutional change. Participants in this study discussed examples of being policed on an institutional level, such as in their schools or at a community health center. These experiences reinforced the values of the dominant norm (i.e., cisgender and heterosexual identities), and identities perceived to be different from these dominant norms were viewed as less valued. The way in which the dominant culture views the “other” is internalized by the LGBTQ community and by LGBTQ individuals. This is gender oppression. Participants in this study reported experiencing gender oppression on individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Mental health providers can do their part to minimize the far-reaching impact of gender oppression by dismantling the unnecessary regulation of gender categories within their workplace. An example of this is allowing clients to self-identify on agency documents (i.e., having open-ended, write-in questions) rather than using simple identity boxes to check off. Another example is to provide gender-neutral restrooms.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and perceived meaning of gender policing in social interactions among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community members in Riverdale (pseudonym). I recruited participants only from Riverdale to provide a context for a particular time, place, and social group. The social construction and enforcement of gender is context dependent. Gender policing refers to the implicit and explicit feedback about accomplishing gender inappropriately according to contextual norms, expectations, and ideals, with the implied meaning that the not conforming will result in real or assumed negative consequences.

Gender policing can occur on an individual level (i.e., self-regulation), interactional level (i.e., interpersonal policing), and structural level (i.e., institutional regulation). This study focused on the experience of gender policing on an interactional level, within a particular time, place, and social identity group. I also presented my results within the context of gender being accomplished on all three levels (i.e., individual, interactional, structural) since all three of these levels are constantly at play and influence each other.

Results from this exploratory study yielded five broad themes: (a) gender oppression, (b) discouragement with community, (c) attempts to cope, (d) queer, and (e) change. These themes reflect narratives of oppression in the dominant culture and the impact of oppression on identity work in the LGBTQ community in a rural college town. Instances of gender policing on an interactional level were often associated with the assumed threat of social rejection and isolation and the experience of disappointment, pain, and disconnection.

Interactional gender policing was sometimes experienced directly and other times experienced through the perception of others being policed. Accomplishing gender appropriately sometimes impacted participants' perceived membership and inclusion within the LGBTQ community. For example, a self-identified gay male participant reported feeling held accountable to group norms such as (a) not being feminine, (b) controlling his display of affect, (c) being sexually promiscuous and being sexually dominant, and (d) being competitive. He reported being aware of these norms when he was in predominantly gay male spaces, and these group norms are about accomplishing both "male" and "gay" appropriately. Dynamics of gender oppression and other forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, ageism, and classism were also replicated through the process of inclusion and exclusion associated with forming LGBTQ group identities. Those who hold the most power

often determine the norms and expectations of the group, which impacts the regulation and enforcement of social group boundaries.

Results from this study support the literature on the accomplishment of gender through social interactions (e.g., Hollander, 2013; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and the maintenance of power differentials through the regulation of perceived differences between sex and gender categories (e.g., Lorber, 1994). Participants' stories support the literature on identity work as a group process (e.g., Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). These results also support the theoretical literature on problems within the LGBTQ community (e.g., Han, 2008; Pharr, 1997; Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 2004), such as the maintenance of oppression and barriers to social change.

Conducting a focus group was an intervention in and of itself. Participants who lived in the same geographical community were able to connect and relate to common experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. Some reported finding support and validation in the focus group from knowing that they are not the only ones struggling to find community. Some of the participants exchanged information after the focus group meeting to continue a relationship and social network. During the focus group participants were also able to identify problems within the community and started generating solutions.

Future studies may consider running more focus groups in Riverdale, or another geographical community of interest, to start bridging connections across differences within the LGBTQ community and develop context-specific community interventions. If this were to happen, I would encourage researchers to intentionally seek out participants from marginalized populations to make sure that these voices are included in the dialogues. Researchers might consider using cultural consultations from the community to help identify

better recruiting strategies. I would also encourage researchers to intentionally seek out pre-existing groups of people within the LGBTQ community who feel included and connected to the community to provide more insight into (a) dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (b) different motivations associated with excluding and/or policing others, and (c) possible reasons for resistance to acknowledging positions of privilege within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information - Focus Group One

#	Pseudonym	Gender Pronouns	Age	Gender Identity & Length of time	Sexual Identity & Length of time	Race/ Ethnicity	Nationality
1	Joanna	she/her	Early 40s	Female (41 years)	Lesbian (22 years)	Caucasian / Jewish	American
2	Kate	she/her	Early 20s	It depends (10 years)	It depends (10 years)	---	---
3	Emma	she/her	Early 20s	Female (23 years)	Lesbian (2.5 years)	White-Caucasian	American, Irish, Czech
4	Aiden	he/him	Late 40s	Transmale (4 years)	Bisexual (30 years)	White/Irish	American
5	Josh	he/him	Early 20s	Male (22 years)	Gay (15 years)	White	American

Table continues...

Table 1 (continued)

Participant Demographic Information - Focus Group One

Pseudonym [column continued from previous page]	Occupation	Education	Social Class	Time Identifying with LGBTQ Community	Time Identifying with Riverdale LGBTQ Community
Joanna	Poet/ Writer/ Teacher/ Student	Graduate student	Lower-Middle class	22 years	1 year
Kate	Personal Assistant	Scattered	Poor	10 years	10 years
Emma	Military Factory Worker	Some college through military	Middle class	2.5 years	2.5 years
Aiden	Grocery Clerk	B.A. degree	Lower-Middle class	30 years	30 years
Josh	Student/ Dietary cook/ Parent	Freshman at a 2-year college	Middle class	15 years	2 years

Notes. N = 5. The dashes indicate the participant left this item blank. Some identifying information has been changed or deleted to protect the privacy of participants

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information - Focus Group Two

#	Pseudonym	Gender Pronouns	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/ Ethnicity	Nationality
6	Scott	he/him	Early 30s	Male (25 years)	Gay (15 years)	White	U.S. American
7	Jenna	she/her	Mid 20s	Female (- - -)	Bisexual (8 years)	White	American
8	Chris	ze/hir	Early 30s	Trans* / Genderqueer (10 years)	Queer (10 years)	Mixed race / 1st generation	I don't define my nationality
9	Hector	he/him	Late 20s	Male (25 years)	Gay (3 years)	Hispanic / Latino	Latin American
10	Riley	she/her	Mid 20s	Transgender (6 years) Queer (3 years)	Fluid, but mostly attracted to men (9 years)	White	- - -

Table continues...

