

AKERS, WHITNEY, Ph.D. Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships: The Impact of The "Closet" on Connection. (2017)

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By virtue of living in an inherently heterosexist/heteronormative and cisgenderist/cisnormative society (Bornstein, 1998; Infanti, 2016; Rich, 1980), lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer (LGBTQ) individuals must deal with outness, the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual (Bradford et al., 1997) or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not identify as cisgender (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014). As an inevitable component of identity formation to those who do not identify with the heterosexual or cisgender societal norm, one's level of outness is likely to shift and change based on environment, social location, and surrounding influences, whether they be people, social groups, legal structures, or matters of safety (Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015).

Relatedly, as common as the experience of outness may be, little is known about the influence of outness on same-gender romantic relationships, specifically in the arena of relationship satisfaction (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Although some researchers have found increased levels of outness to positively correlate with relationship satisfaction (Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000), others have found no relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005).

Thus, through use of a photovoice methodology, the purpose of this study was to (a) gain depth in understanding the experience of outness in various social arenas among

people in same-gender intimate relationships as it relates to relationship satisfaction within their relationship; (b) understand themes in the meanings that participants ascribe to visual depictions of outness in various settings (i.e., familial, social, religious, legal, work, etc.); and (c) support participants in engaging with policymakers through community advocacy efforts presenting findings in whatever ways the participants see fit. Participants who are engaged in same-gender romantic relationships took photographs depicting their experiences of outness as they relate to relationship satisfaction and provided titles and captions to describe selected photographs. After participants engaged with photographs during a structured focus group, the researcher utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to summarize common themes within the focus group discussion, photographs, and captions and provided counselors, counselor educators, supervisors, and researchers increased insight and depth into the role of outness regarding relationship satisfaction in same-gender romantic relationships.

INDIVIDUALS IN SAME-GENDER COUPLES' EXPERIENCES OF OUTNESS IN  
ADULT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: THE IMPACT OF THE  
"CLOSET" ON CONNECTION

by

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Approved by

---

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For my beautiful comrades on this journey toward solidarity, radical love, and revolution—those with whom I have shared space, time, and heart, and those who I have not yet had the honor of working beside.

APPROVAL PAGE

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Audre Lorde stated, “The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot” (1984, p. 98). Spoken in an interview with Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde describes the learning process as a profoundly powerful and empowering experience. The riot within a person or group thirsting for knowledge can be tumultuous, change-inducing, and provocative. While the word “riot” implies a degree of incendiarism, I see this riot not as destructive, but as a constructive challenge toward growth, nourishment, and wholeness; incendiary in the way the fire of knowledge acquisition continuously undergoes the processes of generation, examination, deconstruction, and rich regeneration. Throughout my life, my many teachers and guides have facilitated my entrance into this riotous journey of learning and facilitated my finding of and connection to my empowerment and voice.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals confront barriers in individual, familial, social, career, medical, political, spiritual, and global contexts based on their identities. One barrier, heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuality is the cultural and social norm, leads to systemic granting of privilege to heterosexuals and the simultaneous oppression and marginalization of LGBTQ people (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009; Pharr, 1997).

Further, the number of LGBTQ people potentially affected by heterosexism is substantial. In a 2013 survey, researchers for the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) surveyed 34,557 adults in the United States and found that 1.6% (3,729 out of 34,557) of the sample identified as lesbian or gay, .7% (1,514 out of 34,557) identified as bisexual, and 1.1% (1,153 out of 34,557) identified as “something else,” but non-straight (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014). Though it has been difficult to calculate the number of trans individuals in the United States, due to a historical lack of empirical inquiry, researchers have estimated that .3% or 700,000 adults in the United States identify as trans (Chalabi, 2014). Summing these numbers of LGBTQ people in comparison to the total U.S. population of 318,881,992 (United States Census Bureau, 2014), it is possible that more than 11.5 million adults living in the United States identify as LGBTQ. These statistics only apply to *adults* who identify as LGBTQ,

offering little insight into the percentage of children and adolescents who identify as LGBTQ, estimated in one study as 15.1% of the population (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). What seems clear from these estimates, however, is that a substantive number of LGBTQ people of all ages have experienced histories of oppression and continue to experience current discrimination and marginalization in personal, legal, social, and even mental health contexts (King et al., 2003; Lev, 2005; Lingardi, Nardelli, & Tripodi, 2015).

Many researchers have found that LGBTQ individuals are likely to seek counseling at a higher rate than heterosexual or cisgender populations (Bieschke, McClanahan, Tozer, Grzegorek, & Park, 2000; Cochran, Mays, & Sullivan, 2003; Morgan, 1992), potentially due to identified mental and emotional effects of multilevel discrimination against and oppression of LGBTQ individuals. Presenting issues include increased experiences of depression (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 1999), shame (Greene, Britton, & Fitts, 2014; Hequembourg & Dearing, 2013; Mereish & Poteat, 2015; Wells & Hansen, 2003), anxiety (Herek et al., 1999), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Herek et al., 1999; Szymanski & Balsam, 2011), and overall psychological distress (Herek et al., 1999; Mays & Cochran, 2001). Even when seeking help from mental health professionals, however, LGBTQ individuals have experienced systems of inequity, discrimination, and, in some instances, abuse. Historically, diagnosis and assessment within the mental health field has closely aligned with and been based around cultural norms (Lev, 2005). For example, the inclusion of *Homosexuality* in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual-I (DSM-I) in 1952 is evidence of the relationship between social

constructs and the medicalization of identities. This sexual orientation identity remained pathologized until its removal from the DSM-II in 1973, effectively and erroneously labeling a group of people as “mentally ill” for a period of 21 years (Baruth & Manning, 2007). Though it is understandable that the constructs of assessment and diagnosis emerge out of normed social samples, this process of categorization and comparison is problematic when the norms exist within an inherently hierarchical, heteronormative, and cisnormative society, thus yielding diagnoses regarding sexual orientation and gender identity that are fundamentally flawed and biased by value-laden societal structures. Social and political awareness of variation in sexuality and gender identity has increased over time; however, the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) surfaced in the DSM-III, remained in the DSM-IV, and now appears as “Gender Dysphoria” in the recently-released DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

This pathologization of identities emerges from a medical field modeled after and existing within a heterosexist society, often leading to shaming of individuals who identify with these pathologized identities. Morrison (1996) defined shame as a sense of globalized unworthiness of love from others and/or the self. Results of such shaming can include feelings of depression, internalized defectiveness, weakness, incompetence, dirtiness, despair, disgrace, apathy, mortification, low self-esteem (Morrison, 1996) and lack of identity pride (Wells & Hanson, 2003).

Societal binaries of power and oppression reinforce the marginalization of LGBTQ individuals and support heterosexism and an additional systemic assumption, cisgenderism. Cisgenderism is defined by Ansara and Hegarty (2012) as a “prejudicial

ideology” (p. 141) that assumes cisgender identity to be the ideal, desired norm and systemically disempowers transgender and gender variant individuals through institutionalized social, psychological, and medical structures. The presence of discrimination based on one’s sexual orientation and gender identity is evidence of systemic heteronormativity, the societal and institutional reinforcement of heterosexuality as the norm and non-heterosexuality as “other,” and cisnormativity, the societal and institutional reinforcement of the gender binary (i.e., male and female/man and woman) as the norm and non-binary gender identity as “other.”

Consequently, heterosexism/heteronormativity and cisgenderism/cisnormativity have led to multi-leveled ostracization of those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender, contributing to people of marginalized sexual and gender identities experiencing violence (Herek, 2009; Pharr, 1997; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010), a lack of protection (Pharr, 1997; Quintana et al., 2010), and a lack of identity visibility (Dermer et al., 2010; Pharr, 1997; Wells & Hansen, 2003). Accordingly, these individuals often experience diminished rights in social (Herek, 2004; Pharr, 1997; Quintana et al., 2010), political (Dermer et al., 2010; Gates, 2010; Lind, 2004; Pharr, 1997), medical (Chance, 2013; Kitts, 2010; Quintana et al., 2010; Sperber, Landers, & Lawrence, 2005), and legal realms (Dermer et al., 2010; Pharr, 1997; Quintana et al., 2010; Stewart, 2014). Repeated encounters with systemic heterosexism and cisgenderism and resulting identity shame can shape an LGBTQ individual’s comfort and safety in disclosing sexual orientation or gender identity to others, also known as coming out (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1997). Identity visibility and the level of visibility to

which a person who identifies as LGBTQ has access, frames the construct of outness—the phenomenon of distinguishing the self as different from the heterosexual and cisgender norm prevalent in a heteronormative and cisnormative society—that LGBTQ people commonly experience in multiple arenas of life.

### **Outness**

By virtue of living in an inherently heterosexist/heteronormative and cisgenderist/cisnormative society (Bornstein, 1998; Infanti, 2016; Rich, 1980), individuals who identify as LGBTQ must deal with outness. Outness is the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual (Bradford et al., 1997) or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not identify as cisgender (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014), and is an inevitable component of identity formation to those who do not identify with the heterosexual or cisgender societal norm. To be “out” is to be open and/or visible in one’s non-heterosexual sexual orientation or one’s non-cisgender gender identity. As Bradford et al. (1997) and Klein, Holtby, Cook, and Travers (2015) found, LGBTQ people can be out to varying degrees, and a person’s degree of outness is likely to shift and change based on their environment, social location, and surrounding influences, whether these influences be people, social groups, legal structures, or matters of safety. For example, a person can be out with friends, but not in their family, work, or spiritual arenas or out to all people, out to no one, or any combination of these possibilities.

A recent example of a heterosexist and cisgenderist legal structure that has the potential to shape one’s experience of outness is North Carolina House Bill 2 (HB2),

officially referred to as “the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act,” passed in North Carolina in March 2016 (Gordon, Price, & Peralta, 2016). This bill not only restricted North Carolina cities from raising the minimum wage, but also eliminated existing legislation and barred the passing of new legislation that would protect LGBTIQ individuals, effectively removing protections against discrimination in public, work, legal, and school arenas (Domonoske, 2016; Gordon et al., 2016; Phillips, 2016). Additionally, HB2 mandated that individuals must use only restrooms and changing spaces that correlate with the assigned sex on their birth certificates, effectively transforming bathrooms into zones for public- and state-enforced violence against trans-identified individuals (Domonoske, 2016; Phillips, 2016). The intersecting components of HB2 removed protections that once gave LGBTQ North Carolinians a sense of safety and security, potentially decreasing the ability to be out, as defenses against heterosexist and cisgenderist oppression no longer exist in this state. Other states, such as Alabama, South Carolina, Washington, and Missouri planned to file similar bills to HB2 in the 2017 legislation cycle (Fidel, 2016). More widely explored, the Movement Advancement Project’s (MAP; 2015) overview of non-discrimination policies of all states in the U.S. revealed that only 20 states had high equality standards for non-discrimination laws, meaning that laws regarding private and public employment, housing, public accommodations, and credit and lending non-discrimination had been implemented and any state religious exemption laws and state laws banning cities and counties from passing non-discrimination legislation were absent. The MAP’s 2015 report also divulged that 19 states had low equality standards, meaning that laws regarding private and public

employment, housing, public accommodations, and credit and lending non-discrimination had not been implemented and state religious exemption laws and state laws banning cities and counties from passing non-discrimination legislation were absent. Finally, 11 states had negative equality standards meaning that laws regarding private and public employment, housing, public accommodations, and credit and lending non-discrimination were absent and state religious exemption laws and state laws banning cities and counties from passing non-discrimination legislation were actively implemented (MAP, 2015). Additionally, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC; 2016), as of 2016, there were 45 active anti-LGBT hate groups and organizations established throughout 23 U.S. states. The widespread presence of anti-LGBT legislation and active anti-LGBT hate groups, paired with the absence of non-discrimination legislation, reveals some of the many national structural barriers to being out about one's LGBTQ identity, especially with consideration to safety in diverse settings.

Knoble and Linville (2012) and Klein et al. (2015) found that outness is a repeated event, recurring within each new interaction and context. Each new interaction or introduction causes an LGBTQ person to determine whether to be out in that context. Navigating this decision can manifest differently based on safety considerations, level of outness in other areas of one's life, and amount of time one has been out in certain arenas (Bradford et al., 1997; Klein et al., 2015).

Often, when an individual who identifies as LGBTQ enters into a relationship, they are faced with an automatic shift in visibility status; alone, an LGBTQ person may be less easily identified or outwardly observable as LGBTQ, but when in public with a

significant other, visibility of their sexual orientation identity is heightened. Some people who identify as LGBTQ are able or choose to avoid coming out when not in relationship with a partner, otherwise known as *passing*, or appearing to be heterosexual by norms established in a heterosexist society. The ability to pass as heterosexual diminishes, however, when entering a relationship that can be visibly read as same-gender. In their phenomenological study, Knoble and Linville (2012) found that entrance into a same-gender relationship intensified the visibility of one's sexual orientation identity and often provided an opportunity for, and sometimes motivated, a non-out partner to come out, with partner support. Thus, beginning a same-gender relationship can incorporate the challenge or promise of navigating a more visibly queer identity, within and outside of the relationship, potentially impacting intra-partner dynamics and relationship closeness and satisfaction.

### **LGBTQ Partnerships**

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that approximately 726,600 same-sex couples share households in the United States (Lewis, Bates, & Streeter, 2015). Considering the historical and current presence of overtly discriminatory legislation as well as other social and potentially covert forms of discrimination, it is likely that the number of same-sex households is higher, as many couples may not accurately disclose their relationship status for fear of retribution.

Though the movement toward same-sex marriage in America began around 1970 (Rothman, 2015), Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage through a Supreme Judicial Court ruling in 2004, a policy change that laid the foundation

for movement toward ameliorating legislative discrimination based on sexual orientation (Lewis, Bates, & Streeter, 2015). Eleven years later, as of March 2015, 37 states had adopted laws granting same-sex couples access to marriage and the rights granted by the institution of marriage (Lewis et al., 2015). Thirteen states still had active bans against same-sex marriage (Lewis et al., 2015), however, reflecting popular opinion of state constituencies and elucidating the continued existence of discriminatory laws. An enormous shift in policy and legislation occurred on June 26, 2015 when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Supreme Court of the United States, 2015) that same-sex marriage is a right for all. Though this ruling granted marriage access to all couples, officials in Mississippi and Louisiana continued to deny this right as long as possible (Gass, 2015), demonstrating ongoing social resistance to equal marriage rights. Until this point, the term *same-sex* has been used to refer to lesbian and gay couples to match the social and political language commonly used to describe issue of marriage equality or legalizing partnerships. From this point forward in this manuscript, however, the term *same-gender* will be used with the aim of introducing language inclusive of bisexual-, trans-, and queer-identified people and partnerships, including but not limited to marriage, thus allowing for increased awareness of diverse sexual and gender identities, problematizing the sex-gender binary and the essentialization of sex, and expanding the scope of the study.

### **Same-Gender Couples and Relationship Satisfaction**

Only a few researchers have identified common components of same-gender relationship satisfaction (Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007)

and attachment in adult same-gender relationships (MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010; Wells & Hansen, 2003). Additionally, little is known about the influence of outness on relationship satisfaction within same-gender couples (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Although some researchers have found increased levels of outness to positively correlate with relationship satisfaction (Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000), others have found no relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). Further, researchers (Jordan & Deluty, 2000) also have found that dissimilarity between partners in level of outness is associated with increased relationship dissatisfaction.

Variant findings in previous research could be due to differences in instrumentation and samples across studies. For example, Beals and Peplau (2001) utilized instrumentation that may not have defined disclosure widely enough, limiting disclosure to the parties of mom, dad, best friend, and supervisor, missing the potential to collect disclosure information about participants being out to siblings, friends, and others in work and spiritual communities. Conversely, Caron and Ulin (1997) included immediate family, extended family, friends, and work relationships in arenas of disclosure, demonstrating the diversity in areas in which researchers have assessed outness. Additionally, due to Todosijevic et al. (2005) limiting their sample to citizens in Vermont, a state in which same-sex civil unions were legal since 2000 (Goodnough, 2009), participant responses could greatly differ from those of individuals living in states in which same-sex civil unions or same-sex marriage was illegal due to different political and social climates. Because Vermont was the first state to allow same-sex civil unions

and the first state to legalize same-sex marriage through legislative action (as opposed to a court ruling, as in Massachusetts in 2004), it is likely that the social and cultural climate of Vermont may have been more conducive to affirming and normalizing same-gender relationships at the time the research was conducted, thus making coming-out less significant of an event for many participants. Thus, a state in which a large percentage of the population and cultural norms support same-gender relationships may contribute to creating a safer space in which more LGBTQ individuals come out individually and in same-gender relationships, regardless of legal backing.

A review of existing literature revealed only one qualitative study on the influence of outness on relationship satisfaction. Knoble and Linville (2012) found that outness had potential to enhance relationship satisfaction based on each partner's satisfaction with the other's level of outness. Additionally, the researchers found themes delineating the characteristics of outness and the impact of entering a same-gender relationship on outness (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Knoble and Linville (2012) did not find direct themes, however, linking outness to relationship satisfaction. The lack of this theme could potentially be due to the participating couples having similar levels of outness and requiring this similarity as a foundation for the relationship, thus leaving little room for examination of how different levels of outness might impact relationship satisfaction (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Furthermore, in Knoble and Linville's (2012) study, the process of conducting conjoint interviews with couple dyads could have potentially limited couples' comfort with voicing discontent with a partner's level of outness due to both partners being present. Interestingly, couples in this study did voice discontent and

relationship dissatisfaction when recalling previous relationships in which outness levels between partners differed (Knoble & Linville, 2012). The lack of diversity in levels of outness in this study and the potential limitation of conjoint interviews leaves room for future research to recruit couples diverse in levels of outness and conduct interviews of individuals to explore the way partners with different outness depict and make sense of their visibility and whether and how this impacts overall relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, in research to date, samples were generally limited to mostly white, high socioeconomic status, largely out individuals, limiting generalizability and transferability (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevic et al., 2005). These sparse studies and limited sample diversity leave much room for diverse same-gender couples to further elaborate on and define experiences of outness as related to their experiences within their relationships and as a couple engaged in their diverse domains of lived experience and community. Also, the lack of research merits further exploration of the construct of outness as it manifests in the lives of same-gender couples, as described in their own words and voices. One approach to capturing this information is through the implementation of feminist research methodologies, such as photovoice. Before describing the photovoice methodology, however, an exploration of Queer Theory and Feminist Theory as theoretical foundations for the proposed study is warranted.

### **Queer Theory**

Utilizing queer theory as a theoretical foundation, the researcher aimed to offer a queered perspective of relationship satisfaction as it is experienced outside of hegemonic

norms of heterosexual relationships. In response to the trend of the majority of research on same-gender relationship satisfaction utilizing constructs normed on heterosexual couples (Boesch, Cerqueira, Safer, & Wright, 2007; Gottman et al., 2003), a lens informed by queer theory works to deconstruct dominant heteronormative narratives of sexuality and relationships by uplifting non-heteronormative voices and discourses (Moon, 2008) and makes possible the exploration of non-heteronormative lived experiences. According to Hodges (2008), queer theory “focuses on the ways in which our most private understanding of who we are, who we desire, who and how we love, of acceptance and rejection, sameness and difference, are shaped, moulded, and regulated by relations of language, power and authority” (p.8). The researcher hoped that participation in this study created a space in which participants could examine the impact of these power and authority influences on their lived experiences and potentially re-story their experiences upon the deconstruction of that power. This aim was informed by Foucault’s (1978) theory of subjectification that investigates the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the self, knowledges, and understanding through engagement with these power structures.

Additionally, through application of Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, participants were invited to depict their experiences of performing their identities and the ways in which they engaged in same-gender romantic relationships through a visual means. In this way, participants engaged with the performative nature of gender (Butler, 1990), but also that of sexuality and outness. Participants communicated their

experiences through visually performing—being out—or not performing—not being out—their sexuality in relationships with romantic partners.

### **Feminist Theory**

Serving as another theoretical foundation for this study, feminist theory provides a lens through which to view and critically engage with lived experiences of oppression, the manifestation of structural and systemic barriers that deny and limit oppressed groups the access to empowerment and resources (Bondy, Nicholas, & Light, 2015). This restriction is to the detriment of oppressed groups, yet simultaneously to the benefit of privileged groups, thus creating a system in which those with the most power maintain this power through enacting privilege, or the unearned benefits and access to empowerment and resources (Frye, 1983). Though feminist theory emerged from the examination of systems of privilege and oppression that benefitted men at the expense of women (Evans, Kincade, Marbley, & Seem, 2005), the application of feminist theory in this study engages with power structures between LGB and heterosexual identities as well as trans and gender non-conforming communities and cisgender communities, deferring to participants engaged in same-gender romantic relationships to define and depict their experiences of outness for themselves and their communities.

Through application of the feminist approach of collaboration (Daly, Costa, & Ross, 2015), participants in same-gender romantic relationships were offered a space in which they could utilize their voices to self-define and present themselves as the experts of their own lived experiences, an act that challenges the norms defined by the larger hegemonic, heterosexist, and cisgenderist society, and one defined by many intersectional

feminist theorists, such as Maria Stewart, as vital to the survival of marginalized populations (1987, as cited in Collins, 2000). Incorporation of a lens of intersectionality emphasizes the impact of the intersection multiple lived experiences within a society constructed by the aforementioned norms (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Bondy, Nicholas, & Light, 2015).

Through encouragement of reflective and reflexive practices, feminist theory also integrates the researcher as an “instrument in the research process [who] is called upon to acknowledge her subjectivities” (Iverson, 2015, p. 179). This study is undergirded by thorough consideration of power differentials between researcher and participant and consistent reflexive practice, examining not only the impact of social identities, but also that of institutional and pragmatic, as opposed to only theoretical, influences, as recommended by Daly, Costa, and Ross (2015). Also, grounded in feminist theory, the photovoice research methodology aimed to meet this goal through disrupting the mind/body dichotomy so often propagated in research and through inviting participants to emotionally engage with the subject matter (Iverson, 2015) and the photographic materials they submit.

### **Photovoice**

Examining the construct of outness, a construct that is defined by levels of visibility (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevic et al, 2005), evokes a need to explore this construct through the power of visual images. Using a photovoice methodology to explore same-gender couples’ experiences of outness at it relates to relationship satisfaction within their

relationships, and in personal, social, and political arenas, offered a tangible perspective that portrayed the humanity and emotion within individualized and group perceptions of how daily lived outness is experienced. Photovoice is a methodology based on feminist principles that transitions the power of self-depiction and self-definition into the hands of people who experience oppression and discrimination, flipping the lens of the dominant society's view in exchange for participants defining the needs, strengths, and aims of their communities (Wang, 1999). Wang (1999) stated the goals of photovoice are "to enable people to (1) record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns; (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs; and (3) to reach policymakers" (p. 185).

Photovoice has been previously used with LGBTQ populations, including LGBTQ youth and their experience of outness (Klein et al., 2015), transgender males and their experiences in accessing health care (Hussey, 2006), Black gay men and lesbians in post-Apartheid South Africa (Grazino's, 2004), non-gay African-American men who have sex with men (Mamary, McCright, & Roe, 2007), and African-American young adult men who have sex with men (Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, & Kipke, 2012).

Additionally, photovoice has successfully been used with other marginalized, stigmatized, and oppressed populations, including homeless adults (Padgett, Smith, Derejko, Henwood, & Tiderington, 2013), Montagnard refugee youth (Rhodes & Rotich, 2014), sex-workers (Cheng, 2013; Desyllas, 2014), exited sex trade workers (Barlow & Hurlock, 2013), survivors of intimate partner violence (Moya, Chávez-Baray, & Martinez, 2014), persons with disabilities and substance abuse (Cordova et al., 2013),

persons of low socio-economic status (Harley, 2015), people with mental health needs (Becker, Reiser, Lambert, & Covello, 2014), people with HIV/AIDS (Hergenrather, Rhodes, & Clark, 2006; Hergenrather, 2007; Scott, 2008), and marginalized ethnic and racial groups (Baquero et al., 2014; Cordova et al., 2013; Hannay, Dudley, Milan, & Leibovitz, 2013; Harley, 2015; Markus, 2012; Moya et al., 2014). The prevalence of these studies demonstrates support for Wang and Burris' (1997) development of this methodology for use with vulnerable populations. Additionally, photovoice has the potential to yield a community outcome. As Wang and Burris (1997) stated, "the images produced and the issues discussed and framed by people may stimulate social action...to reach, inform, and organize community members, enabling them to prioritize their concerns and discuss problems and solutions" (p. 373).

### **Photovoice with LGBTQ Individuals in the Current Study**

In the current study, the researcher's implementation of photovoice methodology upheld the three methodological aims of recording and reflecting experience, promoting critical dialogue, and engaging policymakers. A foundational belief underlying this study was that people in same-gender relationships are the experts on their own lived and multifaceted experiences, and thus, are best able to depict their own experiences.

Through this methodological choice, the researcher strived to provide participants with the opportunity to recapture the voices and images that reflect individual and community experiences and strengths and are often lost due to social policing of sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, the discussion group offered an opportunity for participants to engage with and encapsulate experiences that are not accessible within a

clinical setting, visually elucidating how same-gender relationship outness is experienced, shapes relationship satisfaction, and varies in assorted settings such as family, friends, work, spiritual, and home spaces. Additionally, participation in this photovoice study may have provided the opportunity for people in same-gender relationships, a population in which visibility can be simultaneously dangerous and a form of validation, to combine the power of images and words to facilitate their own empowerment. Participants were offered the option to use this research to advocate for desired changes in their communities or illuminate areas of resiliency or need, allowing for the impact of this research to extend beyond the walls of academia. As no methodological choice exists without an array of opportunities and challenges, closer examination of these opportunities and challenges could potentially maximize the researcher's and participants' opportunity for impact.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was threefold: (a) to gain depth in understanding the experience of outness in various social arenas among people in same-gender intimate relationships as it relates to relationship satisfaction within their relationship; (b) to understand themes in the meanings that participants ascribe to visual depictions of outness in various settings (i.e., familial, social, religious, legal, work, etc.); and (c) to support participants in engaging with policymakers through community advocacy efforts, presenting findings in whatever ways the participants see fit. Additionally, the researcher invited participants to offer implications and suggestions for practicing counselors, researchers, and supervisors and educators of counselors in training.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Researchers have scarcely begun to identify common components of same-gender relationship satisfaction (Mackey et al., 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007) and attachment in adult same-gender relationships (MacIntosh et al., 2010; Wells & Hansen, 2003). Additionally, little is known about the influence of outness on relationships of same-gender couples (Knoble & Linville, 2012). The few scholars who have examined this connection have found that an individual's level of outness tends to be positively related to relationship satisfaction (Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000) and similarity in level of outness between each member of the coupleship also tends to be positively related to relationship satisfaction (Jordan & Deluty, 2000). These findings are not universal, however, as other scholars have found no relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Todosijevic et al., 2005).

Additionally, to date researchers exploring outness have investigated samples that were mostly white, high socioeconomic status, and largely out, limiting generalizability and transferability (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevic et al., 2005). These sparse studies and limited sample diversity leave much room for diverse individuals in same-gender romantic relationships to further elaborate on and define experiences of outness as related to their experiences within their relationships, as well as those of engagement in their diverse domains of lived experience and community. Also, the lack of qualitative research points to a lack of depth in the existing research literature. It seems there is a need to examine

outness as it manifests in the lives of these individuals, as described in their own words and voices, especially as political, social, and legal climates shift regarding LGBTQ visibility and access to rights.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this study was to gain insight into how individuals in same-gender romantic relationships experience outness within their relationships, thereby addressing the current dearth in informational depth. Additionally, the perceived significance and interpretation individuals applied to varying levels and experiences of outness within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, and political contexts, was explored. Accordingly, the research questions were as follows:

***Research Question 1.*** How do individuals in same-gender romantic relationships make sense of and/or apply meaning to visual depictions of outness within their same-gender romantic relationships?

***Research Question 2.*** How do individuals in same-gender romantic relationships experience the construct of outness as related to relationship satisfaction within and outside of their relationships and within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, social media, work, spiritual, and public contexts?

### **Need for the Study**

To date, researchers have failed to fully understand and gain depth into the lived experience of LGBTQ individuals' outness in same-gender relationships. Additionally,

because visibility defines the construct of outness (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevic et al, 2005), there is a need to explore this construct through the power of visual images. Using a photovoice methodology to explore individuals in same-gender romantic relationships' perceptions and experience of outness as it relates to their romantic relationships and their experiences in various domains of life could offer a tangible perspective that portrays the humanity and emotion within individualized and group perceptions of daily lived outness. Providing further information surrounding relationship satisfaction as it relates to outness could illuminate the position of outness within a framework of resiliency, potentially aiding same-gender couples in the formation of stronger romantic relationships and interpersonal, social, and community connections in which identity is visible and celebrated.

In clinical settings, this study has the potential to offer counselors a framework through which to conceptualize and better support clients in same-gender relationships, impacting the way in which same-gender couples' work is done regarding the immediate relationship experiences of same-gender couples participating in counseling. Such an understanding will potentially help counselors address this construct as it relates to the individual's wellness and overall experience in their relationship. Additionally, counselors working with LGBTQ couples or LGBTQ individuals might gain insight into the significance of outness within the counseling relationship and ways to respect a client's level of visibility.

Within the realm of counselor education, this study may elicit the emergence of themes that challenge heterosexism or cisgenderism implicit in counseling theories and courses. Additionally, implementing a photovoice methodology could offer further clarification of the role of outness in LGBTQ relationships, strengthening the research base in this area and creating room for future studies as well as deeper and wider understanding of the lived experience of these individuals.

Furthermore, aligning with one of the goals of photovoice, this study could potentially provide a space in which participants can unite to work toward shifting discriminatory, heteronormative, and cisnormative policies within the mental health, social, and political arenas. Additionally, findings could inform counselor preparation, as students learn how to make counseling more accessible to and safe for people diverse in sexual orientation and gender identity. Finally, information from this study could influence policy change at multiple levels (local, state, and national).