Table 2 (continued)

Participant Demographic Information - Focus Group Two

Pseudonym [column continued from previous page]	Occupation	Education	Social Class	Time Identifying with LGBTQ Community	Time Identifying with Riverdale LGBTQ Community
Scott	Paid	Graduate student	Working class	12 years	2 months
Jenna	Teacher, Writer	Graduate student	Middle class	n/a	1 year
Chris	Research	Graduate student / First generation college and graduate student	Working class	15 years	1.25 years
Hector	Graduate Student / Teacher's Assistant	Graduate student	Middle class	1 year	1 month
Riley	- - -	- - -	Grew up & raised upper-middle class	3 years	1 year

Notes. N = 5. The dashes indicate the participant left this item blank. Some identifying information has been changed or deleted to protect the privacy of participants

Table 3

Summary of Themes and Subthemes

#	Superordinate Themes	Subthemes	Additional Subcategories
1	Gender Oppression	a. Cis-supremacy and hetero-normativity b. Institutional and interpersonal enforcement c. Fear and self-regulation	
2	Discouragement with community	a. Disconnection b. Unsupported c. Invalidation and rejection of transgender and bisexual identities d. Not "enough"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not knowing others in the community - Invisibility - Being new - Not connecting with the bar scene - Competition - Not fitting under the LGBTQ umbrella - Silencing intersecting identities - Not helping each other - Surprise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lesbian norms - Gay male norms - Transgender norms

Table continues ...

Table 3, Continued
Summary of Themes and Subthemes

#	Superordinate Themes	Subthemes	Additional Subcategories
3	Attempts to cope	a. Substance use b. Supporting others c. Pride and confidence d. Validation e. Creating supportive spaces	
4	Queer	a. Benefits of queer b. Critiques of queer	- Inclusion - Ambiguity - Defining queer - Difficulty of applying queer in practice - Not queer enough - Privilege
5	Change	a. Noticing change b. Wanting change, wanting unity	- Can't stop - Communication - Ambivalence - Shared experience of gender oppression

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Recruiting Volunteers!

for research study about experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale

Inclusion criteria:

- 18 years old or older
- Identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) spectrum(s) in at least one context in your life
- Identify with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or have had experiences in Riverdale that were predominantly LGBTQ

Primary researcher: Lauren Jensen, M.A. is a doctoral student in the counseling psychology program in the Department of Psychology. Her research study is looking at the ways in which our expectations of others are communicated within LGBTQ communities.

When: Date

What: Focus group discussion

Time required: 2 hours

Compensation: Refreshments will be provided during the focus group discussion



If you are interested in participating in this research study or would like to learn more, please contact Lauren at:

RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com

[*Specific Human Subjects Committee approval statement.*]

(Note: Active recruitment will end on *date*.)

Appendix B

Radio Recruitment Script

To be read on the radio verbatim:

Volunteers are currently being recruited to participate in a research study consisting of a focus group discussion about experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. The phrase “LGBTQ community” is being used to refer to experiences among individuals on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrums.

The primary researcher, Lauren Jensen, is a doctoral student in the counseling psychology program in the Department of Psychology at Riverdale University. Her research is exploring how people experience expectations or “unwritten rules” that may come up within the LGBTQ community. Lauren also identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community.

To participate in this research study you need to:

- Be 18 years old or older
- Identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context in your life
- Identify with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or have had experiences in Riverdale in places that were predominantly LGBTQ
- Be able to meet in Riverdale for a focus group in [date]
- Feel comfortable discussing your experiences with a group 5-6 other participants

The focus group will last about two hours and refreshments will be provided during the discussion. If you are interested in participating or would like to learn more, you can contact Lauren at RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com.

[The formal Human Subjects Committee approval statement from “Riverdale University” was included at the bottom of this flyer.]

Appendix C

Pre-Screening Interview

Hello _____, my name is Lauren Jensen. I received your name and e-mail address from the e-mail that you sent on (*date*) in response to your interest in participating in my research study.

If the potential participant is a friend of the researcher:

I appreciate your interest in participating in my research study. Unfortunately, you do not qualify to participate in this study because we know each other through (*provide context*) and this could potentially bias the study.

If the potential participant is not a friend of the researcher:

Thank you for expressing an interest in this study. In this study I am using focus groups to explore people's experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale by facilitating a conversation among 5-6 people. I recognize that there is not just "one" LGBTQ community. I am using this term to describe experiences among individuals on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer spectrums.

I also know that the LGBTQ community in this area is small and it is possible that we may know each other. (*Provide context in which I might know the potential research participant*).

Do you have any concerns about participating in this research study given our mutual connection to the LGBTQ community in Riverdale?

I would like to ask you a few questions to determine if you might qualify for this study. You do not have answer any question that you do not feel comfortable responding to. I will also provide you with more information about the study and answer any questions that you might have. This preliminary set of questions should take no more than 15 minutes of your time.

Do I have your permission to continue? Y N

Screening questions:

1. Are you 18 years old or older? Y N

2. Would you be available to meet with a group for two hours during *(two week period in [date])* in Riverdale? Y N

3. Do you identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context of your life? Y N

4. Do you identify with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale? Y N
OR
Have had experiences in Riverdale in places that were Y N

predominantly LGBTQ? Y N

5. Would you be interested in discussing your personal experiences in the LGBTQ community with a group of 5-6 other community members? Y N
6. Would you feel comfortable hearing about other people's personal experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale? Y N

Response if potential participants respond “no” to any of the six questions:

Thank you for answering my questions today. I appreciate your interest in the study and willingness to talk with me. Unfortunately, you do not qualify to participate in this study because _____.

Response if potential participants respond “yes” to all of the six questions:

Thank you for answering my questions today. I appreciate your interest in the study and willingness to talk with me. You do qualify to participate in this study.