### **Definition of Terms**

To more holistically understand the construct of outness, one must first understand the theoretical underpinnings of LGBTQ identity, the language of “same-gender couples,” and relationship satisfaction as it applies to outness and heterosexism and heteronormativity—two societal systems which complicate one’s choice to come out, at best, and, at worst, police and punish it. The following terms are key concepts foundational to the design of this research study:

- **LGBTQ:** The acronym LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer.
- **Lesbian:** A woman who is attracted to and may form sexual and/or romantic relationships with other women may identify as a lesbian (Human Rights Campaign Foundation [HRCF], 2014).
- **Gay:** Men who are attracted to and may form sexual and/or romantic relationships with other men may identify as gay. Additionally, however, some lesbian women may use this word to describe their identities (HRCF, 2014).
- **Bisexual:** A man or woman who is attracted to and may form sexual and/or romantic relationships with men and women may identify as bisexual (HRCF, 2014). Many people attempt to depict bisexuality as a state of confusion in which a person is “figuring out” or “uncertain” of their sexual orientation. This is a false understanding, however, as bisexuality is a legitimate, formed identity in which the person does not choose nor feel the need to do so, because they are attracted to people of different genders.
- **Trans:** Trans is used to refer to people who transgress social gender norms in a wide variety of ways. This can include transgender people and people who do not conform to the gender binary and identify as gender non-binary or gender non-conforming. Trans individuals do not always identify as a sexual minority and may enter heterosexual relationships (HRCF, 2014).
- **Queer:** Queer can be used as an umbrella term for a person who identifies as LGBT or a term that describes an identity that lies outside of the gender and/or

sexuality binary (i.e., male-female, man-woman, gay-heterosexual) (HRCF, 2014). Often, this term is used in younger generations, as reclamation of the pejorative use of queer prevalent in the United States in the 1980's, and this term commonly is used to resist categorization and challenge societal norms. The researcher gained insight into participants' LGBTQ identification by providing a demographic form on which potential participants indicated appropriate identifications (i.e., sexual orientation identity, appropriate pronouns) by answering an open-ended question regarding personal identity and ways of identifying in terms of gender and sexual orientation.

- **Same-gender romantic relationships:** For the purposes of this study, the concept of same-gender romantic relationships applied to people within the LGBTQ community who are in adult, romantic and/or intimate relationships with partners of the same gender. The language of same-gender romantic relationships was used as opposed to same-sex romantic relationships or gay and lesbian romantic relationships to increase inclusivity of bisexual- and trans-identified individuals within these relationships (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Additionally, this language was used instead of queer couples, because romantic relationships can be classified as inherently queer even if partners differ in gender. Regarding the construct of outness, the study focused only on individuals in same-gender romantic relationships, because individuals in different gender relationships, regardless of bisexual, trans, or queer identity, could pass as visibly heterosexual and avoid the act of having to come out.

- **Relationship satisfaction:** For the purposes of this study, relationship satisfaction was defined as an individual's contentedness regarding their overall romantic relationship. The researcher's presented research questions and methodological approach offered an opportunity for individuals in same-gender romantic relationships to further elaborate on and define relationship satisfaction in their own words.
- **Heterosexism:** Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is the norm, leading to systemic granting of privilege to heterosexuals and simultaneous oppression and marginalization of LGBTQ people (Dermer et al., 2010; Herek et al., 2009; Pharr, 1997). For this study, heterosexism was explored as a systemic factor that could inhibit LGBTQ individuals' choices to be out due to fear of rejection, emotional, physical, or spiritual harm, or identity-based persecution.
- **Heteronormativity:** Often, heterosexism first emerges in the family system through enforced heteronormativity, the societal reinforcement of heterosexuality as the norm and non-heterosexuality as other or wrong. Heteronormativity assumes that all people are heterosexual, and thus creates the assumption that people must come out if they identify as anything other than heterosexual (Lev, 2010). For this study, the researcher implemented language and structure that rejected heteronormative assumptions about participant identities.

## **Brief Overview**

The following research study will be arranged into five chapters. The first chapter aims to provide an overview of LGBTQ populations' experiences of the shifting social and political climate, an introduction and exploration of the construct of outness as it applies to LGBTQ individuals' and couples' experiences in a heteronormative society, define and elucidate significant terms to be used in the study, and build the foundation for the study. Chapter Two provides an in-depth literature review to further elucidate and contextualize the current study. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology. Chapter Four will present the results of the study, and Chapter Five will offer discussion of the results, a critical examination of study limitations, implications for findings, and opportunities for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

An exploration of LGBTQ individuals' experiences of the shifting social and political climate, an introduction of the construct of outness as it applies to LGBTQ individuals and couples, and a rationale for exploring LGBTQ individuals' experiences of outness through a photovoice methodology was provided in Chapter One. In this chapter, the existing literature on outness, same-gender relationship satisfaction, and the photovoice methodology is reviewed. Previous research studies of barriers to and experiences of outness are discussed in depth, and findings regarding same-gender relationship satisfaction as it relates to outness are presented. Additionally, after a queer and feminist theoretical foundation is described, the applicability and relevance of using a photovoice methodology with LGBTQ populations is examined before a detailed description of the photovoice methodology is presented in Chapter Three.

#### **LGBTQ Identity and the Construct of Outness**

Existing within a societal system influenced by the hegemonic structures of heteronormativity and cisnormativity requires individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender to continuously consider the degree to which they will be open about their sexual or gender identity, or out, in varying arenas. Outness, the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1997) or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not

identify as cisgender (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014), is an unavoidable construct that LGBTQ individuals must repeatedly consider upon entering each new relationship, social arena, or role (Klein et al., 2015; Knoble & Linville, 2012). Individuals can experience diverse and changing degrees of outness throughout their lived experiences, often varying based on perceptions of the safety or dangerousness of the environment, social location of intersecting identities, and surrounding influences (Bowleg, Burkholder, Teti, & Craig, 2008; Bradford et al., 1997; Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015). Additionally, societal changes over time can shift perceptions of safety and surrounding influences, also impacting the degree to which some LGBTQ individuals choose to be out (Knoble & Linville, 2012). LGBTQ peoples' experiences of outness and safety, paired with the complex intersection of diverse identities can impact LGBTQ individuals in numerous aspects of their health and wellness, including cognition and affect (Cass, 1979), mental wellness (Feldman & Wright, 2013), depression and anxiety (Goldberg & Smith, 2013), satisfaction and happiness within a romantic relationship (Jordan & Deluty, 2000), physical health (McGarrity & Huebner, 2014), overall mental health and coping (Meyer, 2003), psychological distress and suicidality (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001), and self-esteem and flourishing (Whitman & Nadal, 2015) as components of overall psychological wellbeing. Considering the combined findings of these studies, it seems clear that the impact of issues of outness and safety on overall mental health cannot be overstated.

## **Outness and Mental Health**

Numerous researchers have examined overall health and wellness benefits to or detriments of coming out as LGBTQ (Feldman & Wright, 2013; Goldberg & Smith, 2013; McGarrity & Huebner, 2014; Whitman & Nadal, 2015). Though some researchers have created linear LGBTQ identity development models and advocated for LGBTQ individuals to come out, citing increased outness to be associated with increased levels of wellness (Cass, 1979; Feldman & Wright, 2013; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Meyer, 2003; Morris et al., 2001), other researchers explored outness in participants with intersectional identities and reached different conclusions (Bowleg et al., 2008; Lewis, 2012; McGarrity & Huebner, 2014; Pastrana, 2016; Robinson, 2010). For example, Feldman and Wright (2013) found positive relationships between outness and mental health when participants strongly identified with their LGB identity. The researchers also found, however, that outness brought challenges, such as the experience of discrimination, though this challenge appeared to be mitigated by identity strength (Feldman & Wright, 2013).

Additionally, it seems increasingly clear that many social factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender identity, influence the challenges of coming out. For example, other researchers have reexamined stage models of the coming out process and found that the experience of people of color varies greatly from these models, which were overwhelmingly developed, based, and normed on samples of white individuals with higher socioeconomic status (SES) (Bowleg et al., 2008; Hyeouk & Adkins, 2009; Ocampo, 2014; Pastrana, 2016). Researchers also have examined the differences in the psychological wellbeing of people who identify as LGB and people who identify as both

LGB and as trans or genderqueer, finding that participants who identify as LGB and trans or genderqueer had lower rates of self-esteem than individuals who only identify as LGB and cisgender (Whitman & Nadal, 2015). Additionally, many studies highlight the way in which linear models of LGBTQ identity development may not fit for non-white or lower SES clients due to the significance of identifying first as a member of one's racial or ethnic community which may precede or outweigh identifying as LGBTQ (Bowleg et al., 2008; Hyeouk & Adkins, 2009; Ocampo, 2014; Pastrana, 2016).

As many researchers have indicated, LGBTQ individuals tend to seek counseling services at a higher rate than heterosexual or cisgender populations (Bieschke, McClanahan, Tozer, Grzegorek, & Park, 2000; Cochran, Mays, & Sullivan, 2003; Morgan, 1992), ostensibly due to identified mental and emotional effects of living in a heterosexist and cisgenderist society. Some of these effects manifest as increased experiences of depression (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999), shame (Greene, Britton, & Fitts, 2014; Hequembourg & Dearing, 2013; Mereish & Poteat, 2015; Wells & Hansen, 2003), anxiety (Herek et al., 1999), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Herek et al., 1999; Szymanski & Balsam, 2011), and overall psychological distress (Herek et al., 1999; Mays & Cochran, 2001).

On an institutional level, Graham, Carney and Kluck (2012) recognized the high rates of lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients accessing counseling services and the tendency for counselor education programs to fail to incorporate LGB-training into general multicultural courses, leaving many students feeling unprepared to work with this population upon graduation. Graham et al. (2012) asked counseling students in

CACREP-accredited programs to complete measures of perceived personal competency in working with LGB-clients. Results suggested that participants felt most competent in awareness of LGB-counseling, but less competent in specific skills for working with this population (Graham et al., 2012). The researchers suggested that counselors-in-training have increased specialized education and practicum contact with LGB-clients to strengthen perceived and actual competency in LGB-specific counseling skills (Graham et al., 2012).

Similarly, Owen-Pugh and Baines (2014) interviewed counselors about critical incidents in work with LGBTQ individuals, and found that many of the participants self-reported feeling that their training programs had left them unprepared to work with LGBTQ populations. Accordingly, many researchers have suggested increased training opportunities specific to LGBTQ populations within counselor education programs (Graham et al., 2012; Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014; Rutter, Estrada, Ferguson, & Diggs, 2008). Such training could promote adherence to ethical principles such as beneficence and nonmaleficence, requiring counselors and counselor educators to actively engage with their own preconceived and potentially harmful notions of LGBTQ identity development as they prepare to work with LGBTQ clients dealing with distress and the challenge of determining desired and possible level of outness.

An additional source of counselor and researcher support in work with LGBTQ communities, especially surrounding the sometimes difficult and tumultuous experience of coming out, comes in the form of counseling competencies. Given the lack of access to LGBTQ-specific training noted earlier, counseling competencies related to LGBTQ

populations and outness are critical. For example, the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) competencies clearly stated:

A. 18. Understand[ing] that coming out is an ongoing and multilayered process for LGBQQ individuals and that coming out may not be the goal for all individuals. Although coming out may have positive results for persons' ability to integrate their identity into their lives, thus relieving the stress of hiding, for many individuals coming out can have high personal and emotional costs (e.g., being rejected from one's family of origin, losing a job/career, losing one's support system) (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2012, p.9).

The ALGBTIC Competencies Taskforce (2012) also stated that counselors working with LGBTQ clients should remain aware of current limitations within models of identity development, recognizing that stages within these models may be fluid and fluctuating while also failing to fit for all individuals across intersectional identity experiences.

In sum, both established counseling competencies and research results acknowledge that one cannot assume that increased outness is beneficial or detrimental to all LGBTQ individuals and participants. Instead, counselors must seek a deeper understanding of participant or client perceptions of outness as related to their unique, multiple, and intersecting identities as individuals and as members of same-gender romantic relationships.

### **Barriers to Outness**

By virtue of membership in an ever-evolving society constructed by rules and norms that conform to dominant group standards, many LGBTQ individuals experience barriers to coming out at all and/or in specific arenas of life. Some of these barriers include systemic heterosexism and cisgenderism, the resulting feeling of identity-based

shame, and the impact of intersecting social identities on one's ability to be out within their community.

**Heterosexism and cisgenderism.** Researchers have identified the impact of heterosexism, or the systemic assumption that heterosexuality is normal and natural, at the expense of the oppression of and multilayered discrimination against LGBQ people, and that of cisgenderism, the systemic assumption that cisgender identity is normal and natural, at the expense of trans-identified and gender non-conforming people, to be far-reaching and varied. For example, researchers have discovered mental and emotional effects of heterosexism on LGBTQ individuals to be varied and far reaching. For example, demonstrating the long-lasting impact of heterosexism, Szymanski and Balsam (2011) reported a positive correlation between lesbian experiences of heterosexism in the form of discrimination and hate-crime victimization and an increased experiencing of PTSD symptoms. Furthering this finding, Szymanski and Balsam (2011) examined the relationship between lesbians' repeated experiences of heterosexism and decreased mental wellness and PTSD through the lens of "insidious trauma", defined as "ongoing negative experiences associated with living as a member of an oppressed group" (p. 4). These findings supported those of Herek et al.'s (1999) earlier study in which researchers proposed that LGB individuals who have been targets of heterosexist discrimination or victimization were more likely to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Due to the systemic nature of heterosexism, it is prevalent in multiple and intersecting arenas, including private spaces like the home, as well as public spaces.

Quintana, Rosenthal, and Krehely (2010) reviewed multiple national studies to illustrate the prevalence and effects of heterosexism and cisgenderism within the home and family system, identifying that though approximately 5-7% of the American youth population identified as LGBT, 20-40% of the homeless youth population were LGBT-identified. Often, these LGBT-identified youths were homeless due to the experience of familial rejection of their identity. Heterosexist and cisgenderist barriers to forming primary secure attachments also can potentially shape the way individuals experience secure or insecure attachment in future adult romantic relationships. Relatedly, Wells and Hansen (2003) studied attachment in adult romantic relationships by administering the *Internalized Shame Scale* and the *Relationship Styles Questionnaire* to 317 self-identified lesbian women and found that within the sample, secure attachment was negatively correlated to shame while fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment were positively correlated to shame. Furthermore, even though participants largely reported higher levels of lesbian identity integration, they also reported significant levels of internalized shame (Wells & Hansen), potentially evidencing the persistent impact of societal heterosexism. As demonstrated by these studies, heterosexist and cisgenderist rejection by families of origin can leave LGBTQ individuals without physical resources or access to emotional support and connection. However, for many LGBTQ individuals, rejection also entails shaming, judgment, distancing, and attempts to change one's identity, even into adulthood.

Heterosexism also emerges in some states' legislation, as evidence through the history of the arduous fight for marriage equality. House Bill 2 (HB2), a bill recently

enacted into law in North Carolina, removed all protections against anti-LGBTQ discrimination (Domonoske, 2016; Gordon Price, & Peralta, 2016; Phillips, 2016), demonstrating the intersection of heterosexism and cisgenderism in the political and legal arenas. Further illustrating the lack of legal protection and the presence of heterosexist, identity-based persecution, Stewart (2014) found “homosexuality” to be relegated illegal in 81 countries throughout the world, many of which have strict religious beliefs denouncing same-sex relationships. This intersection of heterosexism and cisgenderism within family and legal systems often merges with cultural and legislative heteronormativity and cisnormativity, creating a multi-leveled paradigm of discrimination which may drastically impact one’s ability to be out and engage in public and visible living of their identity and the vulnerable act of engaging in romantic intimate connections.

**Identity-based shame.** Heterosexism and cisgenderism establish and propagate social messages that shame non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. Morrison (1996) defined shame as a sense of globalized unworthiness of love from others and/or the self and found that shaming can result in feelings of depression, internalized defectiveness, weakness, incompetence, dirtiness, despair, disgrace, apathy, mortification, and low self-esteem. Jordan (2004) supported this definition, linking shame to feelings of unworthiness in relationships and the subsequent act of engaging in relationships devoid of empathy and support. Coupled with these feelings of unworthiness, LGBTQ people experience daily threats to their social selves, potentially increasing sustained fear states and furthering feelings of shame (Dickerson, Gruenewald,

& Kemeny, 2009). Wells and Hansen (2003) discovered that identity-based shaming can lead to a lack of identity-pride, illustrated by their finding that lesbian women feel more internalized shame than heterosexual women, increased insecure/fearful attachment in relationships with increased identity shame, and decreased shame with stronger lesbian identity and secure attachment. It seems apparent, then, that internalized shame can undercut efforts to build a sense of pride about one's identity and often builds throughout the course of a lifetime, impacting LGBTQ individuals from an early age until late in life.

Through early experiences of familial ostracization and sometimes expulsion, LGBTQ individuals often experience shaming to conform to the heteronormative ideal that potentially destroys secure attachment bonds between parents and children (Rosario, et al., 2014) and evokes enduring identity-based insecurity and fear. McDermott, Roen, and Scourfield (2008) explored the early impact of shame through examining the connection of shame resulting from homophobia to self-destructive behaviors. Researchers found that youth often employed methods enabling them to avoid shame, such as expecting or minimizing homophobia and its impact on the self, taking on the full burden of handling homophobia, and outwardly demonstrating identity pride in the face of homophobia (McDermott, et al., 2008). Additionally, McDermott et al. (2008) argued that participants' individuality and self-determined responsibility kept participants from holding expectations of support from their communities or others, making them more susceptible to self-destructive behaviors. Deepening the framework for understanding these results, in their exploration of LGBTQ experiences of minority stress, Mereish, Poteat, and Paul (2015) supported the association between minority stressors and greater

feelings of shame, evidencing shame's mediating role in explaining how minority stress directly and negatively impacts psychological and mental health, as well as the health of social relationships. Additionally, they found that increased experiences of shame led to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Mereish et al., 2015), potentially demonstrating long-term effects of the methods participants used to avoid shame.

**Intersecting multiple identities.** Though most investigations of outness have been limited to largely white, high SES, highly-educated samples, some researchers have explored the impact of living as a member of many different identity categories on LGBTQ individuals' levels of outness (Bowleg et al., 2008; Lewis, 2012; Moradi et al., 2010, Pastrana, 2016). Some areas for consideration include the intersection of race and LGBTQ identity, class and LGBTQ identity, and religion and LGBTQ identity.

Moradi et al. (2010) explored how race might be an important factor to consider when exploring one's experience of outness, finding that LGB people of color, when compared to white LGB individuals, had lower levels of outness, possibly due to the compounding of stigma based on race and ethnicity (2010). This could account for some of the difficulty researchers have encountered in attempts to engage with racially diverse samples surrounding the topic of outness as engagement in research would require some degree of revealing one's identification with LGBTQ communities (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). To understand racial and ethnic differences in outness, Rosario, Scrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of LGB young people and found that White young people were more out about their

identities than Black and Latino young people. Black participants reported less involvement in LGB social groups and more discomfort in others knowing about their LGB identity, but over time experienced an evolution toward feeling more positively and strongly aligned with their LGB identity, supporting the researchers' claim that the intersection of race, ethnicity, and LGB identity might shift the timeline of identity integration (Rosario et al., 2004). Sarno, Mohr, Jackson, and Fassinger (2015) explored conflicts in allegiances with LGB people of color, finding that conflict in identity allegiance arose when LGB people of color experienced racism and race-based discrimination in LGB communities as well as when the maternal parent expressed heterosexist leanings, potentially further developing the lens through which to better understand experiences of identifying as LGBTQ while also identifying as a person of color.

Similarly, Pastrana (2016) focused specifically on participants who identified as Black and LGBT, finding that family support was the strongest predictor of one's coming out. Additionally, researchers discovered that both the belief that a) one's sexual orientation was an important piece of one's identity, b) was important enough to exist alongside one's Black identity, and c) having a connection to a larger LGBT community, also predicted participant's outness. An earlier study by Bowleg et al. (2008) more specifically explored outness in Black lesbian and bisexual women, finding that participants who had increased social support and ranked their lesbian or bisexual identity as stronger than their Black identity were more likely to be out, enveloped by the recognition that coming out was often a collective as opposed to an individual decision in

which the family, community, and church were considered. Exploring outness within a different ethnic and racial group, Hyeouk and Adkins (2008) explored the experiences of acculturation and western ethnocentrism in determining the process for coming out with Asian and Pacific Islander populations. From their findings, Hyeouk and Adkins (2008) created an adapted model for understanding LGBTQ identity that incorporates a recognition of ethnicity-based minority stress and exists outside of a western framework. These combined research findings evidence a need to contextualize the coming out process and experience through a lens of intersectionality, recognizing the mutual impact of race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ identity on one other, as opposed to conceptualizing them as separate identities. Further, it seems critical to deconstruct the normalization of western-centric models.

Though there is a dearth of research investigating outness and SES, one notable study exists. McGarrity and Huebner (2014) explored the relationship of outness on physical health and perception of stress and anti-gay discrimination among gay and bisexual men of both high and low socioeconomic status (SES). Through their study, McGarrity and Huebner found that physical health was lower and perceived stress and anti-gay discrimination was higher for low SES gay and bisexual men who were out, while physical health was higher and perceived stress and anti-gay discrimination was lower for high SES men who were out, suggesting that SES may be a moderating variable. Additionally, this study highlighted the way in which the intersection of SES with one's other social identities can impact the way outness affects overall health, demonstrating the significance of including participants from diverse backgrounds.

Another area in which researchers have explored the intersection of LGBTQ identity is that of religion, predominantly western Christianity. Subhi and Geelan (2012) conducted a study exploring the effects of LGB individuals' experience of the conflict between Christianity and non-heteronormative sexual orientation, finding that 80% of participants experienced conflict between their sexual orientation and religious identities, 68.8% of participants experienced depression, 37.5% experienced self-blame and guilt, 31.3 experienced anxiety, 25% experienced suicidal ideation, and 25% experienced feelings of alienation. Another study found that gay male members of Evangelical Protestant congregations had the highest percentages of internalized homonegativity and lower percentages of being open and out regarding sexuality in comparison with other faith traditions (Wilkerson, Smolenski, Brady, & Rosser, 2012). Potentially elucidating these findings, Whitehead (2013) explored congregation membership through a study examining overall acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in churches across the United States, finding that only 37.4% of churches allowed same-sex couples to become members, 18.7% of congregations allowed LGBTQ individuals to hold leadership positions, and larger congregations tended to be more accepting of LGBTQ members. The study also found Catholics to be most allowing of LGBTQ members and Evangelical Protestants to be least welcoming. Consistently, however, the percentages of religious traditions who allowed for LGBTQ leaders was consistently and substantially less than the percentages of those who allowed membership (Whitehead, 2013). Additionally, Barnes' (2013) study added breadth in racial diversity through exploring clergy openness to LGBTQ membership and leadership within the Black Church, finding that the Black

Church was becoming more affirming of LGBTQ members, but that there was an overall rejection of LGBTQ lifestyle and a lack of openness to out LGBTQ members serving in leadership roles. Through exploring the intersection of LGBTQ identity and religion, researchers can gain an empathetic understanding of the potential for LGBTQ individuals to experience religious isolation which could also shape overall access to outness within spiritual spaces.

Exploring the existing research on barriers to outness, such as heterosexism and cisgenderism, shame, and the complex intersection of diverse identities with LGBTQ identity creates a foundation from which to begin to understand some LGBTQ individuals' experiences. The experience of outness can drastically shift when an individual experience becomes a shared experience, for example, in a same-gender romantic relationship.

### **Outness in Same-Gender Romantic Relationships**

Some LGBTQ people are able or choose to avoid coming out when not in relationship with a partner, potentially finding it easier to be unidentifiable as LGBTQ when existing as a single person outside of heteronormative social norms of a nuclear family unit or couple. Upon entering into a same-gender romantic relationship, however, LGBTQ individuals commonly experience an increase in identity visibility and may be more easily identified as LGBTQ due to appearing in public and social arenas with a same-gender romantic partner. For example, Knoble and Linville (2012) found that participants reported a shift in outness due to the increased visibility of one's sexual orientation identity when entering a romantic relationship and becoming publically

partnered with a same-gender partner. Additionally, participants stated that beginning a same-gender romantic relationship provided an opportunity for, and sometimes encouraged, a non-out individual to come out while being supported by their romantic partner (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Even when engaged in same-gender romantic relationships and experiencing an impetus for increased outness, many participants disclosed assessing the decision to come out by considering the context of both their situation and their relationship with others, yielding a theme of “situational outness” (Knoble & Linville, 2012, p.333). Participant experiences of this situational outness appear to be informed, in part, by perceived threat of physical harm or loss of community (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Similarly, Bowleg et al. (2008) found that psychosocial factors predicted levels of outness in Black lesbian and bisexual women, including race identity, community, family, and religious concerns to shape the decision to come out, even when in same-gender relationships. It seems clear, then, that contextual factors are influential. Though there seems to be a sound body of research on the factors that influence outness, rarely has outness been examined as related to relationship satisfaction. However, before delving deeper into the exploration of the impact of outness on relationship satisfaction, it is important to understand the context of relationship satisfaction within LGBTQ relationships.

### **Same-Gender Romantic Relationship Satisfaction**

Much of the research on same-gender relationship satisfaction compares LGBTQ individuals in same gender relationships to heterosexual and cisgender individuals in relationships (Boesch, Cerqueira, Safer, & Wright, 2007; Gottman et al., 2003), and

many researchers report finding similar components of relationship satisfaction to exist for both same-gender and different-gender relationships (Boesch et al., 2007; Gottman et al., 2003; Mark, Garcia, & Fisher, 2015). Though heterosexual and LGBTQ relationships may very well share similar qualities, the practice of using heterosexual relationships as a norm against which same-gender relationships are compared is an example of an inherently heterosexist and cisgenderist research practice, further ingraining heterosexuality as the norm and expectation. In response to the heteronormative ideologies implicit in many studies, Belous and Wampler (2016) developed the Gay and Lesbian Relationship Satisfaction Scale to be used specifically with people in same-gender romantic relationships. Following that ideology, this literature review will not examine similarities and differences between heterosexual and same-gender couples, but instead will explore the components of relationship satisfaction within same-gender relationships without using heteronormative relationship structures as a backdrop for comparison.

Researchers have conducted several studies exploring the components of same-gender relationship satisfaction and have found significant components to include, but not be limited to: sexual satisfaction (Edwards, 2016; Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2004; Mark et al., 2015), emotional satisfaction (Mark et al., 2015), relationship happiness (Edwards, 2016), ability to see a future for the relationship (Edwards, 2016), inter-partner support (Kamen, Burns, & Beach, 2011), trust (Kamen et al., 2011), commitment to the relationship (Kamen, et al., 2011), communication (Mackey, et al., 2004), psychological intimacy (Mackey et al., 2004) and mental health (Otis, Riggle, & Rotosky, 2006),

interpersonal conflict severity and conflict management style (Mackey, et al., 2004), equity and decision making in relationships (Mackey et al., 2004), and high levels of companionship (Gottman et al., 2003). Additionally, though Kamen et al. (2011) aimed but failed to find a significant relationship between experiences of minority stress and relationship satisfaction in gay male couples, the researchers were able to clarify the manner in which the experience of heterosexist discrimination had no impact on predicting relationship satisfaction with gay men who had moderate to high levels of trust, but did predict less relationship satisfaction for those with low trust levels, showing the significance of trust in a relationship where one or both partners may experience heterosexist discrimination or sexuality-based rejection by family of origin members, significant people in their lives, or the larger society. Similarly, Mohr and Daly (2008) discovered that internalized homonegativity correlated positively with a decrease in relationship satisfaction, and Szymanski and Hilton (2013) found that internalized heterosexism correlated positively with a fear of intimacy which then correlated positively with less relationship satisfaction, suggesting a mediating role of internalized heteronormativity and heterosexism in determining overall relationship satisfaction. Alternatively, MacIntosh, Reissing, and Andruff (2010) examined the relational impact of legalizing same-sex marriage in Canada, finding that LGB participants experienced increased identity confidence and sense of safety in relationships after the legalization of same-sex marriage. It appears, then, that internalized heteronormativity and heterosexism both impact relationship satisfaction.

Although these studies provide a framework for understanding some components of relationship satisfaction, most are limited by samples of predominantly white (Kamen et al., 2011; Mackey et al., 2004; Mark et al., 2015; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Szymanski & Hilton, 2013), middle to high SES (Mackey et al., 2004; Mark et al., 2015; Szymanski & Hilton, 2013), college educated participants (Mackey et al., 2004; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Szymanski & Hilton, 2013), limiting generalizability and transferability to LGBTQ individuals diverse in race, class, and education. It seems apparent, then, that more research is needed with more diverse samples.

### **Outness and Same-Gender Relationship Satisfaction**

Though numerous researchers have explored components of relationship satisfaction in same-gender couples, much less is understood about the influence of outness, specifically, on relationship satisfaction (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Several researchers have discovered that increased levels of outness positively correlate with relationship satisfaction (Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000), but other researchers have found no significant relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Todosijevic et al., 2005). For example, Mohr and Daly (2008) sought a link between the two variables of internalized homonegativity and outness and three identified dimensions of relationship commitment—relationship attraction, constraints, and satisfaction. Though internalized homonegativity correlated with decreased relationship attraction and satisfaction, the researchers did not find that outness was related to the dimension of attraction, constraints, or satisfaction (Mohr & Daly, 2008). Researchers stated a potential rationale

for these findings to be that outness might not have a significant or persisting impact on relationship satisfaction, but also speculated that the absence of a correlation could be because the measure that was used to assess outness only assessed the motivation to remain closeted as opposed to assessing the consistency of enacting specific behaviors that conceal participant sexual identity (Mohr & Daly, 2008). Thus, Mohr and Daly suggested further research that combines examining the motivation to remain closeted as well as the effort and behaviors enacted to do so.

Beals and Peplau (2001) also conducted a secondary analysis of a previous couples' questionnaire distributed by Blumstein & Schwartz (1983, as cited in Beals & Peplau, 2001) to investigate how lesbians' decisions about outness impacted relationship quality, specifically using a relationship satisfaction scale. Researchers did not find a significant correlation between relationship satisfaction and outness and offered a couple of explanations for this finding, including the use of a measure of disclosure that may have been inadequate in its datedness and limiting of potential parties to whom the participants would come out as well as the measure defining disclosure through only verbal modalities. An alternative explanation was that the focus on outness left out consideration of the support or lack of support a participant's outness garnered, leaving room for a future measure that combined these two components in relation to relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau). Though the use of a previous dataset allowed for a large participant sample, the original data was collected 22 years prior to Beals and Peplau's analysis, presenting a limitation of temporality and being unable to account for the societal shifts over the course of time. Nevertheless, the absence of a significant

relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction seemed to create more reflection on the effectiveness of methods through which researchers obtained this information as opposed to solidifying an assumption that there was no potential relationship between the two variables.