I would like to give you a little more information about this study. Sometimes we pick up on cues or guidelines within a particular social group that give us information about how we are expected to present ourselves to others. These cues may be related to things like thoughts, feelings, or particular behaviors. This study is exploring how people *experience* expectations or “unwritten rules” that may come up within the LGBTQ community.

In addition to me, there will be a silent process observer present during the focus group. This person will be acting as a research assistant and they will take notes about themes that emerge in the discussion. It may also be helpful to know that I identify as a member of the LGBTQ community. The process observer and the research supervisor for this study both identify as allies to the LGBTQ community.

The focus group discussion is going to be audio taped with a digital recorder so that it can later be transcribed. Direct quotes from the discussion will also be used to help present the results of this study, but your real name would never be connected to these quotes. If you choose to, you will have an opportunity to review your quotes during the data analysis process. Pseudonyms (i.e., fake names) will be used instead of your real name and I will attempt to remove identifying information from the analyses and the content of the group discussion.

I also wanted to bring up the topic of confidentiality. I will treat the focus group discussion as confidential. Although other discussion group members will be encouraged to keep the content of the conversation confidential, I cannot guarantee that your confidentiality will be maintained by the other group participants. If you would like to, you can use a pseudonym during the focus group discussion.

What questions can answer for you about the nature of this study?

Are you interested in participating? Y N

The date of the focus group will be (*date*) and located at (*location*). You can get there by (*directions*).

If the time of the focus group needed to change would you be available to meet at a different day and time that week? Y N _____ If yes, when might you be available.

Light refreshments will also be provided for you during the focus group discussion.
Do you have any dietary restrictions that would be helpful for me to know about? Y N
If yes, what are they?

I will contact you one day prior to the focus group to remind you of the date, time, and location and to answer any remaining questions that you might have.

May I contact you at this number? Y N

I would like to send you a copy of the informed consent form so that you will have more time to review it. If you decide you would like to participate, you will be asked to sign this form when you arrive to the focus group.

Would you prefer that I send this to you by email or regular mail?

If you have any questions regarding this study, please call me at (###) ###-#### or e-mail me at **RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com**.

[Contact information for the *Human Subjects Committee at "Riverdale University."*]

Appendix D

Cover Letter: Informed Consent Form

To: Participant's name

From: Lauren Jensen

Subject: Follow-up regarding research study on experiences within the LGBTQ community

Date:

Hello, _____.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. I am sending this letter as follow up to our phone conversation on (*date*). Attached is the informed **consent form** for this study. An additional copy of this form will be provided to you on the date of the focus group. The attached copy is for your own record and for you to review before we meet. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a copy of this form when the focus group meets.

The discussion questions for this research study will focus on **how you experience expectations or “unwritten rules” that may come up within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale**. This might relate to more or less obvious cues or guidelines about how to present yourself to others within the community (e.g., thoughts, feelings, or particular behaviors).

My hope is that the focus group discussion will feel more like a **conversation** and less like an interview. I will encourage you and the other participants to talk with each other rather than directing your response to me in particular. This means that we may not get to every question.

The focus group will be held on (***date and time***) at (***location***). You will be joined by 4-5 other participants, a research assistant, and me. I will contact you the day before we meet as a reminder. Light refreshments will also be provided for you during the focus group discussion.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please call me at (###) ###-#### or e-mail me at **RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com**.

Again, thank you for your interest. I appreciate your contribution to this project and I will see you on (*date*).

Sincerely,

Lauren L. Jensen, M.A.
Counseling Psychology
Department of Psychology

[The formal Human Subjects Committee approval statement from “Riverdale University” was included at the end of this letter.]

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to understand how people experience expectations or guidelines that may come up in social interactions within the LGBTQ community. This might relate to implicit and explicit cues or guidelines about how to present oneself to others (e.g., thoughts, feelings, or particular behaviors). An additional component of this study is about the ways in which expectations within the LGBTQ community are sometimes connected to expectations about one's gender identity, expression, and embodiment (e.g., gender stereotypes).

The researchers:

The principal investigator for this study, Lauren Jensen, M.A., is a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at Riverdale University. Lauren identifies as queer and a member of the LGBTQ community. A silent process observer will also be present during the focus group interview. This person will be acting as research assistant. The assistant is a graduate student at Riverdale University and identifies as an ally to the LGBTQ community. The role of the process observer is to take notes during the interview about themes that emerge during the discussion and to assist with the data analysis process, rather than taking part in the conversation itself. In addition, Dr. Ann R. Fischer will be supervising this study. She is a faculty member in the Department of Psychology and identifies as an ally to the LGBTQ community.

Inclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria for this study include: (a) be 18 years old or older, (b) available to meet in Riverdale, (c) identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context in your life, (d) identify with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale or have had experiences in Riverdale in places that were predominantly LGBTQ, and (e) be interested in discussing your experiences in a group setting.

What you will be asked to do in this study:

You are being asked to participate in a focus group discussion to talk about your experiences within the LGBTQ community. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to gather for a group discussion with between 5 and 6 other people who identify on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer spectrum(s) in at least one context in their life. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. After the group discussion is over you will be asked to complete a follow up questionnaire. This will have questions about your demographic information (age, ethnic identity, gender identity, etc.) and about your experience in the focus group. All of these questions are optional, and you will be asked to respond to the questions that you feel comfortable answering. Demographic information will be used to describe those who participate in the focus group discussion. This information will be attached to a pseudonym (a fake name, made up to protect your identity) in the final document.

Recording:

The discussion will be audio taped with a digital recorder in order to maintain the integrity of the focus group discussion. The recording of the discussion will later be transcribed by the researcher and possibly a professional transcriber who has been trained in confidentiality.