Exploring a more nuanced perspective of relationship satisfaction and outness within gay and lesbian couples, Todosijevic et al. (2005) sought a relationship between relationship satisfaction and partner similarity on levels of outness. Though findings indicated a lack of a statistically significant relationship, again, researchers conjectured that the absence of a significant relationship may have been due to the measure used to assess outness. It seems from the combined findings of Mohr and Daly's (2008), Beals and Peplau's (2001), and Todosijevic et al.'s (2005) studies, more information surrounding the phenomenon of outness is needed to better create a measure of outness that is thorough and accurate in its assessment of this construct.

Though Todosijevic et al. (2005) did not find a relationship between disparities in the level of outness between partners and relationship satisfaction, there do appear to be divergent findings. For example, Jordan and Deluty (2000) hypothesized that lesbian women's increased degrees of outness would positively correlate with relationship satisfaction, and results not only supported this hypothesis, but also evidenced that dissimilarity between partners in level of outness was associated with increased relationship dissatisfaction, leading authors to hypothesize that outness about the relationship could represent higher commitment to the relationship. Similarly, Keeler (2000) surveyed lesbians and gay men in committed partnerships and found a significant

negative correlation between perceptions of discordance of outness between partners in same-gender relationships and relationship satisfaction, lending support to Jordan and Deluty's (2000) finding. Additionally, Keeler furthered this finding specifying that discordance in levels of outness within heterosexual relationships (i.e., heterosexual family and friends) did not have a negative impact on relationship satisfaction while discordance in non-heterosexual relationships (i.e., non-heterosexual family and friends) did, potentially because discordant levels of outness might be more expected in heterosexual relationships and arenas, and thus the surrounding conflict more easily resolved. In a similar study, Frost and Meyer (2009) focused on exploring the impact of internalized homophobia on relationship quality, finding that connection with the LGBTQ community increased overall relationship quality. Although researchers did not consider outness directly, the emphasis on community connectedness suggests the need to be at least somewhat out to find community with which to connect. Clausell and Roisman (2009) sampled gay men and lesbians in same-gender relationships and, using questionnaires and live observation, found that participants who were more out to the world were more likely to feel satisfied in their same-gender relationship. Furthermore, individuals who were involved in a same-gender relationship with a partner who was more out also reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Clausell & Roisman), suggesting that outness may be directly connected to relationship satisfaction. Clausell and Roisman's (2009) results supported Berger's (1990) earlier finding that a gay or lesbian couple's increased outness within significant social relationships correlated to increased relationship satisfaction.

In the only qualitative study examining the impact of outness on relationship satisfaction, Knoble and Linville (2012) discovered that the many components of outness heightened relationship satisfaction by creating a shared understanding regarding the consistently repeated process of coming out, becoming a shared value between partners, serving as a source of strengthened social support, and increasing overall relationship comfort, intimacy, quality, and sense of felt validation within the relationship. Knoble and Linville also found that outness enriched relationship satisfaction based on each partner's satisfaction with one another's degree of outness. The researchers did not find themes, however, linking level of outness directly to relationship satisfaction (Knoble & Linville), potentially due to participants sharing similar levels of outness to their partners, due to chance or intentionally seeking romantic partners who would be out in similar ways to them. The researchers also found that outness had the potential to create relationship satisfaction challenges within same-gender relationships. For example, outness was linked to intensification in family and work-related stress due to others' reactions to participants' outness and an increase in relationship challenges when partners fail to mirror one another's degree of outness (Knoble & Linville). Even with consideration of the findings surrounding outness and relationship satisfaction, however, Knoble and Linville reported that participants did not explicitly identify increased outness as a key component of their relationship satisfaction, though it impacted the relationship in both positive and negative ways. Instead, findings indicated that participant comfort with one's own and one's partner's levels of outness seemed to be more important than overall level of outness (Knoble & Linville).

Unfortunately, limitations of this body of research extend beyond the mixed and contradictory findings. Many of the studies revolving around outness and same-gender relationship satisfaction are characterized by a prevalence of largely white, high socioeconomic status, largely out individuals, limiting generalizability and transferability (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevic et al, 2005). These sparse studies and limited sample diversity leave much room for diverse same-gender couples to further elaborate on and define experiences of outness as related to their experiences within their relationships and as a couple engaged in their diverse domains of lived experience and community. It seems, then, that more research is needed to broadly and intricately understand how a person's choice or ability to be out can impact a same-gender relationship on an individual and collective plane. Furthermore, the sparseness of research that highlights the voices and experiences of diverse same-gender couples leaves much room for LGBTQ couples of multifaceted social identities to further elaborate on and define how outness contributes to their experiences of their romantic relationship in their own words and images. A blending of feminist theory and queer theory provide one framework for considering this relationship.

### **Queer Theory**

Elucidating a core tenet of queer theory, Hodges (2008) stated, "Queer Theory focuses upon the ways in which power gets inside our bodies, our 'hearts' and our heads" (p.8). Queer theory emerged in the 1990s aligning with the reclamation of the term "queer", a term once used in a pejorative manner by dominant groups as a method of

discrimination, oppression, and violence. Once reclaimed, however, “queer” was redefined as undefinable, offering a language that challenged and allowed for transcendence of binary classifications of gender sexuality, race, and class (Hodges, 2015; Jagose, 1996). The larger theory integrates critiquing U.S. liberalism, rejecting categorization and binary structures, and refusing mainstreaming politics (Duggan, 2004; Warner, 1996). Through these means, queer theory offers unlimited possibility for behavior, identity, and experience. The researcher’s grounding of the current study in queer theory allowed for the opportunity to elucidate a queered perspective of relationship satisfaction. As much research exploring same-gender relationship satisfaction is inherently heteronormative and due to being based on norms of heterosexual relationship satisfaction (Boesch, Cerqueira, Safer, & Wright, 2007; Gottman et al., 2003), the researcher refused to utilize heteronormative findings as a comparison for LGBTQ couples, opening the opportunity for LGBTQ couples to define their experiences of relationship satisfaction as it relates to outness with language and expression not bound by hegemonic norms and expectations (Moon, 2015). In this manner, the researcher aimed to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of LGBTQ individuals in same-gender relationships’ experiences of outness in varying arenas and outness as a potential influence on relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, by integrating Foucault’s (1978) theory of subjectification, the researcher aimed to offer a space and action that allowed participants to engage in the process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their notion of self and their lived identities through their engagement with choosing how they desired to depict their

experiences as LGBTQ-identified individuals within same-gender relationships and within larger societal power structures that shape the degree to which they can live in these relationships. Offering participants the opportunity and space to examine and expose and examine the power structures that shape their access to outness, safety, and survival, the researcher hoped to illuminate and destabilize the invisibility of these structures.

Another way the researcher utilized queer theory in the construction of this study was by rejecting binary identity classifications through the construction of open-ended demographic questions, as opposed to designating potential response options for participant selection. Also, the researcher did not ask demographic questions regarding sex of participants, but asked only questions regarding gender to challenge the essentialization and primacy of sex and to interrupt and reject the assumed linear connection between sex and gender (Butler, 2004). The researcher also hoped this approach would allow trans, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals to participate and utilize their created means of self-reference.

Butler's (1990) theory of performativity also aligns with the photovoice methodology as applied to LGBTQ-identities. The researcher's prompt for picture taking asks participants to depict their experiences of outness as an LGBTQ-identified individual in a same-gender romantic relationship. The mere act of taking and selecting photographs that adequately convey participants' intended messages is performance of identity in action. Additionally, through the application of Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. This visual means of depicting the self, sexuality, and outness about

sexuality in one's relationship offers participants the opportunity to perform and construct their identity in the here and now, through use of visual representations of the self and experience.

### **Feminist Theory**

Emerging from the Women's Movement of the 1960's and 1970's, feminist theory in counseling is founded on the ideals of egalitarian power dynamics, facilitating access to empowerment, challenging privilege and oppression, and recognizing that counselors not only have a responsibility to their clients, but to the society at large (Evans, Kincade, Marbley, & Seem, 2005; Evans, Kincade, & Seem, 2011). Thus, feminist theory as applied to counseling research shares many of the same assumptions and values as feminist theory in counseling. In research with LGBTQ-identified participants belonging to marginalized identity statuses, feminist theory requires reflexivity and awareness of researcher positionality (Iverson, 2015).

Critical engagement with feminist theory and gender studies offers critiques of how academic communities perform and use research, because research has the potential to contribute to the continuous othering of marginalized or oppressed peoples, also necessitating a focus on researcher positionality (duCille, 1994; Iverson, 2015; Trinh, 1989). For example, Trinh (1989) critiqued research in the field of anthropology and the structure of the field that places researchers who commonly identify with groups of privileged status as the norm to which participants are compared, situating the researcher as the exemplar of the dominant cultural norm against which other cultures are examined, made sense of, and defined. This oversimplification ignores intricacies of non-dominant

cultures and posits participants as “other,” allowing researchers to use the self as a reference point from which to define “the other” on the merit of similarity and translatability to standards created and reinforced by the dominant culture (Trinh, 1989). This type of lens contributes to the assumption that the subject of study is less-than the studier and strengthens dynamics of power-over that are at the foundation of research that is defined by the researcher making sense of observations.

Additionally, duCille (1994) explored how academics of the dominant culture, predominantly white, male, or white and male, engage in research and teaching that focuses on oppressed groups and appropriates work being done by people in these groups, due to having access afforded by their privilege to studying oppressed groups and to forums in which to present their findings. This type of research conforms to the rules of dominant culture and legitimizes work done by majority and privileged groups at the expense of further marginalization of oppressed groups due to the imposition of the dominant gaze onto marginalized communities (duCille, 1994). Feminist theory necessitates researcher consciousness regarding one’s own experience of privilege and oppression as well as ways in which the researcher’s privileged and oppressed identities might interact with those of participants (duCille, 1994; Iverson, 2015). When participants and researchers explore the impact of the intersections of their multiple privileged and oppressed identities or social locations, they apply a lens of intersectionality to their work.

Feminist theory also highlights researchers’ responsibility to engage with and create frameworks founded on social consciousness and intersectionality while remaining

cognizant of societal power structures (Bondy, Nicholas, & Light, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). As defined by Hulko (2015), intersectionality is the understanding of “the ways in which socially constructed categories like gender, race, sexual orientation, and age interact with one another to produce relations of domination and subordination and the effect this has on individuals marked as having more than one marginalized social status” (p.70). Integrating an intersectional lens, the researcher aimed to understand the unique lived experiences shaped by the intersection and impact of participants’ multiple social locations on their lived experience, as well as that of the researchers. Relatedly, Eng (2001) critiqued queer studies’ heightened focus on sexuality and gender identity at the expense of consideration of racial and ethnic oppressions, calling for an increased awareness of the role of intersecting oppressions (i.e., race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, size, age, ethnicity, etc.) in constructing each participant’s experience. Eng (2001) argued that giving primacy to one social identity fails to capture how a person’s collective social identities interact and reflexively shape one another. Therefore, it was critical for the researcher to understand and operate from a theoretical framework, such as feminist theory, that recognizes the ways in which all identities intersect and manifest within each individual participant (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Hulko, 2015).

Integrating intersectionality into a feminist theoretical foundation also requires engagement with a common limitation of many LGBTQ-focused research studies, a lack of inclusion of participants diverse in gender, race, class, and education. For example, demonstrating the dearth in couples-related counseling research with transgender-identified people, Blumer, Green, Knowles, and Williams (2012) conducted a study to

determine the number of research studies involving trans-identified participants that had been published in couple and family-oriented counseling journals between 1997 and 2009. Out of 10,739 articles, only 9 focused on transgender identity (Blumer et al., 2012). Accordingly, this dissertation study was informed by research like Blumer et al's (2012) regarding the intention to increase inclusivity by actively seeking voices of those commonly left out of the literature, such as LGBTQ –identified individuals of varying gender, racial, socioeconomic, ethnic, ability, and religious identities.

Furthermore, when selecting a methodology and analyzing data for this study, the researcher drew upon core principles of feminist theory for guidance. For example, the language in the results and discussion section of the current study is composed of participant words and approved by participants in the hopes that implementing this approach will challenge the suppression of participants' true experiences and rely on collaboration to determine thematic findings (Daly, Costa, & Ross, 2015).

In the current study, the researcher intentionally utilized a foundation of feminist theory through which to construct the study and engage with participants in the hopes of increasing availability of responsibly conducted LGBTQ-focused research within the counseling field. Answering critical questions before initiating this research study facilitated engagement with the complexities inherent in the intersection of power and privilege that forms the intersectional lived experience of both the researcher and the participants. Such questions included:

- How could this research and approach cause further marginalization, oppression, or harm?
- What are the power dynamics inherent in this research design?
- How could the researcher benefit from this study, and at what expense to participants?
- How does this research approach/design inhibit/make heard participant voices?

Referring to Trinh's (1989) exposure of how power inscribes itself in language, allowing language to act as a form of subjugation when oppressed groups' words are projected through a lens of a scientific, dominant and privileged filter, the researcher refrained from attempting to fit participant experiences into dominant ideologies. Further, the researcher refused to interpret results of the current study through her own experience or social location, and instead, privileged participant voices and consistently engaged in member-checking of emergent themes. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the photovoice methodology, a methodology based on feminist theory, will provide a detailed depiction of the thorough integration of a feminist theoretical foundation throughout the current study.

### **Photovoice**

As described by Wang and Burris (1997), the developers of the photovoice methodology, photovoice is a participatory action research strategy appropriate for use with vulnerable populations. Photovoice provides a means through which researchers can seek to understand the visually-perceived world of people and populations who are of

marginalized identities. Often, these individuals are depicted by the dominant culture, as opposed to being the producers of images of their worlds for themselves (Wang & Burris, 1997). Implementation of this methodology combats societal structures that underlie oppressed communities' experiences of lack of visibility, scarcity in power of self-definition, and insufficient opportunities to self-define. Thus, re-engaging the voices and experiences of these communities becomes critical.

### **Theoretical Background of Photovoice**

Photovoice emerged out of the theoretical principals of critical consciousness, feminist theory, documentary photography, and participatory action research. Understanding these theoretical underpinnings, then, is critical to understanding the context of the photovoice methodology.

**Critical consciousness.** Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and the creator of the idea of critical consciousness, a process in which individuals engage with the world in a manner that reveals that their actions impact their lived realities. Critical consciousness encourages individuals to intervene “in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 1970, p.73). Freirean philosophy hinges on oppressed groups recognizing the roles their assumptions about reality as well as their engagement in reality play in upholding the social norm and continuing their own oppression (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, the idea of critical consciousness can be transformed into action when oppressed people then critically shift their schemas, allowing for critical engagement with an oppressive society to transform the societal structure, and thus, their oppressed status (Freire, 1970, p. 74). About critical consciousness, Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain (2006) stated that

people's "own assumptions shape the interpretations of reality", and their "choices maintain or change that reality" (p. 373).

As a foundational component of photovoice, critical consciousness is exercised through participants having the power to take and present images to reflect their experiences of a concept or problem facing their communities. Wang and Burris (1997) referenced Freire's belief that the visual image can inspire critical consciousness and dialogue about "everyday social and political forces that influence their lives" (p. 370), and described photovoice as aligning with this belief through giving the power of photography, and thus the power of community depiction, back to the community in question.

**Feminist Theory.** Additionally, photovoice is based on feminist principles that transition the power of self-depiction and self-definition into the hands of people who experience oppression and discrimination, flipping the lens of the dominant society's view in exchange for participants' own definitions of the needs, strengths, and aims of their communities (Wang, 1999). Initially developed with a focus on men's power at the expense of women's disempowerment, feminist theory offers a framework through which to understand oppression, the existence and maintenance of systematic barriers that restrict access to resources and power at the expense of the oppressed group and benefit of the privileged group (Frye, 1983). Wang and Burris (1997) confronted oppression in research, critiquing the male lens and bias historically intrinsic to participatory research and exploring the power implicit in giving women and other marginalized and disempowered groups access to participation in portraying and labeling their own

experiences, upholding the belief that these individuals “have an expertise and insight into their own communities and worlds that professionals and outsiders lack” (p. 370). Further, Wang (1999) highlighted the significance of honoring experiences of oppressed groups by overturning the cultural norm and granting marginalized populations access to the power of self-definition, self-depiction, and self-representation.

**Documentary photography.** Documentary photography was defined by Roy Stryker, a critical individual in the documentary photography field, as “the things to be said in the language of pictures” (as cited in Wang & Burris, 1997). Similarly, Smith et al. (2012) defined documentary photography as “a method by which... community realities can be captured, explored, and expressed to policy makers and others” (p. 5). Both definitions are informed by the common use of this method to capture images of historical events, social movements, and peoples’ lived experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Participation in documenting an experience through pictures requires access to photographic equipment, which often necessitates a large amount of privilege available only to select groups. Wang and Burris (1997) highlighted the significant shift of power through implementing the photovoice methodology which places cameras into the hands of people and communities who might not otherwise have the means to access this equipment. Such a transition can transform these people into active creators of knowledge as opposed to passive subjects depicted by others (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998).

**Participatory Action Research.** Smith, Bratini, and Appio (2012) described Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a social-justice oriented research approach in which researchers work closely with and invite community members to examine community concerns or issues and choose appropriate courses of action to create change regarding identified issues. Smith et al. (2012) highlighted important components of PAR to be interpersonal connection resulting from the research-participant relationships, a sense of shared power between often privileged researchers and often marginalized participants, and the unique opportunity for participants who are typically depicted by the dominant culture to create knowledge for and about themselves. Further elaborating on the participant-researcher dynamic, Wang et al. (1998) defined participation to be *contractual* in that participants agree to participate in the research project, *consultative* in that researchers ask participants for opinions before making decisions or interventions, *collaborative* in that researchers and participants work together in a collective fashion, and *collegiate* in that researchers and participants respectfully engage to allow for mutual learning and shared power (p. 76).

Researchers using PAR have found that this methodology offers a myriad of positive outcomes beyond research findings for both participants (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Romero, 2010; Zaal & Terry, 2013) and researchers (Smith & Romero, 2010). Participants reported a sense of connection and relationship-building (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Romero, 2010;), a deeper sense of union with one's own community (Smith & Romero, 2010), an increased awareness of strengths (Smith, et al., 2012; Zaal & Terry, 2013) and agency (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Romero, 2010),

cultivation of new skill sets (Smith & Romero, 2010; Zaal & Terry, 2013), an increased sense of confidence (Pui Ling et al., 2010; Smith & Romero 2010; Zaal & Terry, 2013) and self-worth (Smith & Romero, 2010), and feelings of empowerment (Carlson, Engbretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Deacon, 2005; Smith et al., 2012). Researchers experienced close connections to participants, an opportunity to learn how to share power with participants, and an increased sense of self-awareness (Smith & Romero, 2010). Informed by PAR, the photovoice methodology similarly has the potential to benefit both participants and researchers.

### **Methodological Aims of Photovoice**

Aligned with the theoretical roots of critical consciousness, feminist theory, documentary photography, and PAR, Wang and Burris (1997) identified the main goals of photovoice to be:

to enable people to (1) record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers (p.370).

**Record and reflect experience.** To return power to the hands of people in marginalized communities, photovoice researchers give cameras to participants to enable them to visually record their experiences regarding community concerns, health issues, or community needs (Wang, 1999). Wang and Burris (1997) first used photovoice to engage community women involved with the Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program in a participatory needs assessment. This approach opposed

historical forms of needs assessments which valued researcher thoughts about what the community needs in exchange for community members' thoughts about what the community needs (Wang & Burris, 1997). In this foundational study, Wang and Burris (1997) facilitated Yunnan women's photography and discussion of community needs such as clean water, childcare, and transportation, and supported women in presenting these needs to policy makers. This implementation of a photovoice methodology allowed for visual and verbal communication of needs in a community where many women did not have the ability to engage in written communication and thus were unlikely to have a presence in policy development (Wang & Burris, 1997). In a review of the literature in which researchers employed a photovoice or photovoice-based methodology, Catalani and Minkler (2010) found that "enhanced understanding of community needs and assets among photovoice partners, service providers, local policy makers and other influential community members, and the broader community" was a major outcome of many studies (p. 444). The accessibility to communicating needs and assets of a community inherent within photovoice engages communities and people whose perspectives might otherwise be silenced.

**Promote critical dialogue.** Another aim of photovoice, promoting critical dialogue, is often actualized in the phase of the study defined by group discussion of photographs (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998). This stage offers participants the chance to share their selected photographs and accompanying stories or reactions to the images (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998). Community participants can engage in critical conversations about experiences of a need,

strength, or phenomenon as individuals and as a communal whole. For example, Smith et al. (2012) conducted a study with lower socioeconomic youth participants enrolled in an after-school program and found that through critical discussion of experiences, youth participants discovered a sense of belonging and connection with one another from the impact of sharing of individual perspectives which were linked to group similarities in experience. Throughout the dialogue, use of the SHOWeD paradigm creates an opportunity for participants to examine the visual depiction of their experiences, the underlying processes, thoughts, or feelings in the photographs and how they make meaning of their experiences, how the images relate to their lived experiences and why they exist, and what power the community has to change the situation (Wang, et al., 1998). The SHOWeD paradigm is composed of six processing questions: (1) What do you See here? (2) What is really Happening? (3) How does this relate to Our lives? (4) Why does this situation exist? (5) What has been your Experience taking/selecting the photographs? (6) What can we (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) Do about it? (Smith et al., 2012; Wang, 1999). Engagement with their own and the groups' photographs allows participants to process on many levels, moving from the individual experience to that of the participant group and that of the larger community, each yielding different perspectives and opportunities for action.

**Reach policymakers.** A main proposed method of action within photovoice is participant engagement with policymakers in an effort to effect a desired social change. Wang and Burris (1997) stated, “the images produced and the issues discussed and

framed by people may stimulate social action...to reach, inform, and organize community members, enabling them to prioritize their concerns and discuss problems and solutions” (p. 373). Upon reviewing past photovoice studies, Catalani and Minkler (2010) found that a majority (60%) of studies, led to some sort of collective action specifically addressing issues raised in the group discussion on a larger community platform that involved community figures and policy makers.

Expanding the potential impact of photovoice studies, Sanon, Evans-Agnew, and Boutain (2014) argued that the implementation of a photovoice methodology can have three potential outcomes: (1) *social justice awareness* which illuminates and offers insight into systems of oppression, privilege, and marginalization and the impact on lived experience within these systems; (2) *social justice amelioration* which reduces, diminishes, or alleviates ways in which oppression presents in specific contexts, not eliminating oppression, but rather changing acute manifestations of power hierarchies; and (3) *transformative action* which changes or shifts systems of oppression through implementing larger policy and systemic changes. All outcomes can either involve or highlight the need to involve policy makers in this action toward change.

### **Photovoice with LGBTQ Populations**

Among LGBTQ persons, outness is an experience that is individualized at both the person and couple level. The choice to be out or the access to expression of an out identity is complicated by many factors, including but not limited to safety, access to community, personal decision, surrounding supports, and weighing of the costs and benefits of this decision (Bradford et al., 1997; Klein et al., 2015, Knoble & Linville,

2012). With this awareness, the use of a photovoice methodology poses potential opportunities and challenges for participants who may not be “fully” out, yet photovoice has been used with LGBTQ populations (Grazino, 2004; Hussey, 2006; Klein et al., 2015; Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, & Kipke, 2012; Mamary, McCright, & Roe, 2007; Rhodes et al., 2015).

Supported by Alegría’s (2009) advocacy for the use of photovoice in marginalized populations, Klein et al. (2015) and Kubicek et al. (2012), used photovoice methodology with LGBTQ youth, potentially doubly marginalized population due to the intersection of age and LGBTQ identity. Klein et al. (2015) explored the process of coming out against the backdrop of heavily-criticized stage models for LGBTQ-identity development, explicating additional considerations when applying stage models, including individual factors related to coming out that were unique to participants and deviated from streamlined assumptions within stage models, the context of participants’ lived experiences that encouraged or inhibited coming out, and how participants understand the intricacies of their individualized coming out process that complicate application of stage models (Klein et al., 2015). After engaging in a thorough, consensus-based coding process, Klein et al. (2015) found that participants’ narratives contrasted historically-accepted notions of linearity in the coming out process as well as the belief that increased degrees of outness correlate to higher degrees of health, morality, and political usefulness. Participants discussed the experiences of hiding one’s identity from one’s self and the complex process of internally working to understand one’s identity as connected to the consideration of intersectional factors such as socioeconomic status,

race, family status, and geographic location when critically engaging with the coming out process (Klein et al., 2015). In this exploration Klein et al. (2015) facilitated the elevation of voices that are so often spoken for by mental health theories and adults, highlighting the experiences of fear, assessing for safety, understanding the risks inherent in coming out, and seeking acceptance from the self and others as well as institutional, friend, family, and queer community support. Collectively, the researchers presented findings to contest the use of a linear model of coming out in counseling, as such models assume that a person who is more out is therefore healthier (Klein et al., 2015). Instead, Klein et al. (2015) argued for a model and mental health perspective that recognizes the way in which outness is navigated differently for all and that must be understood from each individual's multifaceted perspective. The sample was diverse in gender identity and sexual orientation, including transgender participants as well as lesbian, gay, pansexual, bisexual, queer, questioning, straight, and asexual participants. Unfortunately, however, the sample was limited demographically as participants were predominantly white and college-educated, limiting transferability to queer communities of color and those with less educational experience. One additional limitation was the researchers' choice to extend inclusion criteria to incorporate anyone who identified as a part of the queer community, thereby allowing a child of a queer parent to participate (Klein et al., 2015). Though only one participant did not identify as queer, themselves, this methodological choice complicates results in that the experience of coming out as a child of a queer individual seems essentially different from the experience of coming out as queer oneself.

Kubicek et al. (2012) also integrated youth into their research, studying African American young men who have sex with men (AAYMSM) through an adapted photovoice methodology, incorporating a photovoice assignment into an exploratory study for the development of a discussion group curriculum. Researchers asked AAYMSM to portray their goals in life and challenges in building long-lasting relationships through bringing in photographs of these concepts (Kubicek et al., 2012). Submitted photographs depicted relationship goals such as buying a house with a romantic partner and being involved in a monogamous, long-term relationship and inspired dialogue about the importance of communication in creating a lasting and strong relationship (Kubicek et al., 2012). Participants also discussed challenges and barriers to maintaining monogamous, long-lasting relationships, including experiencing infidelity, establishing trust, building a healthy relationship in the presence of discrimination and homophobia from family and larger society (Kubicek et al., 2012). Though this study was successful in helping researchers develop an HIV-prevention curriculum, the photovoice methodology was not complete in its execution as it lacked group discussion guided by the SHOWeD paradigm and a component of action or engagement with policy makers. Nonetheless, the components of photovoice that were used did engage participants in critical dialogue of their experiences as AAYMSM and allowed for visual depiction of these experiences, and with further participant involvement regarding participants' ability to shift this experience and engage with the larger community, researchers might have been able to witness the impact of this work on a broader scale.

In addition to these studies on youth, researchers also have used photovoice with adult LGBTQ populations (Grazino, 2004; Hussey, 2006; Mamary et al., 2007; Rhodes et al., 2015). For example, exploring the use of photovoice with African American men who have sex with men (AAMSM) but do not identify as gay, Mamary et al. (2007) asked participants to depict the experience of challenges and protective factors with consideration to HIV prevention, finding three main themes: “(1) The importance of a black identity, (2) factors inhibiting HIV prevention, and (3) factors that maintain health or promote health” (p.363). Participants felt that sexual behavior was only a fragment of their larger identity as African American men and identified systemic barriers to HIV prevention to be the discomfort in discussing HIV within their Black communities, the pervasive community stigma about men who have sex with men, and experiencing fewer HIV prevention efforts directed toward Black communities when compared to the surplus directed toward white gay men. Furthermore, participants indicated that the stigma created a need for secrecy, limiting both the ability to be out about having sex with men and the availability of safe and private spaces in which participants could have sex with other men, thus increasing HIV risk (Mamary et al., 2007). Although the sample in this study was homogenous in geographic location and socioeconomic status, limiting transferability, the researchers’ implementation of photovoice integrated the three main components of photovoice by opening a space for participants to depict their experiences, critically engage in group discussion of the pictures, and create a photography exhibit to educate the community (Mamary et al., 2007).

Grazino (2004) expanded the breadth of photovoice research with LGBTQ populations integrating a comparative component by studying Black gay men and lesbians in post-Apartheid South Africa to explore forms of oppression participants may have experienced as well as their perceived relationships to and differences from white lesbians and gay men in the region. Participants discussed themes such as having awareness of interracial dating and the power dynamics implicit in a relationship between themselves and a white oppressor, the shared experience of race-based classism and a lack of access to healthcare and education, the process of finding community and safe social spaces outside of the white gay and lesbian spaces that are more widely available and visible than those for black gay and lesbian people and within a space in which black gay and lesbian people are disproportionately subjected to violence and victimization (Grazino, 2004). Through the photovoice methodology, researchers provided participants with a space to process shared experiences of identifying as Black and gay and lesbian as well as the experience of hope and resilience within the experience of oppression (Grazino, 2004). Researchers modified the photovoice methodology by first holding individual interviews to process photographs before holding a group codifying session (Grazino, 2004), potentially failing to capture the nuances of group discussion and the group process while participants are in the formative stages of meaning making. Grazino (2004) did defer to participants, however for finding themes and include an action stage, which allowed participants to showcase photographs in the community, upholding many of the core components of PAR and photovoice.

Additionally, some researchers have used photovoice specifically with trans communities, such as Rhodes et al. (2015) who studied Latina transgender women's experience living in the southeastern United States and Hussey (2006) who explored transgender males' experiences in accessing health care. Hussey (2006) found that participants shared experiences of vulnerability, invisibility, and gender-based, denigrating treatment within the healthcare system (i.e., hospitals, clinics, insurance companies). Hussey also found themes in participants' perseverance to find accessible and affirming health care, activism surrounding the expansion and sharing of these resources with others in the community, and their analyses of medical provider approaches, understanding and respect of their identities, and competence to work medically with trans-identified individuals (Hussey, 2006). Like Grazino (2004), Hussey's (2006) study included only individual discussion of photographs, also lacking the experience of the group discussion characteristic of photovoice, but participants were invited to participate in identifying themes with the researcher, aligning with the participatory nature of photovoice. Though no collective action was taken, significant themes such as *the health care system, provider competence, vulnerability, invisibility, perseverance, and activism* emerged to inform healthcare providers of the needs and strengths of this community.

Exploring another facet of trans communities, Rhodes et al. (2015) researched the intersection of transgender identity and Latina identity, finding themes of "daily challenges" such as health, discrimination, and anxiety surrounding family acceptance, "needs and priorities" such as health care, emotional support, and collective action, and

“community strengths and assets” such as life goals, psychosocial and institutional support, and survival strategies (p. 87). Contrasting Hussey (2006), Rhodes et al. (2015) adhered to photovoice protocol, holding multiple group discussions and organizing a community forum to satisfy the critical component of engaging with policy makers. Researchers also seemed to value participant input in structuring an iterative interpretive process, deferring to participants for feedback on the emergent themes (Rhodes et al., 2015).

### **Using Photovoice with LGBTQ Participants: Opportunities and Challenges**

Considering the substantial amount of existing literature on the use of photovoice methodology with LGBTQ and marginalized populations, implementing this methodology with individuals in same-gender couples posed a myriad of both opportunities for success and population-specific and methodology-specific challenges. Photovoice, highly visual in nature and founded on the use of pictorial evidence matches the conceptualization of outness as a construct defined by visibility. The current study offered a sense of queer community to LGBTQ individuals, something cited by participants in previous research as important (Klein et al., 2015). Holding discussion groups allowed members of LGBTQ communities to come together and not only build relationships, but begin to build a united and collaborative vision of their current social climate and areas in which change is desired. Also, echoing Hannay et al.’s (2013) findings of photovoice increasing racially marginalized participants’ confidence and ability to speak out, the current project aimed to facilitate self- and community-empowerment by providing a forum for the voices of LGBTQ people who often go

unheard. Hannay et al. (2013) also found that the addition of photographic data added credibility to participants' stories and life experiences, and in the current study, images added credibility to the power structures implicit in the social environment and the impact of such structures on one's identity presentation and interpersonal relationship dynamics and satisfaction. Additionally, coming together in a collaborative fashion within discussion groups provided another space in which participants felt safe to be out, if outness was an individual desire. Hannay et al. (2013) utilized photovoice within parent-child dyads working to explore barriers to and then engage Latina youth in community after-school programs. Aligning with the researcher's hopes for the current study, participants in Hannay et al.'s (2013) study cited benefits of feeling like their voices were heard, engaging in advocacy, subverting cultural-based stigma, and increasing access to initiating structural and policy changes within their communities.

Though many possible benefits may emerge from participating in a photovoice study, a holistic assessment requires flipping the lens to explore the challenges of implementing a photovoice project with LGBTQ individuals. One challenge may be the effect of social roles on participants' photographic choices (Wang et al., 1998). Applied to the current study in which LGBTQ participants with varying degrees of outness were asked to depict their experiences in a wide array of social arenas, their degree of outness and the way it constructs or constricts their social roles may have confined what is depicted in photographs. Additionally, due to photographs being visible and tangible representations of experience (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998), participants who are less out are at greater risk of identity exposure and retaliatory actions through

taking and sharing photographs, a reality that also may constrain images portrayed and cause anxiety surrounding mere participation in the current study. With consideration to the final stage of action and engagement with policy makers, participants might also feel anxious to share their work in community forums (Becker et al., 2014), especially if they are not used to being recognized for their work or identity.

Additionally, logistical concerns can impact a photovoice project. Some researchers have cited a downfall of using photovoice to be the large amount of time it often takes to complete the photovoice protocol (Hannay et al., 2013; Wang et al., 1998), which seems to require buy-in and significant time commitment from participants. Considering the amount of time required from participants, it would seem beneficial to conduct studies assessing the long-term impact of photovoice studies, potentially justifying time spent, but no such studies exist to date (Catalani & Minkler, 2009).

Considering the opportunities and challenges of photovoice presented in previous research as well as correlating these to use of this methodology with a marginalized population like LGBTQ individuals emphasizes the need for power-conscious, compassionate, and socially-responsible engagement by the researcher. One way of including these critical components of engagement in participant-researcher interactions is to include participants in as many parts of the research process as possible, such as the development of themes and decisions regarding action-oriented strategies. Thus, the researcher followed the lead of the participants, honoring their voices, needs, strengths, and experiences by trusting their agency in the photovoice process.

## **Summary**

In Chapter One, the researcher described the need for and purpose of the study. Chapter Two included a detailed reviewed, analysis, and synthesis of the available related literature related to LGBTQ identity, outness, relationship satisfaction in same-gender romantic relationships, and the photovoice methodology. Next, Chapter Three includes a thorough description of the photovoice methodology and the results of a pilot study. Throughout Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the results and implications of the full study are considered.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

In Chapter One, an exploration was offered of the social, political, and mental health contexts of LGBTQ individuals, along with a contextualization of outness as a shared experience among this population, and a proposal to better understand the phenomenon of outness as related to relationship satisfaction and fill a gap in the existing literature. A thorough review of the literature surrounding outness within the LGBTQ community followed in Chapter Two. In this chapter, an outline is provided for the proposed research study, including the selection of the participant sample, instrumentation, methodological procedures, and data analysis.

#### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain depth in understanding the experience of individuals in same-gender couples' regarding outness as it relates to relationship satisfaction within their adult romantic relationships within their various lived domains. Through understanding themes in the meanings participants ascribe to visual depictions of outness in various settings (i.e., familial, social, religious, legal, work, etc.), insight into this nuanced experience emerged. Additionally, depending on participants' aspirations, the potential existed for participants to engage with policy makers or community advocacy efforts through presenting findings in whatever way participants

chose. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, there were no hypotheses. The following research questions guided this study:

- **Research Question 1.** How do individuals in same-gender couples make sense of and/or apply meaning to visual depictions of outness within their same-gender romantic relationships?
- **Research Question 2.** How do individuals in same-gender couples experience the construct of outness as related to relationship satisfaction within and outside of their relationships and within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, social media, work, spiritual, and public contexts?

## **Participants**

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Participants were selected through criterion-based, snowball sampling. Specifically, participants needed to meet the criteria of (a) living in the United States and being willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting approximately 1.5 – 2 hours, (b) self-identifying as LGBTQ, (c) being at least 24 years of age, (d) being currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and (e) having access to a computer. Due to recruitment challenges within North Carolina, expanding the opportunity to participate to participants living in various regions of North Carolina as well as outside of North Carolina allowed for more geographic diversity. Though the researcher was unable to maintain the goal of recruiting

participants from a similar sociopolitical context, potentially due to the political violence of North Carolina's legislation, such as House Bill 2 (HB2; Domonoske, 2016), this criterion expansion also allowed the integration of people from different sociopolitical contexts.

Additionally, the researcher decided to conduct two online discussion groups due to participant requests to participate in an online discussion group for sake of maintaining anonymity. This methodological shift seemed necessary to invite participants who might be less out to participate in a more anonymous format and to maintain the researcher's commitment to feminist research that honors participant autonomy (Daly, Costa, & Ross, 2015). Through requiring that participants internally identify as a part of the LGBTQ community, even if not publicly out, the researcher aimed to recruit a sample to whom the construct of outness applied. For example, if a person identifies as heterosexual and cisgender, yet participates in same-gender sexual or romantic interactions, this person's self-identification within a non-marginalized identity category minimizes the potential for the person to engage with outness as a lived experience, thus making the study of their experience of outness irrelevant. Limiting inclusion to participants of at least 24 years of age eliminated the barrier of gaining parental consent for participation and minimized risk to underage individuals of being depicted in photographs without consent or without the ability to give consent. Additionally, the researcher chose the age of 24 to account for the developmental definition of adulthood (Wallis, 2013) which potentially allowed for recruitment of participants who had been involved in a same gender romantic relationship for a longer part of their adult lives. Finally, due to the nature of the study design, the

researcher chose to include only participants who were actively engaged in an adult, same-gender relationship for at least 6 months to provide individual data regarding the experience of outness while engaged in a relationship, an experience that is simultaneously intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling through mediums such as online support resources (i.e., PFLAG websites, LGBTQ chat rooms, etc.); queer bar websites and Facebook groups; emails through national LGBTQ, multicultural, and advocacy center listservs; and email, phone, or in-person contact with queer social groups within the North Carolina and larger LGBTQ community (see Appendix B: Snowball Sampling Recruitment Email). To recruit a racially diverse sample, emails were also sent to organizers of local and national Black Pride, Latina/o Pride, Asian Pride, and American Indian Pride boards. Though using an online recruitment format assumed privilege in one's access to a computer, this seemed justified as it may have located more demographically diverse individuals. In an additional effort to reach populations who may have lower levels of outness, emails were sent to counselors and directors of counseling centers in North Carolina and to national counseling listservs (i.e., ALGBTIC, CESNET, etc.), asking counselors and counselor educators to distribute information to any clients, students, or colleagues who might feel safe to participate in the study. Aligning with the foundation of snowball sampling, potential participants who received information about the study were asked to forward the information to other individuals who met the inclusion criteria.

Though researchers conducting past studies with LGBTQ individuals have experienced difficulties in acquiring samples diverse in race, class, ethnicity, and gender identity (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevec, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005), an attempt was made to select for diverse representation of social groups if the flexibility presented within the sample to potentially increase transferability of study findings. Further supporting the potential for transferability, the researcher aimed to include bisexual and trans individuals in recruitment efforts, though the researcher limited the sample to those individuals currently in same-gender relationships. This limitation was necessary, because bisexual and trans individuals in heterosexual relationships, regardless of their non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identity, retain access to societal privileges afforded to heterosexual unions and may not experience the construct of outness.

To access demographic information for use in intentionally selecting a diverse sample, the researcher included in the recruitment email an electronic link to a demographic questionnaire that participants were asked to complete (see Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire). Prior to formally inviting participants to participate in the study, the researcher reviewed questionnaires to ensure that participants satisfied all inclusion criteria, and selected for a participant pool diverse in the demographic aspects measured in an effort to address the existing gap in the research (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Todosijevec et al., 2005).

Though some photovoice studies have used sample sizes as large as 40 (Lenz & Sangganjanavanich, 2013), Wang (1999) defined an ideal discussion group to be 7-10 participants. Recruiting a sample size that satisfied Wang's (1999) identified range yet allowed for some attrition over the course of the study, the researcher initially aimed to select 14-20 participants to allow for two separate online discussion groups of 7-10 participants each. Understanding that fear of being *outed*, or identified as a part of the LGBTQ community, might limit potential participant involvement, the researcher included measures taken to address this risk in the recruitment email (see Appendix B: Snowball Sampling Recruitment Email).

### **Instruments**

Potential participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire through Google Forms prior to selection for participation in the study. Open-ended items about gender identity and appropriate pronouns, sexual orientation identity, age, race, ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic status, and geographic location were included on the questionnaire. The researcher also created questions inquiring about the participant's partner's gender, sexuality, and age as well as cohabitation status. Additionally, participants were asked to indicate how long they have been in their current relationship, how long they have been out in varying arenas, and how their level of outness compared to their partner's level of outness in each arena, as indicated by participant provided answers on a Likert scale (see Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire). Formatting these items to be open-ended potentially reduced societal and researcher bias regarding categorization of identity by allowing participants to use self-

determined language in expressing their identities. The researcher hoped the use of this questionnaire would assist in recruitment of a sample diverse in race, gender, gender identity, class, sexual orientation identity, ethnicity, and level of outness, enhancing transferability of results. Sample selection proved difficult as many potential participants contacted the researcher to state an interest in participating in the study, but later discontinued participation for reasons such as fear of outing themselves, breaking up with their romantic partner (making them ineligible to continue participating), or not having enough time to follow through with the study. Therefore, the researcher accepted all participants who volunteered to be in the study to decrease rate of attrition and access an sample adequate in size.

### **Procedures**

To explore and better understand the construct of outness regarding LGBTQ relationship satisfaction, a photovoice methodology was employed. To prepare for finding themes in all study artifacts, including the two discussions, photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers and to triangulate the data, the principal researcher coordinated a research team of three members, including the principal researcher who coded the data, an additional researcher from the primary researcher's dissertation committee who added a second perspective in coding the data, and an auditor who reviewed the collective obtained themes. Due to the principal researcher identifying as a part of the LGBTQ community, the principal researcher selected an additional researcher who is not a part of the LGBTQ community. The principal researcher made the intentional choice to include a voice that could challenge the principal researcher's

unconscious assumptions or biases from the perspective of an outsider to the LGBTQ community. The additional researcher's social identity as a white, English-speaking, currently upper-middle class with a history of lower socioeconomic status in childhood, "uber-liberal" Christian, heterosexual, cis-male who experiences some age-related ability limitations and has earned a PhD contrasts that of the principal researcher who identifies as a queer, differently-abled, middle class, English-speaking, spiritual-but-not-religious, Latina who is in pursuit of a PhD. The auditor is a person who identifies as a white, English-speaking, middle-class, progressive and liberal Christian, mostly able-bodied lesbian, cis-woman with a PhD.

All members of the research team—the two coders and the auditor—have knowledge of counseling and relationship dynamics, offering a nuanced perspective in this role. More specifically, the research team has a collective 48 years of counseling experience, 42 years of counseling experience specifically with LGBTQ clients, 34 years supervising counselors-in-training, and 34 years teaching counseling courses. Additionally, the research team has collectively presented 21 presentations and/or trainings related to LGBTQ communities. The principal researcher, is currently completely out in all areas and spaces. More specifically, the principal researcher has been out in family arenas for 8 years, friendship and social arenas for 9 years, spiritual arenas for 9 years, social media arenas for 8 years, school arenas for 9 years, work and professional arenas for 8 years, and public arenas for 9 years.

It is important to note that prior to the collection of any data, meeting of discussion groups, and start of analysis, the research team bracketed experiences and

biases as they related to LGBTQ identity, outness, and same-gender relationships, answering Chamberlain's (2011) call to researchers using IPA to critically engage with and clarify biases and assumptions relevant to an interpretative study (See Appendix P: Bracketing Guide for all bracketing questions). After bracketing was complete, the principal researcher was ready to begin selecting the sample.

In selecting the sample, the researcher aimed to select a sample diverse in social location and demographics, however, due to difficulty recruiting a large participant pool and a high rate of attrition due to participants leaving the study due to fear of outing themselves, not having enough time to follow through with all steps, or breaking up with their partners, thus rendering them ineligible to participate, the researcher selected all interested participants to participate in the full study. After the participant sample was finalized, all participants were invited to watch a web-based training video created by the researcher and posted on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) lasting approximately 15 minutes in duration during which participants (a) received education on the photovoice project design, methodology, and research questions; (b) acquired general electronic informed consent information, including education about participation criteria, the potential for harm (i.e., taking a picture of and exposing someone who is not publicly out), ethical considerations, and rights of non-participants (i.e., the right to avoid identity exposure by a picture that is taken when consent is not given); and (c) learned camera techniques. Participants were provided with a direct link to watch the training as well as an electronic document detailing and expanding upon topics covered in the video (see Appendix G: Steps for

Completing Your Photovoice Project). Additionally, participants were informed that they could email the researcher with any questions or concerns regarding the training video.

To make participation accessible, regardless of socioeconomic status, each participant was offered one, 27-exposure disposable camera, basic instructions for use, and a stipend for developing the pictures with a postage-paid envelope for mailing the photographs back to the researcher. Participants were informed, however, that they were welcome to use personal cameras or phone cameras, if accessible and desired. All participants opted to use their own photo-taking devices due to the ease of photograph review, editing, and uploading these devices afforded.

After completing the training, the researcher gave participants instructions to begin the data collection process over the course of the next two weeks (see Appendix G: Steps for Completing Your Photovoice Project). Each individual was asked to take 10 photographs aimed at depicting their perception of outness within their relationship as it manifested in varying arenas. Additionally, individuals were asked to keep in mind the way their experience of outness connected to their satisfaction with their relationship when taking photographs. At the end of the two-week period, participants were asked to email pictures to the researcher for uploading to the private google drive folder shared between the researcher and the participant or to directly upload pictures to the drive from their device. After all photographs were received and uploaded, the participants entered stage one of critical reflection (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998).

### **Stage One: Selecting Photographs**

As participants entered the critical reflection phase of the project, each participant was directed to select 3 of their photographs that most adequately conveyed their intended ideas. Participants were asked to develop a title and caption describing how each of their selected photographs depicted their experience of outness and/or satisfaction within their relationship (Baker & Wang, 2006), and submitted selections to the researcher via the google drive folder in preparation for group discussion.

### **Stage Two: Contextualizing and Storytelling**

During this phase of the project, participants were asked to prepare for group discussion of photographs and captions. Prior to this meeting, the researcher modified Wang's (1999) interpretive paradigm as amended by Smith, Brattini, and Appio (2012), using the acronym SHOWED. Smith, Brattini, & Appio's (2012) paradigm asked the following questions (1) What do you See here? (2) What is really Happening? (3) How does this relate to Our lives? (4) Why does this situation exist? (5) What has been your Experience taking/selecting the photographs? (6) What can we (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) Do about it? (Smith et al., 2012; Wang, 1999). The researcher amended the paradigm to be more reflective of a counseling approach and to better elicit responses related to the research questions. The amended SHOWED paradigm was as follows (1) What is the Significance of this photograph? (2) How does this photograph depict your sense of satisfaction within your relationship? (3) How does this relate to Our lives as LGBTQ individuals in same-gender romantic relationships? (4) What does this photograph say about your outness in

this context? (5) How would you describe your Experience and Emotions taking/selecting this photograph? (6) What feels important for us (participants, researches, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now? Notably, participants entered into Stage Two: Contextualizing and Storytelling individually, as participants were asked to answer all components of the modified showed paradigm and submit answers with their photograph titles and captions prior to and for use in the group discussion. This deviation from typical protocol was necessary to allow for increased discussion time of a larger number of participant photographs in the larger group.

In preparation for group discussion, the researcher separated the groups by participant availability as assessed by the administration of a private Doodle poll. The researcher also made sure to place participants involved in the same romantic relationship into separate discussion groups. When participants met for their scheduled online group discussion, the researcher had compiled all photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigms submitted by participants in that specific discussion group into an electronic document. The researcher intentionally limited included photographs to only those taken by participants in each specific group to respect the privacy of participants who were placed in separate groups due to being involved in romantic relationships with one another. Before each online discussion began, the researcher introduced herself and then asked the participants to take 15 minutes to view and engage with the electronic document of all compiled photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigms.

The two online discussion groups were held via the chat feature on WebEX and were thus automatically transcribed as a function of the program software that provided a complete history of the conversation between participants and the researcher.

### **Stage Three: Identifying Themes**

After 15 minutes passed, the researcher asked participants to return their focus to the group and began guiding discussion of all photographs and accompanying materials, asking participants to consider any themes (Wang, 2006; Wang et al., 2004; Wang et al., 1998) they felt had emerged from discussion. For the purpose of participant discussion, a theme was defined as having “at least 4 compelling photographs [or] stories that emerged during group discussion” (Wang et al., 2004, p. 912). The researcher guided discussion of themes using these focus questions:

Q1) What did you notice about the pictures?

- a. Which pictures stood out to you?
- b. What ideas/thoughts felt new to you in regard to outness in your relationship?
- c. What ideas/thoughts felt new to you in regard to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in your relationship?
- d. What ideas/thoughts felt familiar in regard to outness in your relationship?
- e. What ideas/thoughts felt familiar in regard to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in your relationship?
- f. What emotions did you feel when viewing the pictures?

Q2) What themes did you see in the pictures, titles, captions, and SHOWED paradigms?

- a. What were repeated images, ideas, or experiences specifically related to outness in same-gender romantic relationships?
- b. What were repeated images, ideas, or experiences specifically related to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in same-gender romantic relationships?
- c. What were other general repeated images, ideas, or experiences?

Q3) How did participation in this study impact you, your experience of outness, and your experience of relationship satisfaction?

- a. How did you experience your outness shift?
- b. How did you experience your outness about your relationship shift?
- c. How did you experience your relationship change?
- d. How did you experience overall satisfaction in your relationship change?
- e. Would you like to share any further comments about your experience of the process of participating in this study?

#### **Stage Four: Planning for Action**

Before group discussion ended, the researcher revisited (6) of the SHOWED paradigm (i.e., What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?), defining *us* to be inclusive of people in power at all levels, inviting participants to engage in critical thought and dialogue about their power to effect change and desired responses from their communities at large. The researcher facilitated a collective discussion among

the group members exploring if or how they wanted to see the results of this study used within the community, aligning with Dermer, Smith, and Barto's (2010) statement that ideal photovoice studies will terminate with raising awareness of community members and leaders, policymakers, journalists, and stakeholders. Some potential ways participants could have opted to engage in action included, but were not limited to, addressing or increasing visibility of the issues related to outness and sexuality- or gender-based oppression, creating safe spaces, or advocating for larger policy change. Aligning with the founding of photovoice on Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Wang, et al., 1998), the researcher facilitated this final portion of group discussion to provide space and time for the group to reach consensus in determining the type of change they collectively hoped to effect and the means for doing so. In order to begin preparation for the group's action plan, the researcher gained consent from all participants, indicating if the researcher had permission to reprint all participant photographs, selected participant photographs, or no participant photographs for use in the project and dissertation (See Appendix N: Consent to Reprint/Use Participant Photographs).

### **Data Analysis**

After facilitating discussion of all photographs, the researcher began the process of analyzing the pictorial, written, and transcript data. In many photovoice studies, researchers allude to finding themes in discussion of photographs without identifying specific analyses employed (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Moya et al., 2013; Seitz et al., 2012; Wang, 1999; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). Thus, to

answer research questions one and two through analysis of all submitted photographs, titles, captions, modified SHOWED answers, and discussion group transcripts, the researcher chose to use a pre-existing and known guide designed for analysis of participant and group transcripts, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodological choice was supported by Plunkett, Leipert, and Ray's (2013) argument for the alliance of photovoice and phenomenological analysis, citing the potential for photovoice to deepen understanding of the experience of a phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) characterized IPA by "the close, line-by-line analysis of [participants'] experiential claims, concerns, and understandings" of a phenomenon (as cited in McLeod, 2011, p. 148), and Smith and Osborn (2008) stated that IPA "is concerned with what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to take their side" (p. 53).

Considering that IPA is an approach founded upon "find[ing] out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 55), this analytic method aligned with the research questions and the values of egalitarian participant-researcher interaction implicit in photovoice methodology. Often, researchers have used IPA to find emerging themes within transcriptions of semi-structured interviews, and though IPA has traditionally been used in analysis of individual interviews (McLeod, 2011), it was carefully applied to analyzing transcripts of the group discussions, submitted photographs and supporting titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers with the acknowledgement that the group structure and presence of group members could have

generated themes and data that differed in content or depth from that of individual interviews (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Some strengths in using IPA as an analytical framework included sensitivity to identifying differences in experience across participants (McLeod, 2011) and the dual-leveled interpretation or “double hermeneutic” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53) of empathic understanding that allowed for empathizing with a participant in their process of making sense of their experience. Additionally, the critical understanding that allowed the researcher to analyze participant artifacts to “make sense of the participants’ meaning making” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and IPA’s foundation in idiography, allowed the researcher to focus intensely on one participant submission before moving to the next, resulting in in-depth analysis with the potential to yield themes of similarities while honoring participant differences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This idiographic lens allowed the researcher to acknowledge diversity in each participant’s experience, especially with consideration to intersectional identities as the research team began the stages of transcript analysis, as presented by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014).

### **Stage One: Conducting Multiple Readings of Transcripts**

The first stage of analysis required that the two coders, the principal and additional researcher, closely read and engage with the group transcripts and all participant artifacts, including photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers, multiple times to become immersed in not only the transcriptional data, but the holistic memory and present experience of the discussion groups and artifacts. With each reading and viewing, the coders noted any insights, reflections, or thoughts that become

present. Additionally, the coders made notes regarding content, participant use of language, participant emotion, context, reflexive insight, and early interpretative ideas (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The coders formatted this stage by writing annotations in the left-hand margin so they aligned with the relevant portion of the transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### **Stage Two: Developing Themes from Notes**

After thorough review and annotation, the coders returned to the beginning of the transcript, and, in the right margin, the coders started to identify any emerging themes to “capture the essential quality of what was found in the text” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 68). Smith and Osborne (2008) described this stage as drawing theoretical connections between participant words and higher-level classifications, creating a more concise phrasing and abstract understanding of the transcript (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The coders continued examination of the entire transcript in search of emerging themes, duplicating themes if this was appropriate (Smith & Osborne, 2008).

### **Stage Three: Finding Connections among Themes**

The third analytical stage involved finding connections between developed themes and clustering the themes that were conceptually alike (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008). In this stage, the coders reflexively checked the transcript to ensure that identified theme clusters accurately represented the participants’ actual words (Smith & Osborne, 2008). After this was complete, the coders met to discuss obtained themes and explore areas of similarity and difference between findings. After

coding the data independently, this meeting allowed for the coders to collectively review themes to enhance trustworthiness and accountability.

#### **Stage Four: Presenting the Themes**

The fourth stage for analysis of the group transcript was characterized by organizing all themes and clusters into a table format. The principal researcher developed names for each cluster and indicated in the table where the theme could be in the transcript. Smith and Osborne (2008) recommended including a textual excerpt, page number, and line number of the relevant text. In this stage, the coders elected to drop certain themes that lacked substantial text support (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

#### **Stage Five: Sending Transcripts and Themes to Auditor**

Upon completion of the table, the principal researcher then sent the original transcripts, all participant artifacts, and theme table to the auditor for review and triangulation of data. The auditor was made aware of themes from the group transcript and the ways in which the two coders diverged in their finding of themes, satisfying Brocki and Wearden's (2006) call for the use of more than one coder on a research team. Additionally, the auditor searched for additional emerging themes. The auditor did not identify any unidentified themes, so it was not necessary for the two coders to revisit the full transcript.

#### **Stage Six: Member Checking**

After the coders and auditor agreed upon themes, the principal researcher used member checking to ensure that emergent themes aligned with participants' perceptions

of the group discussion and protected participant anonymity. The researcher electronically sent themes to all participants, and solicited participant feedback, after which the researcher and second coder began the final stage of analysis.

### **Stage Seven: Constructing a Final Table**

To complete data analysis, the researcher reviewed all themes and clusters to construct a final table of superordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher then decided which themes could be dropped and which were most relevant based on theme prevalence within data, richness of supporting primary source data, and the theme's connection to other superordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This table was then submitted to the second coder and auditor before finalization, as another way to maintain integrity of the themes.

### **Limitations**

Possible limitations of this study included methodological risks, accessibility, and bias. Due to the use of photographs in photovoice methodology, participants assumed greater risk associated with living in a marginalized community where increased visibility potentially compromises safety and could lead to reactive harm by others. Wang and Burris (1997) validated the presence of risk when participants choose to document their communities and discuss social and political change or identity, highlighting the significance of addressing this possibility with participants. To decrease this risk, participants were initially instructed to use personal judgment when choosing which photographs they felt were appropriate and safe to take and use as well as when determining in which spaces it was safe to engage in photography. The researcher asked

participants to prioritize safety and comfort considerations regarding themselves, friends, families, and their communities.

Due to the nature of photovoice relying on personal judgment of participants, another limitation included the possibility of group discussion being swayed based on which images participants chose to take, avoid, and include for discussion as well as which images participants chose to leave out of discussion and the study (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997). Furthermore, the discussion of the photographs may be complex and biased (Wang & Burris, 1997) based on which themes or topics the group shows more interest in discussing, a limitation the researcher addressed through utilizing transcriptions of group discussions paired with using IPA to capture the nuances of group dialogue.

Considering limitations to accessibility, it was difficult to obtain a demographically diverse sample due to the initial attempt to limit the geographic location of participants. Even with this criterion of proximity, traveling for this project assumed a certain amount of privilege; travel required that participants have access to transportation, funds with which to travel, and freedom from constraints such as finding childcare or being unable to miss work, potentially limiting the range of diversity in participants' socioeconomic statuses. To address this, the researcher amended the traditional in-person photovoice training, introducing a web-based training to reduce the financial and time costs for potential participants and possibly increase accessibility to participate. The researcher also eliminated both the geographic criterion, expanding recruitment to any state in the U.S., in the hopes that the geographic expansion would increase recruitment

success by offering the option to participate to people who live in potentially less-threatening and less sociopolitically oppressive state climates. For example, the passage of House Bill 2 (HB2, 2016), as previously discussed, created an overwhelming sense of fear and lack of safety within LGBTQ communities in North Carolina (Domonoske, 2016; Gordon Price, & Peralta, 2016; Phillips, 2016). Additionally, the researcher eliminated the in-person discussion group in exchange for two online discussion groups to lessen the risk and increase the safety of participation by increasing the potential for participant anonymity.

Additionally, due to the voluntary nature of this study, those who volunteered to participate seemed already to have been out in many or all contexts of their lives. Outness is an experience that is extremely personal to an individual. With this said, a photovoice methodology does pose a challenge for LGBTQ participants who are not fully out. Recruitment of less-out individuals was not as successful as the researcher had hoped, even after sending recruitment materials to support services, such as LGBTQ centers and counseling agencies that help during the coming out process, to address this limitation.

Connecting to the goal of intentionally engaging with participants, Wang and Burris (1997) identified one aim of photovoice as heightening the voices of participants without catering the research project to the desires and expectations of the researcher. Thus, it was critical that the researchers bracket biases and remain as neutral as possible when giving responses and posing questions during facilitation of discussion groups. Additionally, the researchers worked to address bias through detailed exploration of each researcher's individual experience. Furthermore, the principal researcher selected a

second coder who was not affiliated with the LGBTQ community with the intention of creating opportunity to be challenged by a different perspective.