The primary researcher, the faculty supervisor, and possibly a professional transcriber are the only people who will have access to the recording. A professional transcriber would only have access to the audio recording while the discussion is being transcribed. The digital audio recordings and the transcript will be stored on a password-protected computer, and the files themselves will also be password protected. Pseudonyms will be used instead of your real name and the researcher will attempt to remove identifying information from the analyses and the content of the group discussion. The digital audio recording for this study will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Member check:

When writing up the results, the researcher may use some of your direct quotes from the conversation. You will have an opportunity to review your quotes during the data analysis process before the study is complete. This is known as a “member check.” If you choose to participate in a member check you will have the option to do this by mail, email, or over the phone based on whichever form is most convenient for you. There is also a possibility that the researcher will ask to do a brief follow up interview with you. A follow up interview and a member check are optional.

Time required:

The total time of the focus group will be about 120 minutes (2 hours) including the discussion and the follow up questionnaire. The time required to do an optional “member check” (to review your quotes from the interview) will vary. It may take anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours. The total time of an optional follow-up interview would be 20 – 30 minutes. You will also be invited to e-mail the researcher after the focus group if any thoughts come up for you that feel important to share with the researcher. E-mailing the researcher after the focus group to share additional thoughts is not expected or required.

Confidentiality:

All of your personal information will be kept confidential. The researchers will also treat the focus group discussion and any follow-up communication as confidential. There are certain limits to this confidentiality. If information comes up in the conversation that suggests that you may become a danger to yourself and/or others (i.e., suicide or homicide) this may necessitate the breaking of confidentiality. In addition, the researcher must report any suspected abuse and/or neglect of a child or an elderly person if this comes up in the focus group discussion and/or follow up communication.

It is important to note that confidentiality is not the same as anonymity. Anonymity applies only when participants’ identities cannot be known. Your identity will be known to the researcher, process observer, and possibly the faculty supervisor for this study. All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. The real names of participants will not be used. Since a focus group involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussion that occurs

during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure.

To protect your confidentiality, identifying information will be removed from the transcriptions. Demographic information from a follow-up questionnaire will be used to present the background characteristics of those in the focus group discussions. All of these questions are optional. The digital audio recordings and transcript will be stored on a password-protected computer, and the files themselves will also be password protected. Similarly, your informed consent forms will be stored separately from any other study materials and will be kept in a locked file. As stated earlier, the digital audio recording for this study will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Risks and Benefits:

You may find that some of the questions and group discussion are of a personal nature. You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. In addition, you may opt out of the study at any point. Participation is voluntary. It is very likely that everyone will not agree on topics during the conversation and that different participants will have different opinions. This may have the potential to leave you feeling uncomfortable. During the discussion the researcher will encourage everyone to share their experiences and remind group members that everyone's perspective is valued. If you feel as though you might need any additional support following the focus group session, the researcher will refer you to available resources. Another potential risk is the limit to confidentiality. As stated earlier, the researcher will ask that other discussion group members treat the focus group meeting as confidential, but other group members' behavior cannot be guaranteed. As a result, it is possible that someone in the group could disclose your identity to someone outside of the group. This could mean the potential of disclosing your connection to the LGBTQ community to someone you are not "out" to.

There are no guaranteed direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this research study. However, potential benefits include engaging in a conversation about behaviors within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale that might increase insight into your own experiences. Ultimately, your participation has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of how LGBTQ communities are formed and maintained.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating. You are also free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the study at any time without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

If you have additional concerns about participating in this study, you may contact the principal investigator, Lauren Jensen, M.A., at [contact information].

In addition, Dr. Ann R. Fischer is a faculty member in the Department of Psychology and is supervising this study. She can be reached at [contact information].

Agreement:

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study and know my responses will be audio recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

"I agree ____ I disagree ____ to have my responses audio recorded."

"I agree ____ I disagree ____ that Lauren Jensen, M.A. may anonymously quote me in her paper."

Participant's Name	Signature	Date
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[The formal Human Subjects Committee approval statement from "Riverdale University" was included at the bottom of this form.]

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Note: The content of the protocol and questions was adjusted based on the content and dynamics of the focus group discussions. All four of the broad, primary questions were used in both focus group one and focus group two. The wrap-up questions and some of the probes were also used in both focus group one and focus group two. Only question four from the secondary questions was used in the first focus group. None of the other supplemental questions or primes were needed.

Opening Script

Thank you for being here today. To formally introduce myself, my name is Lauren. I am a graduate student. This focus group is part of a research study about experiences within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. In order to be transparent about my own identity, I identify as queer and a member of the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. The faculty supervisor for this study, Dr. Ann Fischer, identifies as an ally to the LGBTQ community.

[Process observer's name] is also here with us today as a research assistant. (*Allow the process observer to introduce themselves and their connection to the LGBTQ community*). [Process observer's name] will be acting as a process observer. What that means is that she will be completely silent and taking notes throughout the discussion today.

Before we begin and before I start the recorder, I would like to discuss confidentiality. I will treat this discussion in a confidential matter, taking care to protect your identities by using pseudonyms and removing any identifying information about you when analyzing and writing up the results for this study. After this discussion is over, the audio recording will be transcribed, verbatim, by myself and possibly a professional transcriber who has been trained in confidentiality. The faculty supervisor, myself, and possibly a professional transcriber are the only people who will have access to the recording. I also want to ask that you, as participants, honor the confidentiality of your fellow group members by not identifying others in this group to anyone not participating today. The process observer has agreed to this confidentiality as well.

What questions can I answer about confidentiality? (*pause for questions*).

In our discussion today, I am going to ask you about interactions you have observed and experienced within the LGBTQ community in Riverdale. I recognize that there is not just “one” LGBTQ community. I am using this term to describe experiences among individuals on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer spectrums. There are many different constellations that could represent what your community looks like at different times and in different situations. For some, community might be experienced in large groups, for others it might occur in one on one interactions, and for some it may be both. The ways in which other parts of your identity factor into your experience, such as your race, nationality, age, religion, etc. are also important to this study. You are invited to talk about any part of your

identity that feels important during today's discussion. Just think about your own experiences and the things that come to mind. There are no "right" or "wrong" responses. I also hope to hear from everyone. Everyone's perspective is valued. I encourage you to share your experience even if it seems like someone else has already said something similar to what you would say or if you have something different to contribute. It is likely that there will be multiple perspectives shared in this discussion.