## **Pilot Study**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the pilot study was to test the photovoice process. The researcher instituted the photovoice methodology as outlined; however, instead of recruiting participants through snowball sampling, the researcher invited two LGBTQ-identified individuals who were out to the researcher and involved in separate same-gender romantic relationships. The researcher implemented the pilot study to test the photovoice methodology and acquire critical feedback and insights for assistance in improving the full study.

### **Participants**

The researcher selected the pilot study participants after the two individuals expressed an interest in the research modality and the experience of outness. The researcher was already acquainted with the two participants through a shared involvement in similar social arenas. After discussing the topic of the study, the researcher invited the two selected participants to take part in the pilot study. To maintain consistency, both participants met all inclusion criteria required of participants in the full study.

### **Procedures**

First, the researcher electronically sent the initial demographic questionnaire to be used for participant selection through Google Forms. The researcher aimed to gain

general feedback about the questionnaire, which included open-ended items about gender identity and appropriate pronouns, sexual orientation identity, age, race, ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. Additionally, the questionnaire included questions regarding level of outness of the potential participant and the potential participant's perceived level of outness of their romantic partner in various arenas, both scored on a Likert scale.

After completing the demographic questionnaire, the participants watched the web-based photovoice training video posted on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) during which they (a) received education on the photovoice project design, methodology, and research questions; (b) acquired general electronic informed consent information, including education about participation criteria, the potential for harm (i.e., taking a picture of and exposing someone who is not publicly out), ethical considerations, and rights of non-participants (i.e., the right to avoid identity exposure by a picture that is taken when consent is not given); and (c) learned camera techniques. Participants were provided with a direct link to watch the training as well as an electronic document detailing and expanding upon topics covered in the video. Additionally, the researcher informed participants that they could email the researcher with any questions or concerns regarding the training video. Both participants chose to use their phone cameras to take photographs, so the researcher did not mail a disposable camera to participants.

After completing the training, the participants began the data collection process over the course of one week. Each participant took 10 photographs aimed at depicting their perception of outness within their relationship as it manifested in varying arenas.

Additionally, the researcher asked participants to keep in mind the way their experience of outness connected to their satisfaction with their relationship when taking photographs. At the end of the one-week period, participants emailed pictures to the researcher for uploading to the private google drive folder shared between the researcher and the individual participant. After all photographs were received and uploaded, the participants engaged in the first three stages of critical reflection: (1) selecting photographs, (2) contextualizing and storytelling, and (3) identifying themes (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998). (For detailed pilot study procedures and results, see Appendix O: Pilot Study.) The participants were then asked to offer positive and constructive feedback as well as suggestions for the full study.

## **Results**

After discussing each submitted photograph, the participants collaboratively generated five themes and related subthemes that emerged from the overall discussion. Participants were encouraged to identify themes that appeared repeatedly and most frequently. The main themes as identified by participants included (1) visibility of LGBTQ romantic relationships, (2) authenticity of queer relationships, (3) access to LGBTQ-affirming resources, (4) the impact of the cultural environment on outness, and (5) the impact of outness on the romantic relationship. (For an expanded review of themes and subthemes, please see Appendix O: Pilot Study, Pilot Study Table One: Themes and Subthemes.) Additionally, participants discussed their individual experiences of coming out and how these experiences, positive and negative, shaped their hopes for visibility and safety within mental health arenas, romantic relationships, and larger

society, in general. (For an expanded review of the pilot study results and implications for the full study, please see Appendix O: Pilot Study.)

### **Modifications for the Full Study**

Based on participant feedback, faculty consultation throughout the preparation for the dissertation proposal, and reflection on the researcher's experience of the pilot study, the following list of modifications was implemented in the full study.

1. The researcher switched the order of the research questions for sake of clarity and flow.
2. The researcher changed the inclusion criteria to require that participants be actively engaged in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least 6 months.
3. The researcher expanded the recruitment geographic range from within North Carolina to any state in the U.S.
4. The researcher opened participation to both partners engaged in the same relationship, but partners had to participate in separate focus groups.
5. The researcher increased the age criterion from 18 years of age to 24 years of age to recruit participants who were closer age 25, the developmental definition of "adult", rather than the legal definition.
6. The researcher modified the recruitment materials to decrease the amount of information in the recruitment email by supplementing the email with a brief FAQ document and visually-attractive flyer to initially engage potential participants.

7. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by adding questions about participants' partners, including age of partner, gender of partner, and sexuality of partner.
8. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by adding questions about the relationship, including length of relationship and cohabitation status.
9. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by asking questions regarding participant ethnicity.
10. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by adding a Likert scale question about participant and partner levels of outness in social media arenas and opened this as an arena in which participants could take photographs.
11. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by changing the arena of outness entitled "political arenas" to "public arenas (i.e., volunteering, activism, advocacy)".
12. The researcher was intentional in being explicit in all documentation about the risks and ethics involved in using pictures in research and consistently encouraged participants to consider safety as an ultimate priority.
13. The researcher provided a visual example of a completed photograph, title, and caption within the training materials to offer participants a concrete example of a completed selected photograph.
14. The researcher gave participants a maximum word limit of 20 words for captions to provide a generalized format and concrete expectation to guide participants in describing their selected photographs.

15. The researcher modified the SHOWED paradigm to align with the research questions and focus on outness and relationship satisfaction within participants' current romantic relationships. Additionally, to provide more time for group discussion, the researcher asked participants to complete the modified SHOWED paradigm prior to the group discussion meetings to enable group review of all photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers during the first 15 minutes of group discussion.
16. To manage time and increase accessibility for geographically diverse participants, the researcher created two online discussion groups in an effort to be able to discuss 3 selected photographs with accompanying titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers.
17. Throughout discussion, the researcher used minimal encouragers, reflections, and probing questions sparingly, and with the intention of deepening understanding of participant responses.
18. The researcher added a signature line to the Photography Release Form for Individuals Depicted in Photographs for the guardian of a minor who may be depicted in a photograph in the case that a participant chooses to photograph a child or other minor.
19. The researcher created specific and separate folders in the Google Drive Folder to increase the ease of uploading photographs and documents. Folders were entitled "Upload Photographs Here" and "Photovoice Training Materials."

20. The researcher intentionally outed herself to participants and included herself as a part of the queer community, through using language of “we” and “us” when discussing LGBTQ communities.
21. Prior to data collection, the researcher, also serving as a coder, engaged in bracketing activities with an additional coder and an auditor.
22. As the researcher engaged in member-checking, the researcher checked with participants to ensure that the included themes did not compromise their anonymity.
23. The researcher separated the step of completing social action from the larger study. Instead, the researcher will initiate participant discussion future steps toward social action, if this is desired by participants. The researcher clearly conveyed in recruitment and training materials that the social action component of the study was not required, but completely optional.

### **Summary**

The purpose of Chapter One was to describe the need for and purpose of the study. In Chapter Two, the researcher reviewed, analyzed, and synthesized the available related literature. Chapter Three included a detailed description of the photovoice methodology and the results of a pilot study. Throughout Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the results and implications of the full study are considered.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

In Chapter One, the researcher examined current research pertaining to outness in adult same-gender romantic relationships, identified limitations, and proposed a study exploring individuals in same-gender adult romantic relationships experiences of outness and how they relate to relationship satisfaction. The constructs of LGBTQ identity, outness, and relationship satisfaction were explored in depth in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, the researcher outlined the methodology for a photovoice study aimed at exploring visual depictions of and meaning making surrounding outness and same-gender relationship satisfaction. The results of the study are presented in this chapter.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the photovoice methodology:

1. How do individuals in same-gender couples make sense of and/or apply meaning to visual depictions of outness within their same-gender romantic relationships?
2. How do individuals in same-gender couples experience the construct of outness as related to relationship satisfaction within and outside of their relationships and within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, social media, work, spiritual, and public contexts.

The researcher addressed research questions one and two in the second data collection stage, contextualizing and storytelling, and the third data collection stage, identifying themes. Through application of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher and the research team reviewed all submitted photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers as well as transcripts of the online focus group meetings. The researcher also engaged in member-checking to ensure emergent themes aligned with participant experiences and did not compromise participant confidentiality.

### **Participants**

To recruit participants, the researcher participated in snowball sampling by emailing over 60 local and national LGBTQ support organizations, 30 local and national counseling organizations and centers, 80 local and national social media websites, 5 national LGBTQ chat forums, and many personal social connections within LGBTQ communities across the United States. The researcher also posted flyers in local bars, coffee shops, and vendor spaces located within of North Carolina. Initially, the researcher limited participation to participants who lived within North Carolina. After experiencing significant difficulty recruiting due to attrition based on fear of identity exposure, the researcher expanded the recruitment criteria to all of the United States. This criterion expansion was informed by the recognition that many LGBTQ-identified North Carolinians have experienced an increase in identity-based fear and lack of protection due to the passage and maintenance of legislation like House Bill 2 (HB2; Domonoske, 2016; Gordon Price, & Peralta, 2016; Phillips, 2016).

Thirty-one potential participants emailed the researcher and expressed interest in participating in the study. Of the 31 participants who emailed expressing an interest in the study, 15 participants completed the demographic questionnaire study, and the remaining participants who did not complete the demographic questionnaire study were not able to move forward in taking pictures. Additionally, one interested potential participant was not currently in a same-gender adult romantic relationship and two interested potential participants ended their relationship between the time they expressed an interest and were sent the link for the questionnaire, and therefore did not meet participation criteria. Between the stage of completing the demographic questionnaire and beginning to take photographs, another participant ended their relationship and was no longer eligible to participate. Additionally, 3 potential participants dropped out of the study due to fear of exposing their identities or partner discomfort with participation, 6 participants dropped out of the study for lack of time, and 4 participants were unresponsive after receiving training materials.

Of the 15 participants who completed the questionnaire, 9 submitted photographs and supplemental materials (e.g. titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers) and participated in one of two online discussion groups. All participants who participated in the discussion groups met the following criteria: (a) lived in the United States and were willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting approximately 1.5 – 2 hours, b) self-identified as LGBTQ, (c) were at least 24 years of age, (d) were currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and (e) had access to a computer. Demographically, the average age of the 9 participants

who participated in the full study was 30.56 years of age, ranging from 24 to 56 years of age. The participants averaged 3.32 years in their current same-gender romantic relationship, with a range from 2 to 7 years, and 100% of participants cohabitated with their same-gender romantic partner. Additionally, 4 participants were currently involved in a same-gender relationship with another participant, totaling 2 couples, and couples were not placed in the same discussion groups. Geographically, 7 (78%) participants resided in NC, 1 (11%) participant resided in Virginia, and 1 (11%) participant resided in Alabama.

Regarding additional demographic information, 8 of the participants (89%) identified as women and used she/her/hers pronouns, and 1 participant (11%) identified as a man and used he/him/his pronouns. Additionally, 4 (44%) of the participants identified as lesbian, 4 (44%) of the participants identified as gay, 1 (11%) participant identified as bisexual/queer. Furthermore, exploring race and ethnicity, 1 (11%) participant identified as African-American, 3 (33%) participants identified as White and American, 1 (11%) participant identified as White and German, 2 (22%) participants identified as White and European, 1 (11%) participant identified as White and Jewish, and 1 (11%) participant identified as White and Cajun. With regard to participants' highest level of education completed, 1 (11%) participant completed some college—no degree, 1 (11%) participant earned an Associate's degree, 3 (33%) participants earned a Bachelor's degree, 1 (11%) participant completed some graduate school—no degree, 2 (22%) participants earned a Master's degree, and 1 (11%) participant earned a Doctoral degree. Considering participant socioeconomic status, 1 (11%) participant reported an

average household income of below \$25,000 annually, 3 (33%) participants reported an average household income of \$25,000-\$45,000 annually, and 5 (56%) participants reported an average household income above \$65,000 annually.

Considering levels of outness, all 9 (100%) participants had come out to someone other than their partner, and all 9 (100%) participants stated that their partners had come out to someone other than themselves. Overall, considering all potential arenas for outness, 2 (22%) reported being predominantly more out than their partners in most arenas, 1 (11%) reported being more out and similarly out to their partner in an equal number of arenas, 6 (67%) reported being similarly out to their partners in most arenas, and no participants reported being less out than their partners in most arenas. More specifically, with regard to degree of outness in family arenas 3 (33%) reported being more out than their partners, 1 (11%) reported being less out than their partners, and 5 (56%) reported being similarly out to their partners, with an average of being out in family arenas for 17.49 years, ranging from 2 to 37 years; social and friendship arenas 2 (22%) reported being more out than their partners, 0 (0%) reported being less out than their partners, and 7 (78%) reported being similarly out to their partners, with an average of being out in social and friendship arenas for 9.56 years, ranging from 7 to 10 years; spiritual arenas 1 (11%) reported being more out than their partners, 2 (22%) reported being less out than their partners, and 6 (67%) reported being similarly out to their partners, with an average of being out in spiritual arenas for 12.96 years, ranging from .25 to 20 years; social media arenas 5 (56%) reported being more out than their partners, 1 (11%) reported being less out than their partners, and 3 (33%) reported being similarly

out to their partners, with an average of being out in social media arenas for 9.44 years, ranging from 3 to 25 years; work and professional arenas 3 (33%) reported being more out than their partners, 2 (22%) reported being less out than their partners, and 4 (44%) reported being similarly out to their partners, with an average of being out in work and professional arenas for 9.22 years, ranging from 2 to 22 years, school arenas 0 (0%) reported being more out than their partners, 0 (0%) reported being less out than their partners, 6 (67%) reported being similarly out to their partners, and 3 (33%) reported that they or their partners were not currently enrolled in school, with an average of being out in school arenas for 5.25 years, ranging from 2 to 8 years; public arenas (i.e., community, advocacy, activist roles) 2 (22%) reported being more out than their partners, 1 (11%) reported being less out than their partners, and 6 (67%) reported being similarly out to their partners, with an average of being out in public arenas for 12.56 years, ranging from 8 to 37 years.

Summarizing these demographic findings, the participants varied in terms of age, age of partner, duration of their current relationship, linguistic identification of their sexuality, and their highest level of education, though all participants had completed high school. Likewise, participants varied in socioeconomic status as 4 (44%) participants stated earning below \$46,000 annually and 5 (56%) participants stated earning above \$65,000 annually. While participants also varied in the amount of time they had cohabitated with their partners, they did not vary in the fact that they all reported sharing a residence with their partner. Similarly, reviewing participant reported race and ethnicity, the participant sample was homogenous in terms of racial identity, but ethnic

identities varied. As in previous studies exploring outness within LGBTQ populations, most participants identified within privileged social categories of whiteness, having obtained education beyond high school, and earning more than \$25,000 annually per household. Participant gender identity accounted for another area of sample homogeneity as all but one participant identified as women. Additionally, most participants were geographically situated in North Carolina, potentially due to the researcher’s initial efforts to recruit only within the state. To recruit a larger sample, the researcher made the decision to expand recruitment efforts beyond North Carolina after substantial recruitment had already occurred. This recruitment choice potentially skewed the sample to be heavily saturated with North Carolinians, however, all participants were from states with histories and present climates of more conservative voting records and policies. Furthermore, it is important to remain aware that attrition accounted for the sample changing between collecting demographic information and submitting and analyzing photographs. For a detailed description of the demographic and outness qualities of the sample throughout all stages of data collection, please refer to Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. Demographic Information

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Demographic Questionnaire</b>	<b>Discussion Groups</b>
<b>Number of Participants</b>	15	9
<b>Mean Age (years)</b>	39.7 Range = 24 to 57	39.5 Range = 24 to 56
<b>Mean Age of Partner (years)</b>	38 Range = 24 to 56	37.44 Range = 24 to 56

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Demographic Questionnaire</b>	<b>Discussion Groups</b>
<b>Time in Relationship (years)</b>	5.38 Range = .5 to 10.5	3.32 Range = 2 to 7
<b>Cohabitation Status and Time</b>	Cohabiting with partner = 14 Not cohabiting with partner = 1 Mean cohabitation time (years) = 4.44 Range = .5 to 24	Cohabiting with partner = 9 Mean cohabitation time (years) = 2.24 Range = .5 to 7
<b>Gender</b>	Woman=11 Cis Woman = 1 Man= 3	Woman= 8 Man= 1
<b>Pronouns</b>	She/Her/Hers= 12 He/Him/His= 2 My name or he= 1	She/Her/Hers= 8 He/Him/His= 1
<b>Sexuality</b>	Lesbian = 4 Gay = 7 Lesbian or Gay = 1 Bisexual = 1 Bisexual/Queer = 1 Queer = 1	Lesbian = 3 Gay = 5 Bisexual/Queer = 1
<b>Race</b>	White = 13 African-American = 1 No answer = 1	White = 7 Caucasian = 1 African-American = 1
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Cajun = 1 European = 2 African-American = 1 Jewish = 2 Mixed = 1 American or German = 1 American = 3 Non-Hispanic = 1 No answer = 1 Caucasian = 1 White = 1	Cajun = 1 European = 2 African-American = 1 Jewish = 1 American = 3 American or German = 1
<b>Highest Level of Education Completed</b>	Some college, no degree = 2 Associate's degree = 1 Bachelor's degree = 3 Some graduate school, no degree = 2 Master's degree = 5 Doctoral degree = 2	Some college, no degree = 1 Associate's degree = 1 Bachelor's degree = 3 Some graduate school, no degree = 1 Master's degree = 2 Doctoral degree = 1

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Demographic Questionnaire</b>	<b>Discussion Groups</b>
<b>Mean Years Since Completing Highest Level of Education</b>	10 Range = 0 (currently enrolled) to 28 Participants currently attending school = 2	14.22 Range = 0 (currently enrolled) to 28 Participants currently attending school = 1
<b>Household Income</b>	Below \$25,000 = 2 \$25,000 to \$45,000 = 3 \$46,000 to \$65,000 = 1 Above \$65,000 = 9	Below \$25,000 = 1 \$25,000 to \$45,000 = 3 Above \$65,000 = 5
<b>State of Residence</b>	North Carolina = 9 Virginia = 1 Alabama = 1 Louisiana = 1 California = 1 Connecticut = 1 United States = 1	North Carolina = 7 Virginia = 1 Alabama = 1

Table 2. Levels of Outness

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Demographic Questionnaire</b>	<b>Discussion Group</b>
<b>Family Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 4 Less out than partner = 4 Similarly out = 6 Partner's outness unknown = 1  Mean outness level = 8.67 Range = 3 to 10  Mean years being out = 15.64 Range = .17 to 37	More out than partner = 3 Less out than partner = 1 Similarly out = 5  Mean outness level = 8.56 Range = 3 to 10  Mean years being out = 17.49 Range = 2 to 37
<b>Friendship &amp; Social Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 3 Less out than partner = 0 Similarly out = 11 Partner's outness unknown = 1  Mean outness level = 9.6 Range = 7 to 10  Mean years being out = 16.37 Range = .5 to 37	More out than partner = 2 Less out than partner = 0 Similarly out = 7  Mean outness level = 9.56 Range = 7 to 10  Mean years being out = 18.56 Range = 3 to 37

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Demographic Questionnaire</b>	<b>Discussion Group</b>
<b>Spiritual Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 1 Less out than partner = 4 Similarly out = 8 Partner's outness unknown = 1 No answer = 1  Mean outness level = 8.57 Range = 1 to 10  Mean years being out = 11.4 Range = .25 to 37	More out than partner = 1 Less out than partner = 2 Similarly out = 6  Mean outness level = 8.22 Range = 1 to 10  Mean years being out = 12.96 Range = .25 to 20
<b>Social Media Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 5 Less out than partner = 3 Similarly out = 6 Partner's outness unknown = 1  Mean outness level = 8.53 Range = 3 to 10  Mean years being out = 9.7 Range = .5 to 24	More out than partner = 5 Less out than partner = 1 Similarly out = 3  Mean outness level = 8.78 Range = 7 to 10  Mean years being out = 9.44 Range = 3 to 25
<b>School Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 0 Less out than partner = 0 Similarly out = 7 Participant or partner not in school = 6 Partner's outness unknown = 1  Mean outness level = 8.92 Range = 6 to 10  Mean years being out = 5.28 Range = .5 to 10	More out than partner = 0 Less out than partner = 0 Similarly out = 6 Participant or partner not in school = 3  Mean outness level = 9.5 Range = 7 to 10  Mean years being out = 5.25 Range = 2 to 8
<b>Work &amp; Professional Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 5 Less out than partner = 3 Similarly out = 5 Partner's outness unknown = 1 No answer = 1  Mean outness level = 8.71 Range = 2 to 10  Mean years being out = 8.57 Range = .5 to 22	More out than partner = 3 Less out than partner = 2 Similarly out = 4  Mean outness level = 8.67 Range = 2 to 10  Mean years being out = 9.22 Range = 2 to 22

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Demographic Questionnaire</b>	<b>Discussion Group</b>
<b>Public Arenas</b>	More out than partner = 2 Less out than partner = 2 Similarly out = 9 Partner's outness unknown = 2  Mean outness level = 8.13 Range = 1 to 10  Mean years being out = 10.57 Range = .5 to 37	More out than partner = 2 Less out than partner = 1 Similarly out = 6  Mean outness level = 7.11 Range = 1 to 10  Mean years being out = 12.56 Range = 8 to 37

NOTE: All measures of outness were scored on a Likert Scale 1-10.

## **Procedures and Results**

To conduct the study, the researcher used an amended photovoice methodology based on Wang and Burris's (1997) original photovoice methodology. The researcher adapted the SHOWED paradigm to better fit the counseling lens and LGBTQ-focus of this study.

### **Preparing for Photovoice**

In preparation for conducting the photovoice study, the researcher defined the problem, selected photovoice as an appropriate methodological intervention, determined interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to be a fitting paradigm for data analysis, revised the SHOWED paradigm, constructed a team of 2 coders and one auditor, gained approval by the IRB, determined resources for granting an incentive, and recruited participants from various states.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

After receiving email inquiries from interested potential participants, the researcher replied to the initial emails, providing participants with all IRB-approved

recruitment materials including the recruitment email, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document, recruitment flyer, adult consent form, a link to the photovoice training video, and a link to the demographic questionnaire. After participants read and agreed to the terms outlined in the adult consent form, they completed the questionnaire that contained questions about participant age and partner age, gender and partner gender, pronouns, sexual/affectional orientation identity, level of education, years since completing highest level of education, household income, race, ethnicity, city and state of residence, length of current relationship, cohabitation status, contact information, and an outness survey. The outness survey inquired about participant's level of outness and perceptions of their partner's levels of outness in family, social and friendship, spiritual, social media, school, work and professional, and public arenas. Participants also had the option to add information about arenas that were not addressed to the questionnaire as well as the option to elaborate on their experience of outness in any of the aforementioned arenas, but no participants chose to do so. After participants completed the demographic questionnaire, the researcher created a private folder that was shared between the researcher and the participant. This folder contained supplemental information to support and inform participants as they began taking photographs as well as a folder into which participants could upload selected photographs and fill out their accompanying titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigms.

### **Interpreting Study Artifacts through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

In the analysis of many photovoice studies, researchers discuss the finding of themes in discussion of photographs without identifying the particular analyses employed

to extract these themes (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Moya et al., 2013; Seitz et al., 2012; Wang, 1999; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). To strengthen analysis of all study artifacts including participant selected photographs, accompanying titles and captions, participant answers to the modified SHOWED paradigm, and the transcripts of both discussion groups, the researcher selected Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to be employed as the analytical framework. This paradigm entailed engaging in several close readings of all materials to yield a nuanced analysis of the participants' experience and representation of the phenomenon of outness and how it impacts relationship satisfaction.

**Stage one of IPA.** After the researcher collected and compiled all study artifacts, the researcher, serving as one coder, along with a second coder closely read and engaged with all photographs, titles, captions, modified SHOWED paradigm answers, and both discussion group transcripts. Separately, both coders engaged with all materials several times, and wrote interpretations and annotations in the margins of the documents. These annotations were representative of the double hermeneutic characteristic of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and manifested as exploratory comments regarding participant language use and intended meanings as the participants made sense of their experiences. Additionally, some exploratory comments inquired about meaningful pieces of text that were potentially unintended yet present. Ultimately, in this stage of IPA, the coders not only aimed to understand all that the participants intended to convey, but also the subtle meanings that were unintentional or potentially unrecognized by the participants.

**Stage two of IPA.** After thorough review of all materials, the coders engaged with materials to decipher emerging themes. Both coders noted potential themes, reviewing all materials for support for identified themes re-reviewing all materials each time a new theme emerged. The coders duplicated themes when appropriate and worked to identify themes that were different, themes that were somewhat alike yet separate, and themes that were alike enough to potentially warrant the creation of subthemes.

**Stage three of IPA.** The third stage of analysis involved the coder distinguishing between themes that were conceptually different and conceptually alike. The coders deeply engaged with themes that were conceptually similar to differentiate between themes that had enough textual support to stand alone and themes that were more effectively compiled into subthemes for a supporting superordinate theme. After extricating themes and subthemes from the study materials, the two coders prepared to meet in person to review their findings.

**Stage four of IPA.** In their meeting, the coders explored themes that aligned and differed, holding space to debate how to best represent participant ideas and experiences. Throughout the meeting, the coders referred to the photographs, accompanying titles and captions, answers to the modified SHOWED paradigm, and discussion transcripts to find textual support for all themes and subthemes. If a theme lacked textual support, the coders chose to drop the theme. In preparation for presenting the themes to the auditor, the coders developed two themes, one composed of themes and subthemes of outness and the other composed of themes and subthemes of outness and relationship satisfaction, to correspond to the two research questions. The tables included names for themes and

subthemes, location of textual support, and the frequency of the themes and subthemes within the materials.

**Stage five of IPA.** The coders then sent the theme tables including all themes, subthemes, textual references, and frequencies of the themes to the auditor.

Accompanying the theme tables, the coders provided questions and highlighted areas in which their perspectives diverged. The auditor reviewed and compared all study materials to the coders' submitted tables and offered feedback regarding the language of themes and subthemes, advice regarding whether to drop certain themes, and an interpretation of specific sections of the text about which the coders indicated needing support. After thorough review, the auditor did not find any unidentified themes and sent the tables and feedback to the principal researcher.

**Stage six of IPA.** After editing the theme tables to reflect consensus among the coders and auditor, the researcher engaged in member-checking by emailing the theme tables indicating themes, subthemes, and frequency of occurrence, to the participants. The researcher offered the participants 72 hours to review all themes and offer feedback as to if the theme tables accurately represented their experiences of the discussion group and supporting materials and if any theme compromised their anonymity. The researcher ensured participants that any themes that compromised their anonymity would be amended or removed. Three participants responded and affirmed that all themes accurately reflected their experiences and no themes compromised their anonymity. The participants also gave the researcher consent to use photographs and words in the current document and future publications and presentations.

**Stage seven of IPA.** Upon completion of member-checking, the researcher reviewed all participant feedback alongside the theme tables to construct two final tables of superordinate themes. The researcher organized themes in a manner that allowed for ease in readability and the linking of related themes. To maintain integrity of data analysis, these tables were then submitted to the second coder and auditor for final review. Both the second coder and auditor reached consensus, and the researcher finalized the tables.

### Research Question One

Collectively, participants identified 16 themes regarding the meanings made from visual depictions of their experiences of outness within their same-gender adult romantic relationships. These ideas were organized in a table including themes and subthemes (See Table 3).

Table 3. Outness: Themes and Subthemes

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Frequency of Theme</b>
Outness as a source of pride	a) Outness about personal identity	Overall: 19 a) 6
	b) Outness about relationship	b) 13
Outness as a source of unity	a) Being out together in the same context	Overall: 21 a) 6
	b) Having different levels of outness but supporting one's partner in the journey	b) 3 c) 2
	c) Through blending households and families	d) 10
	d) Unity as a community	
Outness as a repeated event/consideration		Overall: 9

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Frequency of Theme</b>
Outness as dynamic (i.e., fluctuating based on context)	a) General context	Overall: 16
	b) Context of age	a) 6
	c) Context of community/culture	b) 4 c) 6
Outness as a tool to challenge or conform to heteronormative norms of family	a) Conform: We're no different than non-LGBTQ family	Overall: 17 a) 8 b) 7
	b) Challenge: Expand, reconstruct idea of family	c) 2
	c) Unconditional acceptance of humanity, regardless of gender or sexuality	
Outness as a risk to family	a) Considering/sacrificing outness to protect family of origin	Overall: 20 a) 12 b) 8
	b) Considering/sacrificing outness to protect family of choice (i.e., worry about children)	
Outness as policed	a) By others	Overall: 31
	b) By self	a) 8
	c) Emotional impact	b) 13 c) 10
Outness as uncomfortable at times		Overall: 9
Outness as requiring constant consideration of safety in each context		Overall: 11
Outness as a consideration even in the home and neighborhood	a) Outness in the private arena of home	Overall: 6 a) 3
	b) Outness in the public arena of home (i.e., neighborhood)	b) 3
Outness as conflicting with religion (Christianity)		Overall: 7
Outness and work	a) Passive outness (i.e., photos on desk)	Overall: 8 a) 3
	b) Active outness (i.e., inviting partner to work functions)	b) 2
	c) Advocating for affirming workspaces for other LGBTQ people	c) 3
Outness as impacted by political context/legislation		Overall: 13

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency of Theme
Outness as an act of advocacy	a) To show direct support for LGBTQ individuals	Overall: 7 a) 3
	b) To use self to educate non-LGBTQ others about LGBTQ individuals	b) 4
Outness as authenticity	a) Of self	Overall: 11 a) 9
	b) In relationship	b) 2
Outness as an assumed universal goal		Overall: 7

**Outness as a source of pride.** Throughout discussion and in review of participant submitted photographs, many participants used the words “pride” and “proud” when explaining their experiences. Participants noted this feeling while reflecting on the photographs depicting outness in varying arenas, but also stated feeling proud to be a part of the discussion group and feeling proud of others processes, revealing outness to serve as a source of pride, a seemingly strong emotion within many participants as it was referenced 19 times in discussion and supporting materials. After reviewing all materials, it became clear that outness was experienced as a source of pride, both outness about one’s personal identity and outness about one’s relationship.