I understand that some of these things that come up in the conversation may be difficult to talk about in a group. At the end of this discussion I will be distributing a follow-up questionnaire. There will be space on this questionnaire for you to talk about your experience in writing.

Finally, I encourage you to talk to each other. This process might bring up more ideas for you. Today's discussion should feel more like a conversation rather than an interview. I will ask questions that will help to focus the discussion today but most of the talking will come from all of you. So even when I ask a question, it would be helpful if you could mostly talk with each other, rather than directing your comments towards me.

What questions can I answer about the discussion today?

I am going to distribute the informed consent form. This is the same form that you were sent before today. Each of you will receive two copies of this form. Please sign both copies and return one to me. After collecting these forms I will start the recorder and we will get started.

(Distribute consent forms and verbally review the key points of the consent.)

Questions

Opening question:

1. At this time I would like you to go around and state your first name and one thing you enjoyed doing over the past week. [*This is just an ice-breaker that I do want everyone to respond to.*]

Introduction to the primary questions:

Sometimes we pick up on cues or guidelines within a particular social group for how to act, how to dress, or certain beliefs (e.g., like a night club with a particular dress code). They give us information about how we are expected to present ourselves to others. These may be explicit guidelines or implicit cues. Sometimes we respond to these cues and sometimes we are aware of them but do not respond to or follow them. Part of this study is exploring some of the flexible and less flexible guidelines or "unwritten rules" that may come up within the LGBTQ community.

Broad, primary questions:

I would like you to take a moment to silently think about some of the subtle or implied **cues, guidelines or rules** that you have noticed or picked up on in the LGBTQ community that are associated with what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. These might be things like stereotypes, labels, jokes or assumptions that you have heard from within the LGBTQ community.

1. How have these **cues, guidelines, or rules** from within LGBTQ community influenced the way you see yourself and how you present yourself to others within the LGBTQ community?
2. Can you think of a time when it felt like you needed to **change or adjust** the way you present yourself in order to “fit in” with the LGBTQ community?
 - **Clarification:** These might be things like facial expressions, the way you walk, how you act, how you talk, what you wear, what you think, the way you attract romantic partners, etc.
3. What kind of feedback or responses have you gotten in the LGBTQ community that has felt **helpful** or **supportive** in terms of how you present yourself to others within the LGBTQ community?
4. What kind of feedback or responses have you gotten in the LGBTQ community that has felt **upsetting**, **embarrassing**, or **judgmental** in terms of how you present yourself to others within the LGBTQ community?

More focused, secondary questions, as needed:

1. Were there any expectations or rules about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer that you learned over time, but you wish you had known from the beginning?
2. Can you think of a time when you did not follow or meet the expected guidelines or rules from within the LGBTQ community?
3. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you felt as if you had to warn someone that their behavior might get some negative reactions from others within the LGBTQ community?
4. Are there certain ways of acting that have more value within the LGBTQ community?

Questions specific to gender, if needed:

1. Can you think of a time when you got the message from someone in the LGBTQ community that the way you were expressing or presenting your gender (e.g., something you were wearing, something you were doing, the style of your hair, the person you were dating) did not match what was expected of you?
2. Can you think of a time when you received the feedback from someone within the LGBTQ community that you were not feminine, femme, masculine, or butch **enough**? What about being **too** feminine, femme, masculine, or butch?

Possible primes or examples, if needed:

- ***Gay man prime:*** Is there any pressure for gay men to act a certain way (e.g., more butch)?
- ***Lesbian Prime:*** Do women who are attracted to butch, or more masculine appearing, women need to look and act a certain way?
- ***Lesbian Prime:*** Have you ever heard messages such as, “There are enough lesbians with short hair, you don’t need to be another one.” or “Just because you’re a lesbian doesn’t mean you have to look like a boy.” or “You’re too pretty to be butch”?
- ***Transgender example:*** A gay man warning another gay man that the guy he is attracted to is transgender and therefore not a “full” man and warning him not to be fooled.

Wrap-up Questions:

1. These are some of the themes that have come up in the conversation... [short 1-2 min. summary]. (*Brief pause for comments.*)
2. What are some of the themes that you noticed in the conversation?

Possible follow-ups, probes & clarifying questions:

- What happened?
- What did you do?
- Has this ever happened/ did this happen in Riverdale?
- How would you describe your feelings in response to that?
- How would you describe your thoughts in response to that?

- It sounds like the consequence of doing [*or not doing*] X was Y.
- Have others had similar experiences?
- Have others had different experiences?
- What impact, if at all, did these experience(s) have on how you feel about the LGBTQ community?
- How, if at all, did other parts of their/your identity factor in, such as their/your race, gender identity, age?
- Remember that there are no “right” or “wrong” responses.
- I am interested in hearing everyone’s perspective.

Post-Interview Script

At this time I will distribute the follow up questionnaire. This questionnaire will complete the focus group today and you may leave as soon as you are finished. Please note that all of these questions are optional. Answer the questions that you feel comfortable answering. If you are interested in being contacted during the data analysis process to review your quotes being used, you can let me know on this questionnaire.

If there is something that comes up for you after leaving today that feels important for me to know you can e-mail me at RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com. In your e-mail you can also let me know whether or not it is something that you would like to be included in this research study as data.

Thank you for your time today. I greatly appreciate your contribution to this project.

(Distribute follow-up questionnaire.)

Appendix G

Follow-up Questionnaire

Directions: Please respond only to the questions that you feel comfortable answering. If you have additional thoughts that come up after leaving today that feel important to share with the researcher you can e-mail Lauren at RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com. You can also indicate in your e-mail whether or not it is something that you would like to be included in this research study as data.