**Outness about personal identity.** Many participants referenced pride regarding their identities as LGBTQ individuals. For example, when discussing her experience of bringing her partner to a work-related function, Mahogany stated, “I stand proud being open in my work environment as a part of the LGBTQ community.” This pride about being identifiable as a part of the LGBTQ community was shared by other participants and potentially allowed for increased levels of outness within various arenas. Relatedly, recognizing her journey in the coming out process, G stated, “I am a bright and strong

woman that has come out to many and will continue to do so”, potentially evidencing that pride about being out and coming out strengthened overall pride in herself. In terms of feeling shifts in emotion and pride as related to other participants’ levels of outness, in discussion group Olivia stated, “I felt sadness when the photos represented a smaller degree of outness. I felt pride when I sensed that others were more out.” Another participant shared, “When I see LGBTQ [people] who are unafraid and courageous in their outness, I feel pride for them even though I’ve never met them,” both statements demonstrating the potential impact of outness on communal pride about identity.



Figure 1. Woman’s March 2017: WE Were a Part of History. “[This photograph] shows that I’m a proud lesbian! I HAVE NO FEAR IN MY HEART TO SAY IT PROUDLY.”

When discussing the experience of selecting photographs that depicted outness in varying arenas, one participant described his process of selection with rich emotion, “It was the first photo I thought of. This image has meant everything to me over the years. It holds a prominent place in my home. I gleefully selected it with pride.” This commentary could evidence that participating in this photovoice study facilitated connection with pride in one’s identity.

*Outness about relationship.* Another subtheme of outness as a source of pride was outness specifically about the participants’ relationships with their partners. In discussion, Bree noted that reviewing another participant’s submitted photograph about outness in public spaces “...reminded me how much I love my wife and that I will show her that I do love her and I am proud to be with her.” Two other participants agreed with Bree, one sharing, “I agree with you...when me and my partner are out [in public], I feel so grateful and proud to show our love.” Similarly expressing gratitude and pride felt from being out about one’s relationship, CD stated, “I am fully aware of how lucky I am and relish in the opportunity to talk about my Love.” This statement seemed to evidence that gaining a sense of pride related to outness about the relationship might occur after struggling to get to this point, a concept KT eluded to after submitting a photograph of the home she shares with her partner and children, “[Our home] was a symbol of how far we’ve come and the hurdles we’ve faced.”

In response to heteronormative barriers and assumptions, other participants also expressed using pride in outness about their relationships to claim their relationships publicly. For example, after Mahogany described an incident where coworkers assumed

that the flowers delivered to her desk were from a boyfriend, Mahogany discussed telling her coworkers that the flowers were from her girlfriend:

...a lot of times, people we work with normally assume your sexual orientation based on what their own personal belief [and] what makes sense to them. This was my personal situation until I had to correct two of my coworkers who insisted my boyfriend sent me the flowers on my desk. I then had to proudly correct them.

Mahogany's words indicate a sense of pride in coming out about her relationship to her coworkers, much like Olivia's discussion of feeling pride about keeping a picture from her wedding on her desk at her workplace.



Figure 2. My Desk: This Photo Sits on My Desk in the Graduate Student Office...People that Come to Chat with Me May See It, Including Students and Professors. I feel proud to show my marriage and wife at my workplace.

Considering the stated impact of outness about the relationship being a source of pride, another participant seemed to summarize many participant's thoughts, "I felt like outness in some of these pictures was a way for standing up for the relationship and taking pride in it—claiming it."

**Outness as a source of unity.** Another theme that emerged from the analysis of study materials was outness serving as a source of unity between partners. Participants described this occurring in several ways, finding unity when participants and their partners were out in the same arenas and conversely experiencing different levels of outness between partners, but finding unity in being able to support one's partner in their own outness journey. Additionally, participants found outness to afford a sense of unity between partners when they could blend households and families and a sense of unity within their larger LGBTQ communities due to sharing the experience of outness in varying arenas and empathizing with the process of coming out in which each person engages, regardless level of outness.

***Being out together in the same context.*** Many participants spoke of their sense of unity and closeness with partners when they were out in the same arenas and could share in their openness about their identities and their relationships with one another. KT exemplified this comment in her statement, "We live on a court and spend plenty of time outside with our kids, so in the context of our neighborhood, we are clearly out and a united family." In reading KT's description of her and her family's outness in their neighborhood, it seemed important to communicate that their visibility contributed to the reading of unitedness by others in the neighborhood. Another participant who expressed

lower levels of outness in more arenas than other participants highlighted the significance of the limited times where she could be out about her relationship, “Moments where we can be out and affectionate in public are what unite us.”



Figure 3. Out of the Shadows: Finding Way to Unite in Difficult Times.

She further stated, “While our relationship may be in the shadows for my family, we are out about our relationship in public. This photo shows the light cast onto our relationship in those public spaces.” Expressing outness in another public space, Mahogany spoke of the experience of unified empowerment in joining the Women’s March on Washington of 2017, a worldwide protest of the current administration and a demonstration of advocacy for human rights legislation and policy (Womensmarch.com, 2017), with her partner, “We felt connected even more. We felt as one, holding hands shouting out chants of unity and power.” These expressions of outness in public seemed to not only create a sense of unity for partners, but also offer the ability to receive love

and support of this unity by surrounding community. Further evidencing not only the sense of unity outness provided, but the legal acknowledgement of this unity, Bree submitted a photograph of her and her partner's wedding vows and marriage license sitting on their bookshelf. Reminiscing about their union, Bree stated, "Although [the vows and marriage license are] in the house, it is representative of something we did in public."

*Having different levels of outness but supporting one's partner in the journey.*

Though many participants had similar levels of outness to their partners, some participants stated being more out than their partners and embodying the role of supporting their partners in their coming out journeys. In these descriptions, participants seemed to understand the significance and necessity of this support and voiced feeling a sense of unity with their partner due to being a vital component of their partner's support system. G used her own experience to encourage other partners to do similarly, "...coming out cannot be rushed. It has to be done on that person's time and way. The out partners need to be supportive and loving through the whole process!!!" Another participant submitted a photograph of a compilation of still frames from a video journal his partner had sent him over the course of his coming out to his family. This participant entitled the photograph *Collateral Damage* and explained the pain that he witnessed his partner endure. Through playing this supportive role, the participant found himself deeply impacted, "...the differences in our experiences and the courage he's exemplified is astounding. It's brought us closer together. It's connected us on deeper levels than it would've had that not been the situation."

*Through blending households and families.* Another medium through which participants experience outness as a source of unity was in the blending of households and families. KT demonstrated this experience through submitting a photograph of two of her children making Christmas cookies, explaining the way that she felt “peaceful and happy” in realizing the manifestation of her united and blended family.



Figure 4. First Christmas: Two of Our Four Girls Making Cookies in the House.

KT stated, “One child in the photo is mine and the other photo is my partner’s. We already had our children when we met. It demonstrates how coming together as a couple brought our children together as friends/sisters.” G, another parent in the discussion group submitted a picture of her partner’s daughter that was taken by her daughter and entitled the photograph *Together*. G followed up by stating, “Just because we are blended, we are still one family.” It seemed that both G and KT experienced the

merging of their family units to be an experience and process of unification within their family systems.

*Unity as a community.* Finally, participants identified experiencing outness as a source of unity between members of LGBTQ communities. One participant discussing the journey of coming out stated, “As LGBTQ people, we are all different and at different spots on the spectrum. But the one thing we all have in common is the journey to ourselves. We should help each other spread those wings and fly.” Mahogany supported this in response to a discussion facilitation question asking about why reviewing selected photographs felt important for participants. Mahogany answered, “I feel that it shows our unity as a whole.” CD and G both connected to the feeling of unity and community from viewing all photographs, titles, captions, and SHOWED answers submitted by participants stating, “[The pictures] all reminded me of somewhere I have been in my process,” and, “We have all struggled with the same thing at one time or another,” respectively. Similarly, Olivia engaged with the experience of a separate but shared struggle and stated, “I often forget how hard it was [to come out]. It’s great to be reminded of the struggle with others to encourage more empathy, support, and encouragement.” Another participant felt similarly stating, “I rarely think about my outness. This study helped me think about it more which in turn helps me have respect and empathy for others in regard to outness,” and then questioned what he could do to help others within LGBTQ communities to come out. Following this line of questioning, G also stated her desire to empower and help people who want to come out but are experiencing fear. These responses indicated that outness not only offered a sense of

unity within LGBTQ communities, but also seemed to build desire for participants to join together in returning that support to less-out LGBTQ people in an effort to continue to build that sense of communal unity.

**Outness as a repeated event/consideration.** Another theme revolved around the way outness manifests as a repeated event and a continuous consideration. Participants elaborated on the experience of having to come out in every new situation, one participant stating, “opportunities to come out are constant”, and EW mirrored this conceptualization through her statement regarding whether to be out in her child’s school environment, “we make these decisions regularly”. These statements reflect that the decision to out oneself is not a unique or time limited experience, but instead, is an ever-present opportunity or challenge. One participant emphasized the quality of urgency enveloping the decision to out oneself, “I’ve definitely felt those moments where you have to make this instant decision of whether to be boldly out.” The universality of this theme was evidenced by several repeated statements about outness being a constant consideration throughout both discussion groups. For example, EW offered an example of this experience as she reflected, “LGBTQ people come out OVER AND OVER AGAIN. It’s not one experience. We come out every time our kid joins a soccer team, every time we go to the dentist or start a new job or need a mechanic,” a statement that garnered support from Bree and KT.

**Outness as dynamic.** As outness was identified to be a constant consideration, it was also identified to be dynamic and constantly fluctuating based on context.

Participants identified this fluctuation to occur for reasons that felt more generalized, but also due to changes in the contexts of both age and community culture.

**General context.** In general, participants felt that outness was impacted by the intersecting components of one's context in any given situation. EW explained the experience of considering context as familiar, and a constant "calibration of outness", especially when contemplating how out one can be in certain spaces paired with the awareness of a partner's level of outness in those spaces. CD also discussed the way her level of outness had shifted across her past relationships, being closeted in one, out in one while her partner was closeted, and out in her current relationship with a very out partner. Relatedly, regarding contextual outness, Bree advised, "When we first meet you, we might be reluctant at first (are you REALLY cool with it, etc.)." One participant submitted a photograph entitled *Metamorphosis* and explained his journey as depicted in the image, "Sometimes I don't always feel like my wings are spread and I'm flying. Perhaps on some days I'm just standing. But I've flown quite a bit and I'm at my happiest when I'm there."

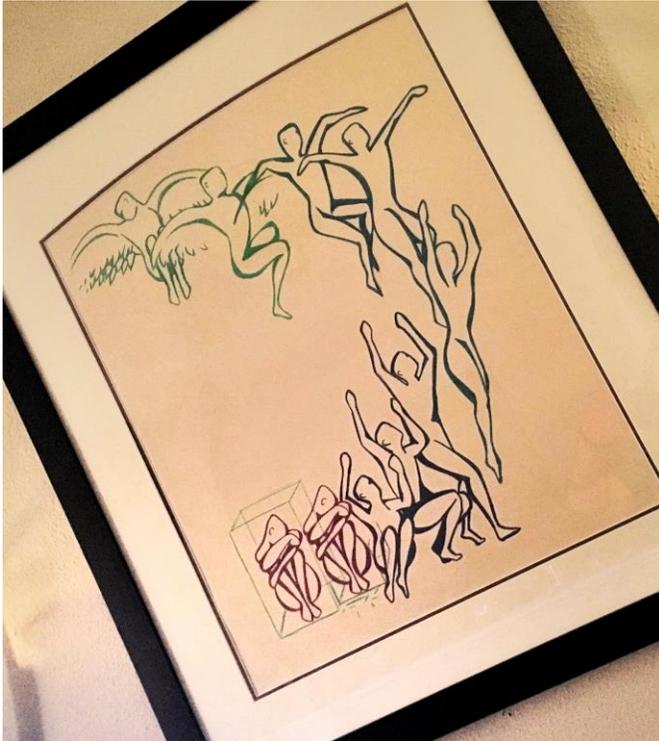


Figure 5. Metamorphosis: Trapped by Truth, the Journey to Freedom, Joy, and an Authentic You.

In group discussion, another participant connected to this image on a personal level. She felt impacted by the reverse “C” shape of the arc in the image, “I loved the picture of the charcoal drawing...I think it showed the various stages of coming out, but the reverse "C" shape...showed that there isn't a clear start or endpoint. It showed there is constant fluctuation.” The participant who submitted this photograph voiced his agreement.

*Context of age.* More specifically, participants stated noticing shifts in their levels of outness based on age and how they had experienced growing older and into their identities. During group discussion, G described her coming out journey across time,

“When I was younger, coming out was very difficult for me because of my own spiritual and religious beliefs.” She elaborated on her timeline of outness stating, “As I get older I just do not care (as much) of what people think about me. If they ask about my sexuality...I am going to tell the truth...if you don't like the truth, then most likely we are done.” Another participant stated feeling similarly:

Age makes a difference for me. I'm 50 and I know I'm at such a different place today than when I was 30 and mostly because I'm just tired of it. I'm tired of the oppression and the fear. I used to care what you think. And while I want you to like me, I understand now that if you don't, it has nothing to do with me.

These participants seemed to gain a sense of confidence and self-reliance as they got older, and they also seemed to express feeling unaffected by negative responses to the disclosure of their sexualities. The other participants in this discussion were younger than the two speaking about age, but the presence of this theme leaves room to wonder how the other participants might experience their outness shift with age in the future.

*Context of community/culture.* Other participants noticed their outness fluctuating based on the community or culture by which they were surrounded, and some made active choices to change this context in an effort to be more out. For example, KT discussed moving from outside of Greensboro, NC to a home located closer to the city and the resulting increase in level of comfort being out. Bree offered perspective on living in Alabama and intentionally choosing “to go to the same three or four places in our little town” to maintain comfort in their community context. In a separate discussion group, another participant shared how community and cultural contexts shaped his

coming out, “I came out slowly over a couple decades, and it was on the easy side. I lived in major cities most of that time where no one really cared. So, I put myself in safe, comfortable places to just be.”

Demonstrating an alternative example of the potential for historical experience to shape perspective of current community context, EW recognized that her outness negatively shifted after moving from Portland, ME to Greensboro, NC, “I moved from Portland Maine to Greensboro. In Portland, even the straight people are queer! ;)", describing the jarring feeling of moving to a location she experienced as less queer, and thus potentially less queer-affirming. Relatedly, one participant elaborated on her feelings of being unable to be out in certain contexts and stated the need for affirming spaces and places, “Even in difficult times, LGBTQ individuals need to find spaces where the light can shine through...as a community, we are resilient, and we have often been able to find those spaces to love and celebrate ourselves and our relationships.”

**Outness as a tool to challenge or conform to heteronormative norms of family.** Exploring outness within the specific context of family, many participants expressed their outness in terms of conforming to heteronormative norms of family or challenging these norms in exchange for a reconstructed notion of family. A couple of participants also examined family through a lens of unconditional acceptance, regardless of gender or sexuality.

*Conform.* When participants experienced their outness as a way to conform to heteronormative ideals of family, the underlying message seemed to be, “We are no different than non-LGBTQ families”. Many of these messages were directed toward non-

LGBTQ individuals. For example, KT implored, “Realize that we do traditional activities with our children just like anyone else does who is not LGBTQ.” She also stated that the image of her home “demonstrates how we [LGBTQ families] also strive for love, consistency, and security,” and that “LGBTQ families share many of the same joys as non-LGBTQ families.” G echoed this theme in reference to her submitted picture of a family vacation home, stating that she wanted non-LGBTQ individuals “to realize that our lives are just as hectic...as theirs. We need to get away just like they do... we are no different than heterosexual couples when it comes to needing and wanting to get away.” In discussion, one participant stated the desire to “Show we’re just like them,” in reference to non-LGBTQ people. In a similar vein, Olivia stated, “We need to show that we are normal,” but also honored differences between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ identities, “but [we are] also so, so special.”

**Challenge.** Aligning with Olivia’s statement, many participants experienced their outness as a way to challenge heteronormative ideals of family, sending an underlying message revolving around expanding upon and reconstructing what it means to be a family. For example, in Bree’s submission of *The Kids*, a photograph depicting Bree’s work desk on which many framed pictures of Bree, her wife, and their cats whom she refers to as their “furry children” sit, Bree stated the need to “remake the general public’s idea of family, become relatable to family” and stated the importance for the general public to show “acknowledgement of the different ways to ‘be a family’.”



Figure 6. The Kids: That Pesky Agenda.

Mahogany also connected with the idea of creating a family that lies outside of the norms established for heteronormative family structures, submitting a photograph of herself surrounded by her supportive and affirming friends and noting, “My friends are my family. Because I don’t have the best relationship with my family, my friends always are there for me and I am so thankful.” Additionally, participants spoke of the way LGBTQ couples experience their relationships and family units differently from non-LGBTQ couples. G described her experience of being out in public with her partner and family and being aware of the differences of that experience, especially those related to considerations of outness, “For sure, no one looks at a straight couple and wonders what they are feeling on the inside.” CD agreed that by virtue of living in a heteronormative society, LGBTQ individuals are constantly aware of how their couple or family is being perceived due to their identities, a consideration many non-LGBTQ couples never contemplate.

***Unconditional acceptance of humanity, regardless of gender or sexuality.*** In another manifestation of a subtheme related to outness as a tool to conform to or challenge heteronormative ideals emerged in some participants expression of the desire to be accepted within their family systems, regardless of gender or sexuality, in a way rejecting categorization in exchange for unconditional acceptance of one's humanity. Describing her submission of *Woman's March 2017*, Mahogany stated, "...we stand proud as human beings who see no gender when it comes to love", alluding to both a rejection of gender and sexuality categorization, and also a claim of universal humanity. Similarly, G asked for all people to "love and respect each other no matter what and be as one." These statements did not seem to conform to or challenge heteronormativity within the family system, but instead evidenced a longing to exist outside of systems of gender and sexuality that are socially created.

**Outness as a risk to family.** Somewhat expanding on the intersection of outness and family, many participants spoke about outness as a risk to their families. This risk manifested differently when considering families of origin and families of choice, however, responses to the risk were somewhat similar.

***Considering/sacrificing outness to protect family of origin.*** Many participants spoke of measures taken to protect the emotions or comfort of their families of origin. For example, one participant who was not out to her family of origin discussed never feeling able to take her partner to family gatherings. Being very close to her family and worried about their reactions to her identity and relationship, she often went home alone, leaving her partner behind.



Figure 7. Holiday Time: Traveling Back Home Alone for the Holidays because My Family Doesn't Know We Are a Couple.

Describing this experience, she said:

...having close family bonds without being out to family can cause a lot of personal and relational tension...it feels like always having to choose between family and my relationship. Either way is missing something and risks hurt feelings all around.

Three other participants in this participant's discussion group connected with her photograph and expressed feeling sadness. The participant who submitted *Holiday Time* also discussed the experience of her partner's level of visibility shifting due to her low level of outness with her family, "...my partner becomes 'my roommate'," a situation Olivia acknowledged as having experienced in her past, "my girlfriend was also my

roommate at one point. We were hiding toothbrushes and photos when family came to town.” G and another participant connected to these experiences, as well, and shared support around having to hide one’s relationship from family.

Throughout discussion, participants questioned motivations behind these sacrifices, “...we all on some level seem to share the notion of sacrificing self and relationship to help family deal...we sacrifice us to protect those who don’t bother to accept and honor [us].” One participant asked the group, “I wonder if...to believe gay is bad develops a lower sense of worth. So, it’s more important to protect mom and dad than stand up for who we are,” questioning how self-worth influenced the choice to avoid being out to family in exchange for their comfort. There also seemed to be a frustration related to obscuring identity for the comfort of family who is not expending the same amount of energy or consideration toward the participants. One participant highlighted her pattern of sacrificing her outness to protect family, “I’ve always had a habit of protecting my family’s feelings too and prioritizing them above my own. In relationships though, it also becomes prioritizing it above my partner’s,” and exposed the way this sacrifice situated her partner as secondary to her family of origin. This inspired Olivia to recall a change in this pattern for herself. Olivia submitted a photograph entitled *Gift*, a picture of a gift her girlfriend had presented to her at the bow of her senior show. This gift was to honor her work and success, and when she was presented with the gift, Olivia kissed her partner on stage, representing the first time Olivia had kissed a woman in front of her parents. In describing the shift in her outness, Olivia stated, “Being out meant

making family uncomfortable, and until that point, I had tried to protect or shelter them. And in that moment, I couldn't do that anymore. My love had outgrown their fear."

*Considering/sacrificing outness to protect family of choice.* As participants moved away from discussing outness with families of origin, they began to discuss the ways in which outness could be a risk to their families of choice. One predominant subtheme was worrying that their children would be negatively impacted by their outness, and the accompanying consideration of whether to sacrifice their outness to protect their families of choice. After experiencing an incident of identity-shaming and policing at her child's school, EW shared, "It is a risk to be out and to be a family. We are holding each other and ourselves and we make these decisions regularly, moving closer or further away from each other or the risk. It's a constant algorithm." She continued, focusing on her son's experience of her outness, "...I hope my son's experience isn't too impacted by our queerness. I want him to feel good." KT referenced her fears about her kids being impacted, as well, "We are nervous about other kids saying things to our kids about their moms," and though Mahogany did not have children, she voiced her fears for the future, "Seeing the school and reading your answers definitely made me think about once me and my partner decide to have children, how will we have those conversations with them and how will we handle their peers and their teachers." She finished her statement, "It makes me a little nervous," evidencing the presence of this fear and potential impending sacrifice once she decides to begin a family.

Further elaborating on how being out poses a risk to their families of choice, CD stated, "The more visibly out we are, potentially the more dangerous it is for us...it

makes me want to hold my relationship closer. And do things to protect it.” Similarly, G furthered this notion of needing to “do things” to protect family, “We are out!!! But we are also cautious depending on the setting...especially if we have our children with us...protecting our girls is way more important than us being out.” From these statements, it seems like one of the things to do to protect one’s family of choice, per some participants, was to be less out.

**Outness as policed.** Considering the measures of sacrifice taken to protect family members leads to consideration of the mechanism founding how participants display or conceal their identities, policing. Most participants addressed the act of policing, whether through exploring how others had policed their outness, how they policed their own outness, and the emotional impact of this policing, or relegating their identities and expressions of their identities to the shadows.

**By others.** Some participants recounted experiences of their expressions of outness being policed or controlled by others. For example, in her submission of PDA-Checked, EW recounted the experience of holding hands with her partner at her child’s school and being told by the assistant principal that the display of affection was inappropriate. EW recalled:

We go to pick him up from school. My girlfriend and I are holding hands in the lobby, waiting for him. The assistant principal comes over and tells us that ‘there’s been a complaint and the school has a policy about public displays of affection.’ When we get home, I can’t find any such policy in the handbook. Only one aimed at students regarding ‘lewd behavior.’



Figure 8. PDA-Checked: My Kid's First Day of 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade at the School in a New State, Post-move, Post-divorce.

Many of the participants were impacted by the contrast between the colorful, vibrant façade of the school in this image and the despair and darkness of the accompanying story. Mahogany described policing in another, less overt manner, “I often get prejudged by others who see me out or I get approached by men who tell me I look ‘too pretty to like women’,” indicating a policing of outness and identity based on the assumption that being pretty and loving women are mutually exclusive.

Focusing on the secondary effect of policing, KT shared her sadness about the impact on her children, “At our old house, the lady down the street quit letting her girls play with ours when she found out about us,” and EW pondered, “I wonder if my son has friends who won't play with him because we are gay.” Mahogany even questioned her experience of policing at an early age, before she came out, “I remember when I was

younger before I came out my mom wouldn't allow me to go around my cousins who were gay because of her religious belief and I never understood that,” demonstrating the prevalence of policing sexuality and outness, sometimes as a lesson to a child. Finally, CD described the way the presence of a political sign supporting Donald Trump served as a policing force in her neighborhood, and one participant described the systems that uphold one’s ability to police another’s outness about their identity as “overwhelming systems of hate.”

*By self.* Other participants recognized times in which they policed their own behavior or display of outness in response to these systems. CD, in discussion of the Trump sign in her neighborhood processed changing her behavior to protect her family and avoid becoming a target. During group discussion, EW investigated how she policed her outness in public contexts and asked the question “How much do we hold back or look around before we touch or kiss and when is that just old?” Bree acknowledged holding similar questions, “I am lucky because I am, for the most part, in a bubble world between where I work and who I am around. But there is always that half-second of thought in the back of my mind ‘who is around?’” EW further elaborated on the observable impact of these self-policing thoughts, stating “I have found myself letting go of my partner’s hand recently—like after HB2 passed, we were walking on the sidewalk and I saw cops and I just unconsciously let go of her hand.”

Returning to considerations of policing identity for the comfort of one’s family of origin, one participant stated, “I feel guilt thinking of coming out to my family,” and

described how this guilt maintained her closeted status. She submitted a picture depicting the act of policing her outness, entitled *An Uncomfortable Distance*.



Figure 9. An Uncomfortable Distance: When My Family Comes to Visit and My Partner Becomes “My Roommate.”

She stated, “This photo demonstrates the degree of separateness my partner and I experience when my family comes to visit. Since I’m not out to my family, my partner and I don’t show any signs of being together when they’re around.”

***Emotional impact.*** Whether policing was done by others or by the self, participants expressed feeling the emotional impact of this action. Revisiting EW’s *PDA-Checked*, she stated, “I was devastated that our affection made our family a target and it was hard to celebrate my son and be present. My disappointment towards the school and the administrator crushed my spirit.” The impact of a small act of affection like handholding being relegated to the realm of “lewd behavior” was felt emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Another participant described feeling guilt for the potential

impact of her outness on her family of origin and her policed, lack of outness on her partner:

Being closeted to my family makes my partner feel like I don't value her as much, but I also feel guilt thinking of coming out to my family. While I don't believe they would turn their backs on me, they would not be approving.

Furthermore, she stated, "I feel sad thinking about how I have to hide a piece of myself to the people I love the most, and sad that this casts my partner aside," and reflected on the felt sense of loneliness she felt having to travel home to visit her family without her partner. In addition to reflecting on familial experiences of policing, Mahogany described the confusion associated with her early childhood experience of her mother forbidding her to spend time with her cousins because they were gay.

CD referred back to her picture of the Trump sign in her neighborhood, and stated noticing a shift in her emotions and internal sense of pride:

For me, it's been shocking living in a such Trump forward neighborhood. This is the most beautiful neighborhood I have ever lived in and I have always been proud to live here. Now, some of that pride is replaced with fear.

In response, one participant voiced feeling "deep sadness and pain" thinking about systems that enable and uphold these types of policing. In a concluding comment, CD observed, "There is loss in being closeted and there is loss in being out."

**Outness as uncomfortable at times.** From engaging with participant narratives and dialogue, it became obvious that experiencing or grappling with one's outness was often uncomfortable. Representing this experience of discomfort, CD submitted a

photograph entitled *Unexpected Acceptance*, depicting a change in plans that led CD and her partner to celebrate their anniversary at a southern hotel known for catering to clients of higher socioeconomic status—a space CD questioned due to geographic location and class norms. CD found that she was feeling nervous about feeling homophobia from the hotel, but stated, “Even though it made me uncomfortable, I wanted my girl to feel truly unique and special. So, we went.” EW stated of her commitment to being out, “I am out. Even when it’s uncomfortable,” a claim that seemed to be mirrored in CD’s story. Both Bree and KT connected EW’s statement to their shared sense of discomfort being out at times. Olivia also shared her sense of discomfort when considering whether to be out after being publicly presented with the gift from her girlfriend, expressing, “There was a real fear when I saw her walk on stage with the gift. I thought, ‘Can I kiss her? Is that okay?’” Engaging in a kiss with her girlfriend in this moment, however, aided to alleviate the feelings of discomfort, as Olivia explains, “...now it is such a fond memory of boldness and support. I think we need to continue holding each other up and supporting.”

**Outness as requiring constant consideration of safety in each context.** Review of study materials revealed one reason why outness may feel uncomfortable; participants revealed that one’s choice to be out is often linked to constant consideration of one’s safety or threats to life. Participants repeatedly discussed safety as a component of outness, stating reasons for policing to be to preserve safety of themselves, their children, and their partners. While Bree mentioned patronizing only spaces of safety, Mahogany highlighted that, “Not everyone has the strength to be open...create those safe spaces for

those to be themselves and be heard and be seen.” Similarly, G and CD described making cautious choices about their expressions of outness informed by their access to safety and recognizing that being out poses a risk to overall safety, and potentially life. G stated, “Greensboro is pretty accepting of the gay community...my partner always says what’s the worst thing that is going to happen if people see us hold hands, kiss? We are not going to get arrested for gosh sakes!!!”, however, not all participants felt the same. When contemplating her felt sense of safety in Greensboro, NC, EW stated:

Greensboro needs to be a safe place for LGBTQ people. I am not sure what kind of campaign it would take for this to happen. It helps that the mayor is the [Executive Director] of Guilford Green [an LGBTQ advocacy organization] but actually what have they done for the city?

This commentary depicts the ways in which participants perceive safety, potentially questioning the levels of safety participants feel they deserve. EW’s comment also implies the visibility of people in power supporting the local LGBTQ community is not enough—EW wants to see these people in power taking action to transform the city and safety for LGBTQ individuals and families. Another participant from Wilmington, NC supported this statement in her photograph *Out of the Shadows*:

We need to make more places safe to be out. No one should have to be scared holding their partner’s hand in public. We need to increase awareness and legal support for same-gender partners. We need to erase the stigma of being in a same gender relationship and shine a light on this issue.

**Outness as a consideration even in the home and neighborhood.** The impact of outness on safety seemed to be felt even in the home. Participants described the home as

having a private arena, inside of the house, and a public arena, in the surrounding neighborhood.

*Outness in the private arena of home.* EW most explicitly stated the experience of outness inside of the home, as she described her photograph, *Where I Begin My Day*, composed of the image of her couch situated in front of a picture window, a barrier or portal to the outside world:

I am insecure at times for all the reasons of my journey and internalized homophobia – this scene is supposed to be a safer place for me and most of the time it is. But the corner of the picture is darker, it’s also a tumultuous time on the couch. Homophobia still impacts us even when it’s just the two of us in our home.



Figure 10. *Where I Begin My Day*: This is the View from Our Couch to the Outside World.