1. **What is your age?** _____
2. **How do you define your gender identity?** _____
A. For about how long have you understood yourself this way? _____
B. Do you identify differently in different settings or contexts? _____

If yes, how so? _____

Additional comments (optional):

3. **How do you define your sexual identity?** _____
A. For about how long have you understood yourself this way? _____
B. Do you identify differently in different settings or contexts? _____

If yes, how so? _____

Additional comments (optional):

4. **How do you define your ethnicity?** _____
A. Do you identify differently in different settings or contexts? _____
If yes, how so? _____

Additional comments (optional)

5. How do you define your nationality? _____

Additional comments (optional):

6. How would you title the work that you do? (paid or unpaid) _____

Additional comments (optional):

7. How would you describe your economic or social class? _____

Additional comments (optional):

8. For about how long have you identified with the LGBTQ community? _____

And with the LGBTQ community in Riverdale specifically? _____

Additional comments (optional):

9. Would you be willing to be contacted after the focus group to review your quotes being used for this study? **Y N**

Would you be willing to be contacted after the focus group for a potential follow-up interview? **Y N**

If you answered “yes” to either question, please provide **at least two** ways in which I will be able to contact you.

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Complete mailing address: _____

Note: Please place a star (*) next to the best way to get in touch with you.

10. Is there any information you feel comfortable sharing with the researcher that may be relevant to you and/or your experience in the LGBTQ community in Riverdale?

The following questions are specifically related to your experience during the focus group discussion today.

1. What was the group discussion like for you today?

2. Are there certain things you were unable to share in the group but maybe wanted to? **Y N**

If you feel comfortable sharing now, what didn't you say but maybe wanted to?

If you feel comfortable sharing now, what kept you from sharing this in the group?

3. Is there anything else that you would like to share with the researcher about your experience in the focus group discussion today?

Appendix H

Cover Letter: "Member Check" Instructions

To: [Participant's name]

From: Lauren Jensen

Subject: "Member check" regarding study on experiences within the LGBTQ community

Date:

Hello, _____.

I am sending you this letter as a follow up to a focus group that you were a part of on (*date*). Thank you again for your participation in this research.

At the end of the interview you indicated that you would be interested in reviewing your direct quotes from the discussion. This process in research is known as a "member check."

The purpose of a member check is to help ensure that I am representing your perspective accurately. Attached is a list of your quotes from the focus group. I have also included the emerging theme(s) from the preliminary data analysis that I believe relates to your quote(s). Remember that pseudonyms, rather than real names, will be used in this study.

It may be helpful to know that conversations from the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. This means that the exact wording and breaks (such as pauses and little words like "uh-huh") were included. We do not commonly read transcripts of our direct conversation and participants can sometimes experience a range of feelings in response to reading their quotes. It is normal for it to feel a little weird when reading your spoken words in print.

If you would like to provide me with feedback about your quotes and your contribution to this study please review the attached document and send me your feedback by (*2 weeks from the date being sent*). You can send it to me at RiverdaleFocusGroup@gmail.com or, if you would prefer, we can set up a time to talk over the phone. If you would prefer to provide your feedback over the phone please call me at (###) ###-#### to set up a time to talk.

As you read through your quotes, please think about the following questions:

1. Are you comfortable with me using this quote?
2. Are there any changes you would like to make to your wording that wouldn't change the main ideas?
3. Are there any comments that you would like to share about what you were saying or communicating in this quote?
4. Does the associated theme fit with what you were saying?
5. Is there another theme or better wording that would capture what you were saying?

Again, thank you for participation and continued contribution to this project.

Sincerely,

Lauren L. Jensen, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling Psychology

[The formal Human Subjects Committee approval statement from "Riverdale University" was included at the bottom of this letter.]

Appendix I

Glossary of Terms

The following terms help to provide understanding of some of the language used in this document. The definitions for these terms are copied, verbatim, from the University of Southern California, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center. The list can be found at: (<http://sait.usc.edu/lgbt/files/LGBT%20Terminology.pdf>)

LGBTQI Terminology

A note about these definitions: *Each of these definitions has been carefully researched and closely analyzed from theoretical and practical perspectives for cultural sensitivity, common usage, and general appropriateness. We have done our best to represent the most popular uses of the terms listed; however there may be some variation in definitions depending on location. Please note that each person who uses any or all of these terms does so in a unique way (especially terms that are used in the context of an identity label). If you do not understand the context in which a person is using one of these terms, it is always appropriate to ask. This is especially recommended when using terms that we have noted that can have a derogatory connotation.*

Ag / Aggressive - See ‘Stud.’

Agendered – Person is internally ungendered.

Ally – Someone who confronts heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexual and genderstraight privilege in themselves and others; a concern for the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people; and a belief that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are social justice issues.

Androgynie – Person appearing and/or identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

Asexual – Person who is not sexually attracted to anyone or does not have a sexual orientation.

BDSM: (Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, and Masochism) The terms ‘submission/sadism’ and ‘masochism’ refer to deriving pleasure from inflicting or receiving pain, often in a sexual context. The terms ‘bondage’ and ‘domination’ refer to playing with various power roles, in both sexual and social context. These practices are often misunderstood as abusive, but when practiced in a safe, sane, and consensual manner can be a part of healthy sex life. (Sometimes referred to as ‘leather.’)

Bear - The most common definition of a ‘bear’ is a man who has facial/body hair, and a cuddly body. However, the word ‘bear’ means many things to different people, even within the bear movement. Many men who do not have one or all of these characteristics define themselves as bears, making the term a very loose one. ‘Bear’ is often defined as more of an attitude and a sense of comfort with natural masculinity and bodies.

Bigendered - A person whose gender identity is a combination of male/man and female/woman.

Binding – The process of flattening one’s breasts to have a more masculine or flat appearing chest.

Biphobia - The fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of bisexuals, which is often times related to the current binary standard. Biphobia can be seen within the LGBTQI community, as well as in general society.

Bisexual – A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

Bottom - A person who is said to take a more submissive role during sexual interactions. Sometimes referred to as ‘pasivo’ in Latin American cultures. Also known as ‘Catcher.’ (See also ‘Top’.)

Bottom Surgery – Surgery on the genitals designed to create a body in harmony with a person’s preferred gender expression.

Butch – A person who identifies themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. ‘Butch’ is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but it can also be claimed as an affirmative identity label.

Catcher – See ‘Bottom.’ This term may be considered offensive by some people.

Cisgender – [One’s gender identity, expression, and embodiment aligning with their sex assigned at birth.]

Coming Out – May refer to the process by which one accepts one’s own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersex person (to “come out” to oneself). May also refer to the process by which one shares one’s sexuality, gender identity, or intersex status with others (to “come out” to friends, etc.). This can be a continual, life-long process for homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and intersex individuals.

Cross-dresser – Someone who wears clothes of another gender/sex.

D&D – An abbreviation for drug and disease free.

Discrimination – Prejudice + power. It occurs when members of a more powerful social group behave unjustly or cruelly to members of a less powerful social group. Discrimination can take many forms, including both individual acts of hatred or injustice and institutional denials of privileges normally accorded to other groups. Ongoing discrimination creates a climate of oppression for the affected group.

Down Low - See ‘In the Closet.’ Also referred to as ‘D/L.’

Drag - The performance of one or multiple genders theatrically.

Drag King – A person who performs masculinity theatrically.

Drag Queen – A person who performs femininity theatrically.

Dyke – Derogatory term referring to a masculine lesbian. Sometimes adopted affirmatively by

lesbians (not necessarily masculine ones) to refer to themselves.

Fag – Derogatory term referring to someone perceived as non-heteronormative.

Fag Hag – A term primarily used to describe women who prefer the social company of gay men. While this term is claimed in an affirmative manner by some, it is largely regarded as derogatory.

Femme – Feminine identified person of any gender/sex.

FTM / F2M - Abbreviation for female-to-male transgender or transsexual person.

Gay – 1. Term used in some cultural settings to represent males who are attracted to males in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense. Not all men who engage in “homosexual behavior” identify as gay, and as such this label should be used with caution. 2. Term used to refer to the LGBTQI community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual.

Gender Binary – The idea that there are only two genders – male/female or man/woman and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or. (See also ‘Identity Sphere.’)

Gender Confirming Surgery – Medical surgeries used to modify one’s body to be more congruent with one’s gender identity. See “Sex Reassignment Surgery.”

Gender Cues – What human beings use to attempt to tell the gender/sex of another person. Examples include hairstyle, gait, vocal inflection, body shape, facial hair, etc. Cues vary by culture.

Gender Identity – A person’s sense of being masculine, feminine, or other gendered.

Gender Normative – A person who by nature or by choice conforms to gender based expectations of society.

Gender Oppression - The societal, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege cisgender people and subordinate and disparage transgender or gender [non-conforming] people. Also known as “genderism.”

Genderism – see “Gender Oppression.”

Genderfuck – The idea of playing with ‘gender cues’ to purposely confuse “standard” or stereotypical gender expressions, usually through clothing.

Genderqueer – A gender [non-conforming] person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. Often includes a political agenda to challenge gender stereotypes and the gender binary system.

Heteronormativity—The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and bisexuality.

Heterosexism – Prejudice against individuals and groups who display non- heterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the majority power to impose such prejudice. Usually used to the advantage of the group in power. Any attitude, action, or practice – backed by institutional power – that subordinates people because of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual Privilege – Those benefits derived automatically by being heterosexual that are denied to homosexuals and bisexuals. Also, the benefits homosexuals and bisexuals receive as a result of claiming heterosexual identity or denying homosexual or bisexual identity.

HIV-phobia – The irrational fear or hatred of persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Homophobia – The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid sex role stereotypes. It is this fear that enforces sexism as well as heterosexism.

Homosexual – A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

Identity Sphere – The idea that gender identities and expressions do not fit on a linear scale, but rather on a sphere that allows room for all expression without weighting any one expression as better than another.

In the Closet – Refers to a homosexual, bisexual, transperson or intersex person who will not or cannot disclose their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender identity to their friends, family, co-workers, or society. An intersex person may be closeted due to ignorance about their status since standard medical practice is to “correct,” whenever possible, intersex conditions early in childhood and to hide the medical history from the patient. There are varying degrees of being “in the closet”; for example, a person can be out in their social life, but in the closet at work, or with their family. Also known as ‘Downlow’ or ‘D/L.’

Intergender – A person whose gender identity is between genders or a combination of genders.

Institutional Oppression – Arrangements of a society used to benefit one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics, etc.

Internalized Oppression – The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.

Intersex Person—Someone whose sex a doctor has a difficult time categorizing as either male or female. A person whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, gonads, and/or genitals differs from expected patterns [associated with being either male or female].

Leather: See ‘BDSM’.

Lesbian – Term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people. The term lesbian is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos and as such is sometimes considered a Eurocentric category that does not necessarily represent the identities of African-Americans and other non-European ethnic groups. This being said, individual female-identified people from diverse ethnic groups, including African-Americans, embrace the term ‘lesbian’ as an identity label.

Lesbian Baiting – The heterosexist notion that any woman who prefers the company of woman, or who does not have a male partner, is a lesbian.

LGBTQI – A common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex community.

Lipstick Lesbian – Usually refers to a lesbian with a feminine gender expression. Can be used in a positive or a derogatory way, depending on who is using it. Is sometimes also used to refer to a lesbian who is seen as automatically passing for heterosexual.

Male Lesbian—A male-bodied person who identifies as a lesbian. This differs from a heterosexual male in that a male lesbian is primarily attracted to other lesbian, bisexual or queer identified people. May sometimes identify as gender [non-conforming], or as a female/woman. (See ‘Lesbian.’)

Metrosexual - First used in 1994 by British journalist Mark Simpson, who coined the term to refer to an urban, heterosexual male with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. This term can be perceived as derogatory because it reinforces stereotypes that all gay men are fashion-conscious and materialistic.

MTF / M2F – Abbreviation for male-to-female transgender or transsexual person.

Oppression – The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group with access to social power, the result of which benefits one group over the other and is maintained by social beliefs and practices.

Outing – Involuntary disclosure of one’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status.

Packing – Wearing a phallic device on the groin and under clothing for any purposes including: (for someone without a biological penis) the validation or confirmation of one’s masculine gender identity; seduction; and/or sexual readiness (for one who likes to penetrate another during sexual intercourse).

Pangender – A person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions.

Pansexual – A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender expressions.