We drink coffee and sit on the couch every day for about 1 hour. We talk about what's on our schedule, what's on our hearts and how we are doing. We anticipate if there's anything that needs attention. It's a grounding time for us. Sometimes, we have had arguments here. We have also had conflicts.

Both KT and Bree resonated with the experience of homophobia within the home, whether it be internalized homophobia or reliving homophobia experienced out in the world. Bree related to EW, "The comments about still feeling not so comfy even in "our nest" resonated with me...even in our private spaces we still think about [outness]."

*Outness in the public arena of home.* As participants engaged in exploring life on the other side of the picture window, in the neighborhood, they connected over the shared experience of considering their outness when they were just beyond the walls of their homes. In discussion, Bree stated, "It's like 'what does my new neighbor stranger guy think when he sees us in the driveway. Stuff like that," when asked about connecting to consideration of outness in her private spaces. Upon submitting her photograph of the exterior of her house and yard entitled *Our Home*, KT reflected on the experience of being visibly out in her neighborhood, out as an LGBTQ individual and out as a blended LGBTQ family. Additionally, CD reflected on the way her neighborhood felt different for her, and hence impacted her expression of her identity, after seeing neighbors place signs in their yards supporting Donald Trump. The participants seemed to notice how considerations of outness were inescapable, even in the most private and homey of spaces.

**Outness as conflicting with religion (Christianity).** One space in which many participants experienced a conflict between their outness and an arena related to religion.

Many participants discussed feeling as if their outness conflicted with religion, specifically Christianity. One participant described his partner's coming out journey as, "Swimming in religious intolerance a young man's journal of loneliness, heartbreak and desire to simply be himself," and reported the way witnessing his journey impacted him, "Experiencing his emotion, and at times torture, broke my heart and helped me see the cruelty and abuse administered in the name of God, under the guise of love." G shared her similar experiences with religion early in her life, "When I was younger, coming out was very difficult for me because of my own spiritual religious beliefs," and Mahogany referred to her early learning of her mother's disapproval of LGBTQ individuals due to religion. One participant submitted a picture of himself standing beneath a towering cross, entitled *Bigger Than Us*. This photograph gained much attention and response in the discussion group.



Figure 11. *Bigger Than Us*: When a Hurting Heart Wonders How Something So Beautiful Can Unleash Something So Ugly.

The photographer described his photograph, “Standing beneath the world’s largest cross you truly feel the power of forgiveness and oppression in the same heartbeat. It’s a chilling experience to feel so small in the face of combined good and evil.” Olivia responded, “...the large white cross. It brings me back to some of the religious trauma I’ve encountered”, and another participant shared, “...the cross...can both show the towering oppression of religion...growing up in a small religious town, it often felt overwhelming.”

The participant who submitted *Bigger Than Us* stated his experience of this cross to be illustrative of “an intimidating force that is frightening to face as a fully out gay man,” and “a force [my partner and I] faced as we charged into our life together.” This participant voiced feeling like many LGBTQ people had turned away from their faith and expressed feeling uncomfortable in his current church. An opening of possibility was then extended by G who shared the name of her home church and praised it for being affirming. In that moment, it seemed that though discussion of the pain caused by Christianity, two participants connected over finding a space of sanctuary within Christianity.

**Outness and work.** Another arena in which participants focused on outness was at work. Participants shared experiences of expressing outness through both passive and active measures in this arena. Participants also voiced the need for LGBTQ-affirming workspaces.

*Passive outness.* Many participants submitted photographs of their workspaces as an indication of outness in this arena. It seemed that participants felt comfortable leaving

photographs of themselves with their partners on their desks, even when they might not actively come out to colleagues. Olivia, for example, submitted a photograph of her desk located in her graduate assistant office. Elaborating about her level of outness in this arena, she stated, “I am out in the workplace, only to those who get close to me. I do not out myself to students in the classroom, but I wouldn’t flip down this picture frame if they came to office hours,” alluding to how she feels comfortable being out in ways that can be recognized by others, even if she does not make an active choice to verbalize her identity. Similarly, Bree discussed keeping photographs of her chosen family on her desk at work, claiming, “I work in public. I am not afraid to showcase my life to most people.”

*Active outness.* Other participants were more active in their expressions of outness in the workplace. One way participants expressed this way of being out was through inviting partners to attend work functions. For example, EW brought her partner on a “workation” to explore the city of New Orleans when she had downtime from work. Mahogany invited her partner to a happy hour with colleagues and stated, “I felt happy and proud. I was extremely appreciative of how my co-workers responded to meeting my partner.”



Figure 12. Happy Hour with the Co-Workers and Bae.

She felt this photograph was significant in that it was her first out-of-office gathering with coworkers and it “was a special day, because they were able to meet my girlfriend for the first time.”

*Advocating for affirming workspaces for other LGBTQ people.* Throughout discussions of outness in the workspace, participants advocated for transforming workspaces into LGBTQ-affirming zones. Mahogany stated, “There should be more education within the work place on the right and wrong ways to have certain conversations in that environment. Making sure that ultimately, it’s a safe environment for everyone to work and feel comfortable.” Olivia felt similarly, advocating for the workplace to be a space of validation for queer love and queer marriages. About a picture she submitted of her wife’s work desk, Olivia stated her hopes for how being out at work can impact others, “I hope this too encourages small doses of outness in the workplace to continue, when it safely can.”

**Outness as impacted by political context/legislation.** When considering the range of arenas in which one can be out, many participants reflected on how the current political climate and accompanying legislation has impacted their outness. An example of the current political climate was portrayed in CD's *Trump in My Neighborhood*.



Figure 13. Trump in My Neighborhood: This is the Trump Yard Sign I Drove by or Walked by Every Day before Elections Day.

CD expressed shock that, “Someone with such vocal and blatant bigotry is being supported visually by many more of my neighbors than I could have anticipated.” She related this to the lives of LGBTQ individuals in same-gender relationships because the photograph represented that “People in power have control to make our very existence illegal.” Olivia and one other participant expressed that they felt fear due to Trump’s presidency. One participant stated:

I have to say that the Trump sign generated a feeling unlike any I felt with the other photos. The shock of those around us supporting that man and his ideals is something that sits with me still today following the election. It's terrifying to know there are so many around us who agree with him, or at the least turn a blind eye to his ways.

In response, another participant shared, "I felt strong feelings about the Trump sign too. I can't help but feel those anytime I see someone sporting something Trump-related."

Other participants discussed the current state of North Carolina's legislation, notably House Bill 2 (HB2). Some, like CD, saw displays of outness in the face of HB2 to represent courage and resiliency, "That we live in NC with HB2 and have the courage to show affection to each other afforded us this sweet exchange," describing validation of her relationship by a cashier at a local grocery store. Others examined the overarching impact of this legislation, one asserting, "We're taught we don't matter. Our systems say we don't matter (HB2)." Another referenced one of CD's photographs, and expressed her fear, "The O'Henry picture, for example, made me sad initially thinking about how scary it is in the world of HB2 to access simple services. I feel this every time I book a hotel, go into a restaurant, etc." These conversations between participants indicated a shared experience of the ways their outness shifts in response to the political and legislative climate.

Some participants used their outness to respond to the political climate.

Mahogany and her partner attended the Women's March of 2017, supporting her choice by sharing her goal, "With everything going on in our world right now, we have to set a

tone and a stand that we are hear and our voices will be heard.” Another participant exclaimed:

With current anti-LGBT legislation, it feels more and more like we are being relegated to the shadows. We need to make more places safe to be out. No one should have to be scared holding their partner’s hand in public. We need to increase awareness and legal support for same-gender partners. We need to erase the stigma of being in a same gender relationship and shine a light on this issue.

Joined by CD’s directives to “Repeal HB2,” and “...get conservative ideologues out of state government” participants seemed to have a vision for change. CD elaborated on this vision by providing a potential means, “We need grassroots organizing in each of our communities. We need to influence the people that are on our side to stand up for us.”

Participant dialogue revealed that ultimately, the political climate, at both the national and local level, influenced participants’ levels of outness and factored into their considerations of whether to be out. Exemplifying this claim, CD explained her personal experience, “The current political climate has made me hyper-aware of my outness and vulnerability.” In closing, Olivia summarized the groups dialogue by stating, “Many of us expressed the same disdain for the political climate today.”

**Outness as an act of advocacy.** In light of the current political and legislative climate, participants viewed their outness as an act of advocacy. Participants voiced two purposes of this advocacy, to show direct support for LGBTQ individuals and to use the self to educate non-LGBTQ individuals about LGBTQ individuals.

*To show direct support for LGBTQ individuals.* One notable depiction of using outness as a source of advocacy was in Bree’s submission of a photograph entitled, *It Sure Does!*, showing a paper flower with “Love Wins” written on it.



Figure 14. It Sure Does!: From Strangers to Friends.

Bree explained that a stranger had made this flower for her on her wedding day, and expressed the connection between the photograph and her outness, “It is above my desk at work. Shows support to students on campus and other people who remember that

slogan being used in relation to this issue.” One participant stated an advocacy goal for himself that he hoped others shared, “We need to remain aware of our own journeys...and how those around us are experiencing the same thing. We need to respect their journeys and support them through their obstacles.” It seemed that through visual representations of outness, participants felt they were supporting other LGBTQ-individuals in their journeys. CD exemplified this commitment in discussion, sharing, “It is my duty to myself and those that paved the road before me to live OUT.”

*To use self to educate non-LGBTQ others about LGBTQ individuals.*

Participants also addressed the way outness could be a form of advocacy in educating non-LGBTQ people. Some participants felt their examples of outness were critical to validating queer existence and informing non-LGBTQ individuals about the presence of queer communities. CD submitted a photograph of herself and her girlfriend holding hands in public and stated, “We believe we are doing the public a service by being out.” Likewise, Olivia and Mahogany stated their belief in their role in educating others about LGBTQ-people by being visibly out in their workspaces. Communicating their presence through conversation with coworkers or displays of their relationship through framed pictures of their families felt like fulfilling and effective routes of informing others.

**Outness as authenticity.** Throughout discussion, many participants referenced outness as being authentic about one’s self and one’s relationship. Discussion centered on a person’s choice or ability to be largely out and how this represented authenticity.

*Of self.* One participant referred to his journey into becoming increasingly out as a “journey to an authentic you.” This view was supported by Mahogany in her dedication

to “live in my truth” and “stand proud in [my] authentic self.” Bree described her wife’s process of coming out as no longer avoidable once they began their relationship, “She had to [come out] because she finally felt whole.” Additionally, demonstrating the power of release some participants associated with outness, a few participants used the language of “truth” to reflect the concept of outness as authenticity, as if truth granted freedom from hiding. For example, CD stated, “Nothing will change unless we show the truth of ourselves,” and another participant stated, “[we are] aim[ing] to live in our authentic truth.” Mahogany demonstrated an awareness of confounding factors to this authenticity through outness, acknowledging, “not everyone has the strength to be open and live in their truths”.

***In relationship.*** Participants also saw outness about their relationships as a source of authenticity. During discussion, KT explained, “Outness is key to authenticity in relationship,” after contemplating repeated themes within participant submitted materials. Mahogany affirmed this, expressing, “I agree...I couldn't imagine not showing outness between me and my partner. I wouldn't feel authentic.” Bree also discussed how being authentic impacted her relationship in a positive way.

**Outness as an assumed universal goal.** A final, and potentially controversial theme emerged from discussion, the assumption that outness is a universal goal for all LGBTQ-identified individuals in relationships. One participant referred to outness as “a goal for all of us,” while G identified outness to be “our normalcy.” Reflecting how participants felt about outness in relationships, KT claimed, “Outness is healthy for any relationship,” and Mahogany agreed. In response to a less-out participant’s experience as

depicted through *Holiday Time* and *An Uncomfortable Distance*, G stated, “I felt...hopeful that one day there will be 2 suitcases and sitting close on a loveseat.” G also shared her hurt regarding participants who were less-out, “It hurts very deeply within in me the ones that are struggling with coming out. I wish I could come out for you/them!!!”, and her hopes for them, “I am just hopeful to the group that those who are not out to their family can take that leap of faith and come out.” Interestingly, and perhaps importantly, the less-out individuals were quiet during these discussions. The researcher wondered if this silence was indicative of feeling shame for not being as out as other members of the LGBTQ-community idealized. Though the participants’ words were intended to be supportive and affirming, the researcher wondered about the potential for these words to further isolate and take power away from participants who had lower levels of outness. This concern will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

### **Research Question Two**

In response to the second research question, participants generated 8 themes regarding their experiences of the construct of outness as related to relationship satisfaction within and outside of their relationships and within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, social media, work, spiritual, and public contexts. These ideas were organized in a table including themes and subthemes (See Table 4).

Table 4. Outness & Relationship Satisfaction: Themes and Subthemes

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Frequency of Theme</b>
Relationship satisfaction is related to displaying relationship (i.e., outness about the relationship)	a) Active displays	Overall: 19
	b) Passive displays	a) 13
		b) 6
Relationship satisfaction is related to open and public displays of affection (i.e., a way of performing outness about identity AND outness about the relationship)	a) As a source of strengthening the relationship	Overall: 8
	b) As a source of potential validation from others	b) 5
		3
Relationship dissatisfaction is related to not displaying relationship in all contexts		Overall: 7
Relationship satisfaction is impacted when partners have different levels of outness	a) Different level of outness	Overall: 8
	b) Shared experience of outness journey offers opportunity for support between partners	a) 3
		b) 5
Relationship satisfaction is impacted by trauma related to coming out	a) Family	Overall: 8
	b) Spiritual	a) 3
	c) General	b) 4
Relationship satisfaction is impacted by fear	a) Internal:	Overall: 11
	1. Fear is present	a) 7
	2. Fear is blocked out	b) 4
Relationship satisfaction is impacted by support systems	b) External:	
	1. Fear is present	
	2. Fear is blocked out	
Relationship satisfaction is impacted by support systems	a) From partner	Overall: 13
	b) From other people	a) 6
	c) Creating chosen family in which outness is safe	b) 4
		c) 3

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency of Theme
Relationship satisfaction is related to legal legitimacy through marriage		Overall: 4

**Relationship satisfaction is related to displaying relationship.** In terms of exploring how outness influenced relationship satisfaction within the participants' same-gender relationships, participants identified displaying outness about the relationship in different arenas as related to relationship satisfaction. Many participants felt satisfaction from displaying their relationships in both active and passive ways.

**Active displays.** Participants voiced engaging in active displays or their relationships in various ways, including but not limited to holding hands in public, kissing in public, and taking their partners to work events or on vacations. CD described the satisfaction she gained from holding her partner's hand in a grocery store, and other participants voiced their agreement in discussion, one connecting deeply to the act of holding hands in public as a demonstration of outness about her relationship. Others described the feeling of satisfaction they experienced when able to kiss their partner in public. EW submitted a photograph entitled *We Are Beautiful* that portrayed EW being kissed on the cheek by her partner in the city of New Orleans. EW described her love for adventuring in public arenas and stated of her relationship satisfaction:

My lover is affectionate and courageous and we have such a great time. We have strong romantic and sexual desire for each other and we are not afraid to have fun and be affectionate. She knows how much this means to me and we meet each other's needs for adventure, discovery, walking, hiking, and affection with no reservations.



Figure 15. We are Beautiful: “It’s Important to Me to Not Feel Ashamed of Being Queer and to Express Joy and Love Whenever I Want, Wherever I Want.”

EW expressed the feeling that this picture depicts that “love is a powerful source for change.”

In other contexts, by taking her partner to a work function, Mahogany expressed the feelings of relationship satisfaction gained from incorporating her partner into her work arena. Additionally, G described the sense of satisfaction she felt about her relationship when she takes her partner or their girls to a cabin that has been in her family for generations, potentially evidencing a pride in being out about her relationship to her extended family and finding satisfaction in the ways she and her partner are integrated in family traditions.

Overall participants described active displays of the relationship to afford them to “stand proud in love for one another,” as stated by Mahogany, or to express “a mutual love for the other person and an openness to showing that love,” as described by Bree.

CD elaborated on the impact of outness about the relationship on her sense of relationship satisfaction, “Outness allows me to express my love for my girlfriend and in turn I feel how proud she is of me.”

*Passive displays.* Participants also explored passive ways in which they displayed their relationships openly in varying arenas and how these displays impacted their sense of satisfaction within their relationships. Most participants passively displayed their outness in their work arenas through leaving pictures of their partners on their desks. Olivia and Bree both kept photographs of their partners in range of visual access within their workspaces. Another participant shared the comfort in being out in this way, stating, “Outness can be refusing to take your photo down when a student comes in.” Referencing their photographs, Bree voiced feeling a sense of satisfaction that her and her partner’s life was constantly on display in this arena, and Olivia declared feeling a sense of hope for her marriage each time she looks at her photograph, positively impacting relationship satisfaction. Olivia also referenced her partner’s practice of keeping their wedding photograph on her work desk, stating the influence on her satisfaction with their relationship, “I’m so happy to be loved so much and be in a photo that reminds her of our love.”

Examining the way displaying how her relationship satisfaction was influenced by passive displays in her private spaces, Bree also demonstrated how she expressed her outness about her relationship in her home by keeping her vows and marriage license framed and on display for all who visit her house. She stated, “It is always, when I am at

home and in the living room, in my line of vision,” potentially reminding Bree of the satisfaction she feels within her marriage.

**Relationship satisfaction is related to open and public displays of affection.**

Upon review of all study artifacts, another theme regarding relationship satisfaction being related to open and public displays of affection emerged. These public displays of affection seemed to be a way of simultaneously performing outness about identity and outness about the relationship. Participants recognized that public displays of affection in different arenas served to strengthen the relationship and offer the opportunity to experience validation of the relationship by others outside of the relationship.

*As a source of strengthening the relationship.* In discussion of her photograph, *PDA-Checked*, EW stated, even in the midst of being policed for showing affection through holding her girlfriend’s hand at her son’s school, “This picture is about our courage and affection for one another—I am so deeply satisfied that we are stepping out in the world as a couple.” EW, Bree, and another participant all described the positive impact of public displays of affection on their satisfaction within their relationship, reflecting on the strength gained from these moments. Describing satisfaction from displaying affection in front of family, Olivia described feeling proud to have kissed her partner in front of her family for the first time and proud to document this shift in their relationship.



Figure 16. Gift.

Olivia elaborated on this memory:

My wife (then girlfriend) presented this to me at the bow of my senior show, for which I had directed and choreographed the entirety. My love presented me this gift in front of the cast, audience, friends, family, and professors. It was the first time my parents saw me kiss a woman. For the first time, I forced my outness on my parents in what could be described in a very graphic way.

*As a source of potential validation from others.* Another function of public displays of affection was the often-unexpected validation of participants' relationships by those outside of their relationships. In discussion group, one participant stated, "[Outness] can strengthen relationships and create a feeling of pride, especially when validated by others." CD experienced this sense of validation when she was holding hands with her partner in a public grocery store. She elaborated, "At the check-out, the cashier said what a cute couple we were. She saw us holding hands in the produce and she saw how I looked at my girlfriend." Regarding how this public display of affection affected her

satisfaction within her relationship, CD exclaimed, “I was elated. Grocery shopping, of all things! How could I be so happy doing such a mundane task?” This photograph seemed to represent the positive impact of receiving external validation of one’s relationship.



Figure 17. Love + Affection: Symbolic Depiction of a Sweet Interaction with a Whole Foods Employee.

**Relationship dissatisfaction is related to not displaying relationship in all contexts.** Conversely to relationship satisfaction being experienced when partners display their relationships in many arenas, participants also identified relationship dissatisfaction

as related to not displaying one's relationship in all contexts. In her submission of *Holiday Time*, one participant described the resulting conflict when she has to leave her partner behind whenever she goes to visit family:

I feel sad thinking about how I have to hide a piece of myself to the people I love the most, and sad that this casts my partner aside. I also feel tense thinking about the fights this leads to with my partner when it gets closer to holiday time.

The same participant shared how her lack of outness within the family arena caused her partner to feel invalidated and contributed to distance and strain within the relationship. A participant responded to this experience in the discussion group, stating, "You assume [your partners] get it and support where you are in the process. But it doesn't stop them from feeling invalidated," potentially evidencing a shared experience. The other participant further elaborated, "I think my partner tries to support me in my coming out process, but it also definitely causes fights and tension...I also feel like the places where I'm not out are also the sensitive spots in my relationship." Emphasizing the impact of not displaying one's relationship in another arena, one participant expressed his experience of being in church with his partner, "When my partner and I are in a place, like church, where we can't be out we are less communicative," conveying the way being unable to be out cuts across various arenas and affects the relationship qualities couples treasure and expect to be present.

**Relationship satisfaction is impacted when partners have different levels of outness.** Reviewing the previous theme regarding dissatisfaction as related to not displaying one's relationship elucidates the potential for different levels of outness

between partners to impact relationship satisfaction. When participants experienced different levels of outness in different arenas within their relationships, they found that these different levels of outness could challenge and create tension between partners or could offer an opportunity for the more out partner to support the less out partner on their journey.

*Different levels of outness challenges/creates tension between partners.* In discussion, participants discussed the challenge of being in a relationship with a partner who does not share the same level of outness in all arenas. EW expressed feeling that “it’s hard when you meet someone and there’s a different comfort level in outness,” and Bree agreed in discussion of her wife’s lower level of outness when they met, “I don’t think we would have been able to continue for a long period with one person being hidden.” Another participant specifically referred to her lower level of outness around her family as a frequent cause of conflict in her relationship, demonstrating the potential for diverging levels of outness to create a barrier between partners.

*Shared experience of outness journey offers opportunity for support between partners.* Other participants found that when partners had diverging levels of outness, they experienced the opportunity to offer the less-out partner support in their coming-out journey. One participant referenced how supporting his partner on his journey and witnessing his struggle brought them closer together and inspired a sense of admiration for his partner’s strength. Another participant reflected on this in discussion, offering her perspective, “Sometimes, coming out can be so painful but those moments can also solidify and strengthen a relationship because you’re in it together,” pointing out the

sense of unity and connection gained from facing this obstacle together. Referring to his photograph, *Metamorphosis*, one participant discussed his sense of satisfaction in his relationship, “Now, as my partner starts to stand up out of his box, it brings great satisfaction knowing I’m here to help him, guide him and catch him when he falls.” He also reflected on how different levels of outness in religious arenas had impacted their relationship satisfaction:

It has strengthened my relationship to question the long-standing teachings of a church that shaped me, as my partner is the gay son of a Baptist preacher and questioning his programming. The journey for restoring acceptance and love to faith has connected us on a deeper level.

Additionally, EW also expressed her appreciation for being able to have a mutual understanding of outness between herself and her partner in many contexts, “Our outness journeys are always with us. Our individual histories [and] the history we have created together...It’s very satisfying to be with a partner who wants to devote attention to our process and how we are with each other.”

**Relationship satisfaction is impacted by trauma related to coming out.**

Though some participants expressed gratitude for sharing an outness journey with their partners, many also recognized the impact of experienced trauma on relationship satisfaction. Participants referenced experiencing trauma in family, spiritual, and other general arenas.

**Family.** One participant seemed to be amid reconciling her outness with her family’s expectations of her, and she referred to the constant state of strain this placed on

her relationship and the unrelenting guilt she felt about concealing her identity from her family. EW, a participant who was largely out in all arenas still recognized the impact of past traumas related to coming out, “Our trauma with outness and our families and communities comes through at times of conflict,” evidencing trauma with outness as a factor undergirding conflict in the relationship. Supporting these disclosures, when asked about repeated themes throughout the review of all study artifacts, Olivia identified familial stress to be prominent.

*Spiritual.* Olivia also identified a theme of religious trauma throughout all participant materials. Many participants reference religious trauma, from being cut off from LGBTQ loved ones due to a parent’s religious beliefs, to feeling the terror inspired by symbols of Christianity that represented ostracization or shame. One participant visited the largest cross in the United States and recollected, “It inspired fear and sadness as my partner and I visited this landmark together mere days after I picked him up to move him across the country to live with me.” He further described supporting his partner in his outness within religious arenas and emphasized the potential of openness and presence to heal these past traumas, “The shame we’ve been showered in our whole lives begins to fade when we allow ourselves to present and open.”

*General.* In a general reflection on how trauma associated with coming out in any arena leaves a lasting impact on the relationship, CD speculated, “I suspect it [our relationship satisfaction within the process of coming out] matters how traumatic our coming out has been.” This conjecture highlights the potential for satisfaction to be

impacted positively or negatively and to different extents. Further exploration into how the depth and extent of trauma experienced affects relationship satisfaction is warranted.

**Relationship satisfaction is impacted by fear.** Considering other themes related to outness and relationship satisfaction, participants identified fear as impacting their sense of satisfaction within their relationships. Participants differentiated between fears that arose internally and fears that were borne of external sources. Additionally, participants noted a difference in impact when fears were present and ineffectively managed and when fears were present but effectively managed or “blocked out.” In discussion, EW shared, “I am satisfied in my relationship when I feel we can hold off the fears that are external and internal.”

*Internal.* Participants discussed the ways internal fears create conflict or opportunities for success and satisfaction within their relationships based on the ability to navigate these fears effectively.

*Fear is present.* When fears are present and unable to be coped with in an effective manner, participants identified relational stress to result. EW claimed, “Fears create a stressor,” and Bree supported EW’s opinion stating, “Having those extra thoughts [about fear] can be stressful to a relationship.” EW further elaborated, “It’s not like I don’t want to be gay anymore, but it’s hard to tease out - satisfaction - like how satisfied can I be when I am scared?”

*Fear is blocked out.* Participants expressed having a different experience of relationship satisfaction when internal fears could be blocked out, reducing their impact on the relationship. In *Where I Begin My Day*, EW identifies the time spent on her couch

each morning, accompanied by her partner, to be times of combatting internal fears and internalized homophobia, and she states gaining a sense of relationship satisfaction due to having this time and space in which to practice blocking out fears. In her photograph, *Beginning*, G also identifies home and her relationship as arenas in which she is at peace. She states, “We should not have to worry about not being accepted by society and at peace [with] who we are inside and out.”



Figure 18. *Beginning*: Taken from Our Back Porch.

Additionally, Olivia, referencing her photograph *Gift*, recounts how choosing to kiss her partner in public as a challenge to her internal sense of fear regarding how others would perceive her outness effectively diminished the fear. The triumph over fear is portrayed in the way the sun's rays break through the cover of the trees in G's photograph, illuminating beauty and bathing all in light.

***External.*** Referencing experiences of fears originating from an external source, participants also found that relationship satisfaction was impacted by participants' ability to successfully block out the influence of this fear.

*Fear is present.* In situations where externally-originating fear was unable to be blocked out, participants experienced the negative impact on relationship satisfaction within their relationships. For example, CD felt fear when she became aware of the large amount of Trump supporters in her neighborhood, causing her to live less freely in her outness in this arena. Within her family arena, one participant also minimized her outness due to the external family pressure not to engage in a same-gender relationship. This participant noticed an escalation in conflict and an increase in distance between herself and her partner. Both participants recognized how shifting their outness based on perceived fear in these contexts reduced relationship satisfaction.

*Fear is blocked out.* CD shared experiencing reward when she successfully blocked the fear of being treated in a homophobic way when she took her partner to a public establishment to celebrate their one year anniversary. She stated feeling not only "proud that there's a business in Greensboro training their staff to treat all people with respect," but also having created the opportunity to "remember a special night...looking at

this picture (and every time I go by [the O’Henry Hotel]).” Referencing this photograph, one participant voiced wondering, “how much of the negative we survive within is self-created. We go into situations "expecting" bad, and...that feeds off an energy that others can feel. How much does fear...help create what we face?”

**Relationship satisfaction is impacted by support systems.** Participants identified an additional theme of relationship satisfaction regarding outness being impacted by support systems. These support systems were found to be located within the relationship, outside of the relationship, and through intentional acts of creating a chosen family in which outness is safe.

***From partner.*** Many participants referred to their partners as primary support systems in their expressions of outness. Mahogany stated in discussion, “I’m so thankful to be surrounded by my partners love and strength.” Olivia also shared feeling supported by her partner and valuing her relationship as such a source of support that she took the risk to display affection in front of her family for the first time. Additionally, another participant shared his experience of finding a deeper connection through supporting his partner’s tumultuous coming out journey, exclaiming, “I laughed and teared up a bit as I relived this time...We’ve come so far. This took me back to a time where our happiness came with quite a cost. It was an emotional time.”

***From other people.*** Participants also identified support from others outside of their relationships to impact relationship satisfaction in a positive way. In discussion, many participants discussed the importance of community in which they can be out as supporting their relationship satisfaction, even referencing the feeling of support gained

from participating in the discussion group associated with this study. Participants shared information regarding affirming spaces with one another and expressed gratitude to one another and the researcher for making that community possible. In another arena, Olivia expressed her experience of relationship satisfaction she gained from being surrounded by the support her partner’s coworkers expressed for her relationship.

*Creating chosen family in which outness is safe.* Expanding on the idea of community support, participants also were attentive to the ways in which they created chosen families—systems of support conducive to being out. KT’s submission of *First Christmas*, represented “how coming together as a couple brought our children together as friends/sisters,” a unification that gave her much satisfaction personally and relationally. Mahogany also commented on the impact of creating a chosen family on her relationship through submitting *A Night Out on the Town*.



Figure 19. A Night Out on the Town: My “We Like to Party” Crew in Unity.

Mahogany reflected on this image describing her friend group, “Not all of my friends are a part of the LGBTQ community, but we are still able to come together and accept each other for who we are and be each other’s support systems.” Later in her description, she identified these friends as her family who unfailingly support her, especially in the absence of her family of origin’s support. She also commented on the way this photograph depicted her satisfaction within her relationship, stating, “Me and my partner do not always go out together, but we surround ourselves both with the type of friends who respect our relationship and our commitment to one another. We can all go out and have a good time.”

**Relationship satisfaction is related to legal legitimacy through marriage.** The final theme that emerged from participant discussion and review of submitted materials was that of relationship satisfaction being related to legal legitimacy of the relationship through the system of marriage. Olivia proudly expressed displaying her wedding picture on her office desk to “show my marriage and wife at my workplace” and the related satisfaction of knowing that her partner has the same picture on display on her work desk, as well. She recounted the impact of marriage on her relationship satisfaction in terms of reminiscing about the joy that defined her wedding day as well as looking hopefully into the future she will share with her wife. In her submission of the photograph, *Vows*, Bree described the sense of affirmation of her relationship she got from displaying her legal marriage license, a symbol of “something we fought so hard for, that ‘legal legitimacy’ to our long-term relationship.”