Passing – Describes a person's ability to be [read] as their [identified] gender/sex or race/ethnic identity or to be seen as [in alignment with the expectations of] heterosexual [or cisgender identities].

Pitcher – See ‘Top.’ This term may be offensive to some people.

Polyamory – Refers to having honest, usually non-possessive, relationships with multiple partners and can include: open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves multiple romantic relationships with sexual contact restricted to those), and sub- relationships (which denote distinguishing between a ‘primary’ relationship or relationships and various “secondary” relationships).

Prejudice – A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members.

Queer – 1. An umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively-heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transpeople, intersex persons, the radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive (underworld) explorers. 2. This term is sometimes used as a sexual orientation label instead of ‘bisexual’ as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to be attracted to, or as a way of stating a non-heterosexual orientation without having to state who they are attracted to. 3. A reclaimed word that was formerly used solely as a slur but that has been semantically overturned by members of the maligned group, who use it as a term of defiant pride. ‘Queer’ is an

example of a word undergoing this process. For decades ‘queer’ was used solely as a derogatory adjective for gays and lesbians, but in the 1980s the term began to be used by gay and lesbian activists as a term of self-identification. Eventually, it came to be used as an umbrella term that included gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. Nevertheless, a sizable percentage of people to whom this term might apply still hold ‘queer’ to be a hateful insult, and its use by heterosexuals is often considered offensive. Similarly, other reclaimed words are usually offensive to the in-group when used by outsiders, so extreme caution must be taken concerning their use when one is not a member of the group.

Same Gender Loving – A term sometimes used by members of the African- American / Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of European descent. The term emerged in the early 1990s with the intention of offering Black women who love women and Black men who love men a voice, a way of identifying and being that resonated with the uniqueness of Black culture in life. (Sometimes abbreviated as ‘SGL’.)

Sex - A medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Because usually subdivided into ‘male’ and ‘female’, this category does not recognize the existence of intersex bodies.

Sex Identity – How a person identifies physically: female, male, in between, beyond, or neither.

Sexual Orientation – The desire for intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships with people of the same gender/sex, another gender/sex, or multiple genders/sexes.

Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS) – A term used by some medical professionals to refer to a group of surgical options that alter a person’s “sex”. In most states, one or multiple surgeries are required to achieve legal recognition of gender variance. Also known as “Gender Confirming Surgery.”

Sexuality – A person’s exploration of sexual acts, sexual orientation, sexual pleasure, and desire.

Stealth – This term refers to when a person chooses to be secretive in the public sphere about their gender history, either after transitioning or while successful passing. (Also referred to as ‘going stealth’ or ‘living in stealth mode’.)

Stem – A person whose gender expression falls somewhere between a stud and a femme. (See also ‘Femme’ and ‘Stud’.)

Stereotype – A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for their individual differences. Though often negative, can also be complimentary. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative impact, however, simply because they involve broad generalizations that ignore individual realities.

Stone Butch / Femme– A person who may or may not desire sexual penetration and/or contact with the genitals or breasts. (See also ‘Butch’ and ‘Femme’).

Straight – Another term for heterosexual.

Straight-Acting – A term usually applied to gay men who readily pass as heterosexual. The term implies that there is a certain way that gay men should act that is significantly different from heterosexual men. Straight-acting gay men are often looked down upon in the LGBTQ community for

seemingly accessing heterosexual privilege.

Stud — An African-American and/or Latina masculine lesbian. Also known as ‘butch’ or ‘aggressive’.

Switch – A person who is both a ‘Top’ and a ‘Bottom’, there may or may not be a preference for one or the other.

Top — A person who is said to take a more dominant role during sexual interactions. May also be known as ‘Pitcher.’

Top Surgery - This term usually refers to surgery for the construction of a male- type chest, but may also refer to breast augmentation.

Trans - An abbreviation that is sometimes used to refer to a gender [non-conforming] person. This use allows a person to state a gender [diverse] identity without having to disclose hormonal or surgical status/intentions. This term is sometimes used to refer to the gender [diverse] community as a whole.

Transactivism- The political and social movement to create equality for gender [non-conforming] persons.

Transgender – A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.

Transgender (Trans) Community – A loose category of people who transcend gender norms in a wide variety of ways. The central ethic of this community is unconditional acceptance of individual exercise of freedoms including gender and sexual identity and orientation.

Transhate – The irrational hatred of those who are gender [non-conforming], usually expressed through violent and often deadly means.

Tranny Chaser - A term primarily used to describe people who prefer or actively seek transpeople for sexual or romantic relations. While this term is claimed in an affirmative manner by some, it is largely regarded as derogatory.

Transition – This term is primarily used to refer to the process a gender [non-conforming] person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

Transman—An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as females. Also referred to as ‘transguy(s).’

Transphobia – The irrational fear of those who are gender [non-conforming] and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity.

Transsexual – A person who identifies psychologically as a gender/sex other than the one to which they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals often wish to transform their bodies hormonally and surgically to match their inner sense of gender/sex.

Transvestite – Someone who dresses in clothing generally identified with the opposite gender/sex.

While the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘transvestite’ have been used synonymously, they are in fact signify two different groups. The majority of transvestites are heterosexual males who derive pleasure from dressing in “women’s clothing”. (The preferred term is ‘cross-dresser,’ but the term ‘transvestite’ is still used in a positive sense in England.)

Transwoman-- An identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female transsexuals to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as males.

Ze / Hir – Alternate pronouns that are gender neutral and preferred by some gender [non-conforming] persons. Pronounced /zee/ and /here,/ they replace “he”/”she” and “his”/”hers” respectively.

Reference note: This terminology sheet was created by Eli R. Green (eli@trans-academics.org) and Eric N. Peterson at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside (2003-2004 , with additional input from www.wikipedia.org and many kind people who helped use create and revise these definitions. This sheet is always a work in progress so please be sure to check the Instructional Materials section of Trans-Academics.org for updated versions. Please feel free to alter, use or pass on as needed but be sure to give credit to the original creators. Any updates or corrections can be submitted to eli@trans-academics.org. Thank you.

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Experiences of gender policing within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community

Major Professor: Ann Fischer, Ph.D.