Figure 20. Vows: On the Shelf.

### **Other Substantive Findings**

Though many themes emerged related to how participants applied meaning to visual depictions of outness within their relationship and experience relationship satisfaction related to outness in various arenas of their lives, additional findings that were unrelated to the research questions emerged. These findings included a slight focus on created family systems engagement impacting relationship satisfaction, a shared desire to plan for community action using study materials, and messages for counselors, counselor educators, and counselor researchers. These substantive findings are discussed in the remaining portion of Chapter 4.

**Relationship satisfaction related to witnessing created family engage.** The idea of gaining satisfaction about one's relationship by watching created family systems engage was mentioned a few times, but did not emerge strong enough to become a theme. Though two participants mentioned the joy and peace they feel watching their children interact with one another and share experiences of bonding, these participants were also engaged in the same relationship, allowing for emergence of this consideration across the two separate discussion groups and in submission of multiple photographs. For example, in her submission of the photograph, *Together*, G described the sense of pride in witnessing her partner's daughter take a picture of her daughter, both girls collaborating to capture the shot at the precise moment. G further elaborated that she feels her relationship satisfaction is enhanced by being a mother in a blended LGBTQ family. Though this finding did not necessitate the development of its own theme due to manifesting only within one couple, the idea warrants further exploration in future studies with blended LGBTQ families.



Figure 21. Together: Taken by My Partner's Daughter of My Daughter.

**Planning for community action.** As an effect of participating in a photovoice study, participants were offered the opportunity to engage in some sort of community action. The participants were informed that they could use their work (i.e., photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers) to engage with their surrounding communities. No participant was required to engage in community action, but all were offered the opportunity to take part in transforming their surrounding publics. Through participant-devised means, the results of this study could incite policy and community change through reaching community members, policymakers, and political leaders at large, potentially impacting the immediate worlds of the participants. Participants unanimously opted to be a part of this stage of the project and discussed various ideas for community engagement. All participants agreed that they wanted to connect with one another, requesting the researcher share emails between both discussion groups to unite their brainstorming efforts. Participants felt the urge to not only connect to create social

action, but also to be able to join one another in their separate but related journeys of outness and life, forming community amongst themselves.

Though planning was not complete at the finalization of this study, participants stated a few potential routes of community engagement, including but not limited to wanting to educate non-LGBTQ members of their communities, hopes for creating support for LGBTQ members of their communities, and advocating for policy change, for example, by uniting to challenge House Bill 2 and the repeal that continued to stay many discriminatory policies within this legislation. Specifically, participants asked for interventions including, but not limited to: the implementation of a full LGBTQ audit and action plan for Guilford County schools to ensure that they are fully supporting LGBTQ families; increasing community and professional counseling support for LGBTQ couples to “work on our stuff, to not let horizontal hostility and trauma get in the way of our intimacy – our outness to ourselves and each other;” facilitate acceptance and normalize the presence of LGBTQ families and queer family systems within the community; continue dialogues fostering support of and validating queer marriages and unions; educate workplaces about how to have conversations about outness and same-gender relationships and create work environment of safety and affirmation; continue the movement to spread love as opposed to hate on a local and national level; increase support and understanding of LGBTQ-love and same-gender relationships in families of origin by educating them about “what it means to be in a same-gender relationship;” build legal support for same-gender relationships and erasing stigma associated with being in one; combat homophobia and judgment and enhance sense of personal pride;

shift religious culture in churches to “uplift instead of manipulate and control;” support other LGBTQ individuals in their journeys into outness, no matter where they are on this journey; continue supporting one another and showing same-gender affection; engage in grassroots organizing to influence LGBTQ-supporting people in power; and to ultimately contribute to creating a culture in which “it feels safe to be out, and where we will feel accepted and welcomed.”

In discussion groups, participants processed how they would like to do this and shared ideas such as using photographs to start conversations within the surrounding LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ community, holding panel discussions to involve community members to allow for face-to-face dialogue, creating a safe space in the community to talk about being out or coming out, and holding a photo exhibit with an accompanying discussion meeting. One participant clarified his desire to “not just spread awareness, but educate in creative ways.” Participants will begin dialoguing with one another to determine how to best proceed with their united vision and effect change in their surrounding worlds.

**Implications for counselors, counselor researchers, and counselor educators.**

Before the close of discussion group, the researcher also asked for participants to share any messages they felt important for counselors, counselor educators, and counselor researchers, specifically. Participants asked counselors, educators, and researchers to embody roles of support, stating: “[Know] that our shame is something we wear, not who we are. Help us take it off;” “Teach/help people to celebrate us, not just tolerate us!;” “We struggle. We need support. Please hear us;” “When we first meet you, we might be

reluctant at first (are you REALLY cool with it, etc.). Be patient and think about how hard it can be;” “[Recognize that] not everyone has the strength to be open and live in their truths. Create those safe places for those to be themselves and be heard and be seen.” Participants also seemed committed to informing non-LGBTQ counselors, educators and researchers about their experiences. Some examples of messages communicated by participants were: “LGBTQ people come out OVER AND OVER AGAIN. It's not one experience. We come out every time our kid joins a soccer team, every time we go to the dentist or start a new job or need a mechanic;” and “There are just as many ways to be gay as there are to be straight. We are not 1 giant lump of people - we are infinitely diverse.” Additionally, and powerfully, participants added: “We are not broken;” “We are resilient;” and “We are not going anywhere.”

### **Summary**

The purpose of Chapter Four was to present the results of the photovoice study and to answer the two proposed research questions. Fifteen participants filled out a demographic questionnaire detailing social location, identity categories, relationship details, and levels of outness across diverse arenas. Nine participants then took and submitted photographs and created titles, captions, and completed the modified SHOWED paradigm to elaborate on the meaning of the photographs. Four participants met in one discussion group and 5 participants met in another discussion group to process the larger collective meaning of their submitted photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigms. Finally, participants identified many ways they hoped to engage with the community upon closure of this study and began to collaborate in

executing this vision for community change. In the following chapter, the researcher explores the results, reports the limitations of the study, and offers implications and suggestions for counselors and clients, educators and supervisors, and researchers.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

In Chapter One, the researcher reviewed literature surrounding LGBTQ identities and relationships and proposed a study exploring experiences of outness within same-gender romantic relationships as well as the impact of outness of relationship satisfaction. In Chapter Two, the researcher offered an in-depth literature review to ground the research questions and methodology. The researcher then elaborated on the photovoice methodology in Chapter Three and presented the results in Chapter Four. Concluding this study, the researcher discusses the results with consideration to existing literature, discusses the limitations of the study, and offers implications for counselors and clients, counselor educators and supervisors, researchers, and social justice practices.

#### **Discussion of Results**

The results are discussed regarding each of the two research questions. Additionally, the researcher will review study limitations and implications for counselors and clients, counselor educators and supervisors, counselor researchers, and social justice practices.

#### **Research Question One**

To answer the first research question, the researcher asked participants to take and submit three photographs representing their experiences of outness within their same-gender romantic relationships. Participants were asked to make sense of their depictions

of outness through answering a modified SHOWED paradigm and participating in a group discussion in which all photographs, titles, captions, and SHOWED answers were processed. The 16 developed themes and their 26 associated subthemes (see Table 3: Outness: Themes and Subthemes) reflect and expand the literature on outness in general and outness within same-gender romantic relationships.

**Outness.** A predominant theme of outness as a repeated event/consideration emerged from the participants' submitted study materials and group discussions, mirroring findings like those of Klein, Holtby, Cook, and Travers (2015) and Knoble and Linville (2012). Additionally, outness was identified to be dynamic and fluctuating based on context, another theme supported by previous studies (Bradford et al., 1997; Klein et al., 2015). This contextual fluctuation of outness was apparent within the theme of outness requiring constant consideration of safety and the theme of outness as impacted by the current sociopolitical context and recent anti-LGBTQ legislation. This is similar to the findings of Knoble and Linville (2012), who addressed the intersection of safety and the sociopolitical context, finding that societal changes over time could influence perceptions of safety and impact the degree to which individuals feel able or choose to be out. Relatedly, the themes of outness as requiring constant consideration of safety in each context and outness as policed could be illustrative of the concept and impact of insidious trauma examined in Szymanski and Balsam's (2011) study. The collective consideration of these two themes substantiates the impact of repeatedly and consistently surveying one's surroundings to determine risk and safety, only to then interact with people or

systems that make being out unsafe by silencing, eradicating, or punishing signs of outness.

Some participants voiced perspectives that aligned with findings associating increased outness with higher levels of overall wellness (Cass, 1979; Feldman & Wright, 2013; Jordan and Deluty, 1998; Meyer, 2003; Morris et al., 2001), and even claimed that others should be out to high levels in every arena, yielding themes of outness as authenticity and outness as a universal goal. Though these themes were representative of the positivity felt from largely-out participants' experiences of outness, the claim of outness as authenticity and the assumption that outness is a universal goal for all must be problematized as a potentially white-centered claim. Researchers have explored the construct of outness within communities of color and revealed that outness is not always a universal goal, nor is it deemed necessary or conducive to survival and thriving within communities of color (Bowleg et al., 2008; Moradi, 2010; Pastrana, 2016; Rosario, Scrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Sarno, Mohr, Jackson, & Fassinger, 2015).

Nevertheless, most participants frequently identified outness as a source of pride and expressed pride in their identities and relationships, in both group discussion and individual description of submitted photographs. Furthermore, participants in this study shared experiences of outness and pride, as well as that of shame, mirroring Wells and Hansen's (2003) finding that lesbians who reported higher levels of identity integration and identity pride also reported significant levels of internalized shame. When participants focused on shame and wanting to cast it away, some still found themselves enacting shame-induced behaviors such as hiding their relationships from families of

origin in exchange for their family's sense of comfort, potentially elucidating Dickerson, Greunewald, and Kemeny's (2009) finding that the routine experience of threats to LGBTQ-individuals' social selves furthers feelings of shame.

Relatedly, participants identified two arenas in which it felt more difficult to be out—in their present or past experiences—families of origin and religious communities specifically identified by participants in this study as Christian religious communities. The themes that emerged from discussion of these experiences were outness as a risk to family and outness as conflicting with religion. Participants experienced increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection from partners due to engaging in these systems that they experienced as shaming or silencing, reflecting findings by Mereish, Poteat, and Paul (2015). Regarding participant experiences of outness as a risk to family, participants found themselves considering/sacrificing their outness to both protect families of origin from discomfort or to protect families of choice, most commonly children, from discriminatory experiences, potentially elucidating a novel nuance of this overall theme.

In consideration of outness as conflicting with religion, namely Christianity, participant experiences were validated by Subhi and Geelan's (2012) finding that 80% of participants experienced conflict between their sexual orientation and religious identities. This could also be possibly related to Whitehead's (2013) finding that only 37.4% of Christian congregations in the United States allowed same-gender couples to become members and even fewer allowed LGBTQ individuals to become leaders, furthering the sense of not belonging in religious arenas.

Along with the multitude of findings supported by previous literature on outness, there were also a couple of findings that seemed novel. One of these findings revolved around participants viewing outness as an act of advocacy, a display that has the potential to show direct support to LGBTQ individuals and to educate non-LGBTQ individuals about LGBTQ-people. This theme seemed indicative of participants' abilities and commitment to transforming a tool of oppression into one of communal strength. As this is an unexplored concept within the counseling literature, further examination of this theme could offer support for the ways and means LGBTQ individuals access resiliency.

Secondly, participants identified outness as a tool to conform to or challenge heterosexual norms of family. Some participants conveyed conformity through statements depicting their similarity to non-LGBTQ individuals, couples, and families, and other participants conveyed their outness as a challenge to heteronormative constructions of family by advocating for redefinition of family and acknowledgment that families look many different ways. Specifically addressing outness as a tool to challenge the heteronormative institution of the nuclear family, participants seemed to be engaging in Munoz's (1999) theory of disidentification as a resistance strategy. Recognizing that the nuclear family is the current system in place, a system founded by white heteropatriarchal norms, participants found ways to operate within it, allowing their queer performances of family to resist and destabilize "socially prescribed patterns of identification," particularly within the family unit (Munoz, 1999, p. 28). Furthermore, using outness as a tool to challenge norms of family, participants worked within and outside of the dominant public sphere to embrace and live all parts of their identity as

multifaceted LGBTQ family members, and embodied a presence that actively injected queer structures within the dominant (read: white, straight) larger society.

**Outness in same-gender romantic relationships.** Specifically regarding their experiences of outness within their same gender relationships, many participants stated that their entrance into a same-gender relationship often inspired them to come out or to support a less out partner in doing so, a finding supported by Knoble and Linville (2012) who described the entrance into a same-gender relationship as posing the opportunity or challenge to come out. Further aligning with Knoble and Linville's findings, some participants discussed their experiences offering support to their romantic partners who were less out or, if participants were less out in certain arenas, receiving support from their partners. Participants also identified their difference in outness about their relationship to be based on context, mirroring what Knoble and Linville deemed *situational outness* in their 2012 study.

### **Research Question Two**

To answer the second research question, the researcher similarly asked participants to take and submit three photographs representing their experiences of outness within their same-gender romantic relationships. Participants were asked to make sense of their depictions of outness as related to relationship satisfaction in diverse arenas through answering a modified SHOWED paradigm and to participate in a group discussion in which all submitted photographs, titles, captions, and SHOWED answers were processed. The 8 developed themes and their 14 associated subthemes (see Table 4:

Outness & Relationship Satisfaction: Themes and Subthemes) mirror and further develop the literature on how outness is related to relationship satisfaction.

**Outness and relationship satisfaction.** In discussion about how outness impacted relationship satisfaction, 8 themes and 14 accompanying subthemes emerged. Contributing to the development of themes, some participants spoke of their personal experiences of outness in same-gender relationships, claiming that higher levels of outness positively influenced their relationship satisfaction, correlating to findings of previous studies (Berger, 1990; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000). These claims contributed to the emergence of two related themes, relationship satisfaction as related to displaying the relationship (i.e., as a way of performing outness about the relationship) and relationship satisfaction as related to open and public displays of affection (i.e., as a way of performing outness about identity and outness about the relationship). Offering additional backing of these themes, Clausell and Roisman (2009) found that participants who were more out in the world reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction, potentially offering support for the perceived positive impact on relationship satisfaction that occurs when participants embody their outness in many different arenas by displaying their relationships and engaging in acts of public affection toward one another.

Conversely, the theme that relationship dissatisfaction arose when partners did not display or demonstrate outness about the relationship in all contexts supported this line of reasoning in a complimentary manner and aligned with both Jordan and Deluty's (2000) and Keeler's (2000) findings. However, a diverging perspective emerged in the theme of

relationship satisfaction being impacted when partners have different levels of outness. Relationship satisfaction was stated to be impacted in two different ways; different levels of outness challenged/created tension between partners, and different levels of outness contributed to the shared experience of one's outness journey and offered the opportunity for support between partners. The subtheme of different levels of outness challenging/creating tension between partners was supported by Jordan and Deluty (2000) and Knoble and Linville (2012) who found that dissimilarity between partner's levels of outness was positively correlated to relationship dissatisfaction. Additionally, the subtheme that different levels of outness contributed to the shared experience of one's outness journey and offered the opportunity for support between partners was somewhat supported by Knoble and Linville (2012) who found that engaging in a same-gender relationship provided the opportunity to come out while being supported by a romantic partner. However, Knoble and Linville's findings did not link relationship satisfaction to the experience of understanding and support in this shared journey.

Further elaborating on systems of support, participants identified relationship satisfaction to be impacted by support systems of partner, other people, and the creation of a chosen family. This theme is consistent with results obtained by Frost and Meyer (2009) who found that connection with LGBTQ community increased overall relationship quality; however, this theme also furthers Frost and Meyer's finding, demonstrating that gaining support impacts relationship satisfaction, directly. This direct link between outness serving as a source of social support also was found by Knoble and Linville (2012).

Another way in which participants experienced support for their relationships was through certain legal systems such as marriage. Participants highlighted the sense of satisfaction gained from the legal legitimization of their partnership. Similarly, MacIntosh, Reissing, and Andruff (2010) examined the relational impact of legalizing same-sex marriage in Canada, finding that LGB participants experienced increased identity confidence and sense of safety in relationships after the legalization of same-sex marriage. The current study expands upon this finding, connecting access to marriage with relationship satisfaction.

Two findings that were not yet evident in the body of literature surrounding outness and relationship satisfaction were the themes that relationship satisfaction was impacted by trauma related to coming out, and relatedly, relationship satisfaction was found to be impacted by fear. These findings make sense in the context of literature (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Szymanski & Balsam, 2011) about coming out and experiences of homophobia, but could be productive in adding to the literature base if further explored.

Overall, it seems that outness did play a role in relationship satisfaction—though outness may not have fully determined relationship satisfaction, outness was revealed to be a necessary component to consider within same-gender relationships. The cumulative findings challenge findings of previous studies that claimed there was no relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Todosijevic et al., 2005). The potential divergence in findings of the current study could be due to adjustments the researcher made based on limitations of previous studies.

For example, Mohr and Daly (2008) included measures of disclosure of identity that were only limited to verbal modalities of identity disclosure in very limited arenas. In the current study, the researcher expanded the arenas of disclosure to those of family, friendships/social, spiritual, social media, school, work and professional, and public arenas. The researcher also provided extra space for participants to identify any arenas the researcher did not include and felt relevant, and the researcher granted leeway for the participants to interpret their outness in a variety of ways, including but not limited to verbal and physical, as well as active and passive modalities of outness. Additionally, in response to the critique of the previous use of quantitative measures to assess the relationship between outness and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Todosijevic et al.; 2005), the researcher chose to explore this relationship qualitatively, as previous studies evidenced the need for more depth into nuanced understandings of outness.

All in all, distilling findings down to such a rudimentary statement that higher levels of outness correlate to higher levels of relationship satisfaction fails to do this phenomenon justice. To avoid oversimplification of multifaceted, lived experience and to maintain the integrity and nuances within how participants experience outness as related to satisfaction within their relationships, one must understand the multitude of ways outness is uniquely experienced, shared, and felt.

### **Limitations**

Though many important themes emerged within the current study, it is important to acknowledge a number of limitations existing throughout phases of the methodology,

specifically in recruitment, sample demographics, and study design. Regarding recruitment, the researcher faced significant difficulty accessing enough participants when the geographic location criterion was limited to the state of North Carolina. After significant and extensive recruitment efforts, many participants emailed the researcher stating their interest in participation but either dropped out of the study, citing feelings of discomfort or fear, or became unresponsive to the researcher's follow-up emails. The researcher was aware of the unique sociopolitical climate within the state, including the passage of legislation that increased a felt sense of fear within LGBTQ communities. It is possible, though difficult to prove, that the current political context within the state was impeding successful recruitment.

In response, the researcher modified inclusion criteria to expand the option to participate to anyone living in the United States. After another round of recruitment in this larger area, the researcher was again emailed by multiple participants who either dropped out of the study or became unresponsive after receiving follow-up materials or completing the demographic questionnaire. Thus, constrained by time, the researcher chose to move forward with the current sample consisting of 7 North Carolinians and 2 participants from different states. Due to the large percentage of time recruiting within North Carolina, a state with a political climate that has been greatly shaped by House Bill 2 (HB2), the sample was heavily weighted and saturated by participants currently immersed in the political struggles of North Carolina, and the findings are representative of that impact. The introduction of this bill was an important contextual event that potentially impacted the study by shaping the degree of comfort and safety participants

felt regarding their outness. The presence of this legislation also could have skewed findings to limit transferability to other states. Though two participants were from states other than North Carolina—Virginia and Alabama—these states were potentially similar in sociopolitical context related to LGBTQ individuals. Thus, this study is representative of the way outness is experienced within politically conservative environments that lack protections for LGBTQ residents and may not be applicable to states that are more ideologically and politically liberal and supportive of protections for LGBTQ residents.

Another limitation is in the homogeneity of particular sample demographics. Though the sample of participants who participated in all phases of the study was diverse in ethnicity, they were largely homogenous in race, with 8/9 participants identifying as white. This occurrence could be related to the possibility that many non-white participants might have identified first as a member of their racial or ethnic community, their racial or ethnic identity preceding or outweighing their sexuality or gender identity (Bowleg et al., 2008; Hyeouk & Adkins, 2009; Ocampo, 2014; Pastrana, 2016). Additionally, 8/9 participants identified as women, and of those 8 participants, 3 women identified as lesbian, 3 women identified as gay, and 1 woman identified as bisexual/queer. The ninth member of the sample was a white man who identified as gay. All participants, with the exception of one, were mostly out in many arenas of their lives, evidencing a lack of diversity regarding participant level of outness. Across participants, the mean level of outness was always above 7 on the Likert scale. Though some participants stated having lower levels of outness in certain arenas, the majority were more largely out, yielding higher means and potentially evidencing that less-out potential

participants dropped out of the study and more-out participants remained involved. Additionally, most participants were out at levels similar to their partners, producing a sample in which there was not much difference between partners' levels of outness. However, in some contexts—work, family, and social media—participants did report diversity in intra-relationship outness level.

Furthermore, the researcher was unable to include trans participants in same-gender relationships in this study, and thus was unable to gain perspective into individualized trans experiences of outness about their relationships. Though there was some sample heterogeneity in participant levels of education and socioeconomic status, all participants had at least completed high school and 8 participants had a household income of above \$25,000, demonstrating a sample more weighted toward the privilege of education and income. The prevalence of white, cisgender, middle to high SES participants in this study could be indicative of the trend that leaves trans, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming communities of color out of the dialogue of queerness, which is mostly composed of the stories and experiences of white people who are of middle to upper socioeconomic status (Bailey, 2011).

In recruitment, the researcher included the criterion requiring a participant to be at least 24 years of age to account for the developmental definition of adulthood. This criterion limit, though specific to age, potentially hindered recruiting a diverse sample in demographics other than age. For example, more young people, below the age of 24, might have increased comfort with visibility having come of age in a time in which the political climate was more affirming in terms of marriage equality and non-

discrimination legislation. Also, in terms of outness, ages below 24 are often still coming to terms with their sexuality identities, yielding a greater opportunity to include participants with very different levels of outness from their partners. Considering all mentioned sample limitations, the researcher was unable to determine the impact of multiple intersecting identities on outness and relationship satisfaction. Through concerted recruitment efforts, the researcher aimed to engage with participants of diverse and intersecting social identities, but ultimately was unable to do so.

The photovoice study design also posed certain methodological limitations. Utilizing photographs to depict levels of outness could have increased the level of participant's visibility in their communities, potentially making participants vulnerable to acts of homophobic violence. The researcher addressed this limitation and risk by consistently and frequently encouraging participants to prioritize their safety and comfort. Participant risk of being outed also increased due to the visual nature of the design. Fear of being outed or discomfort with being out was expressed as a reason for many potential participants to drop out of the study. The researcher worked to assuage this fear by offering two online discussion groups to preserve participant anonymity, and though some participants felt comforted by this option, others still deemed participation too risky.

Relatedly, the group format of the discussion posed additional limitations. For example, participants could have experienced self-monitoring when selecting which photographs to use, where a one-on-one meeting might have removed perceived pressure to fit into social norms and offered the opportunity for participants to more comfortably

take risks in their selections. Secondly, the group discussion could have been swayed by participants who were more active and staunch in their beliefs. Additionally, participants who were more-out and proud might have silenced the voices of the few participants who were less-out, potentially making those group members feel isolated or silenced. An additional limitation surfaced in the virtual nature of the discussion meeting. Though discussions needed to be virtual to accommodate participants who did not live close to Greensboro, NC, the chat modality of discussion could not capture the expressions and nuances of tone exchanged between group members.

The time commitment required of participants was another limitation that led to significant attrition throughout the phase of the study. With the requirement of watching a 15 minute training video, filling out a demographic questionnaire, taking and selecting pictures, and attending a discussion group lasting 1.5-2 hours, many potential participants dropped out of the study, potentially due to fatigue.

In work with marginalized populations, it is exceedingly important that these limitations be taken into consideration as well as the limitations that may have emerged from the interaction of the coders and auditors with their own experiences of their intersecting personal and political identities. Though the coders and auditor intentionally bracketed their biases related to LGBTQ identities and couples, outness, and relationship satisfaction, potential for bias in the interpretation of results exists. The researcher made a concerted effort to use participant words wherever possible in the reporting of results—this choice was to minimize the potential of speaking for or over participants and incorrectly relaying their experiences, in exchange for uplifting their word and voices.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Training and Future Research**

Throughout implementation of this study, many implications arose for people involved with the counseling profession at multiple capacities. These implications are organized below as follows: (a) implications for counselors, (b) implications for counselor educators, and (c) implications for counseling researchers. All implications are based on study themes and participants' recommendations.

### **Implications for Counselors**

This study has the potential to offer couples counselors a framework through which to conceptualize and better support clients in same-gender relationships. The themes garnered from this study could impact the ways in which same-gender couples' counseling is done, as well as the immediate relationships of same-gender couples participating in counseling. Additionally, providing further information surrounding outness, a concept that all LGBTQ individuals experience to some degree, this study could illuminate the position of outness within a framework of resiliency, potentially aiding same-gender couples in the formation of stronger interpersonal, social, and community connections in which identity is visible and celebrated within and outside of the mental health field.

Furthermore, participants used their voices to speak directly to counselors, making use of a direct line of communication between LGBTQ clients and non-LGBTQ counselors. Participants used this opportunity to teach counselors about their unique experiences and to direct counselors on the best ways to work with them in both clinical and advocacy contexts. Some salient recommendations included asking counselors to

advocate with LGBTQ clients in ways that promote celebration, not mere tolerance, of LGBTQ populations and communities. Participants also encouraged counselors to empathize with the repeated nature of outness, especially as it manifests within the counseling relationship, even if it influences clients initially to feel hesitant to trust counselors. Additionally, participants urged counselors to understand their challenges and struggles, but also to recognize their strength and resiliency. Counselors-in-training, new counselors, and seasoned counselors alike could greatly benefit from reading and integrating these messages into their practices.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

The findings could also shift and enhance the way counselor educators teach about outness, LGBTQ-identity, and related counseling concerns. Through integration of relevant, non-heteronormative literature and discussion into couples and family counseling courses, educators can work to eradicate heteronormativity and cisnormativity from their teachings, and in exchange, educate counselors-in-training to combat similar programming within themselves. These foundational teachings can translate into action as students become effective and socially conscious counselors and advocates for identity celebration and gain skills to authentically represent themselves as systems of safety and support for marginalized populations. This study could further illuminate the ways in which educators teach about challenges or promise of LGBTQ romantic relationships, highlighting the spaces of resilience, resistance, and strength within same-gender unions.

Additionally, thoroughly integrating these findings into coursework could answer to the failure of counselor educators to include LGBTQ training in coursework (Carney

& Kluck, 2012). Increased inclusion of and specialized education about LGBTQ communities and experiences can increase sense of perceived competency in work with LGBTQ populations, which Graham et al. (2012) and Owen-Pugh and Baines (2014) discovered to be low among graduates from CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The current study offers the chance to engage with actual participant voices, words, and images, and could serve to humanize and make accessible LGBTQ peoples' experiences while also challenging harmful notions about LGBTQ populations that counselors-in-training may harbor. More specifically, integration of the findings of this study with the 2012 Association for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) competencies that identify the critical importance of honoring that one's coming out process may be "ongoing and multilayered...and coming out may not be the goal for all individuals," can build sense of understanding as to why these competencies exist and are necessary to honor (ALGBTIC Competencies Task Force, 2012, p. 9). Counselor educators can teach counselors-in-training that the assumption that coming out is beneficial or detrimental for all individuals who identify as LGBTQ, is dangerous and must be released in exchange for working to fully and deeply understand each unique person's perspective, needs, and intersectional experience. Counselor educators can infuse in their instruction, modeling the art of listening and honoring one's unique experience, an art that defines the power of counseling.

### **Implications for Counselor Researchers**

Finally, implementing a photovoice methodology to study outness and relationship satisfaction within same-gender relationships could offer further clarification

of the role of outness in LGBTQ relationships, strengthening the research base in this area and creating room for future studies. Also, mirroring this study, the implementation of research practices grounded in feminist and queer theory has the potential to transform the way research is done, minimizing research violence and making way for new productions of knowledges that challenge positivist notions about individualized experience. Furthermore, applying queer theory to recruitment offers the promise of shifting how recruitment is done. For example, regarding reaching samples diverse in race, education, and socioeconomic status, Moradi et al. (2010) and Rosario, Scrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color often were less out than white lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Relatedly, Sarno, Mohr, Jackson, and Fassinger (2015) explored conflicts of allegiance when LGB people of color experienced racism in the LGB community, and Sarno et al. (2015) and Pastrana (2016) examined family support to be strongly predictive of LGB people of color coming out. Hyeouk and Adkins's (2008) offered a call to action to recognize the intersection of LGBTQ identity and ethnicity-based minority stress outside of a western framework. Through a queer theory lens, researchers can collaborate across identities of sexuality, race, class, and gender, and potentially problematize the use of categories in research, questioning and eradicating systemic violences implicit in the realm of research.

### **Conclusion**

Audre Lorde stated, "And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength" (1984, [p.42]). The participants in this study delved into the depths of vulnerability to illuminate the revolution and resilience of

their lived experiences. Through their own words and gazes, they embodied and examined their visibility to reveal the sources of their greatest strengths and resilience. The purpose of this study was to explore individuals in same-gender relationships' experiences of outness as it relates to relationship satisfaction and as it manifests in various arenas of life. Particularly, the researcher sought to gain depth in understanding the unique impact outness can have on relationship satisfaction as well as the nuanced meanings LGBTQ individuals apply to their experiences of outness in diverse contexts. The results of this study lead to a diverse array of implications for counseling practice and the counseling field. Utilizing the results of this study, counselors, counselor educators, researchers, and other mental health professionals may gain a nuanced and accessible perspective on how to more knowledgeably conceptualize, counsel, and connect with LGBTQ-identified individuals within same-gender romantic relationships, specifically around the common, yet concurrently promising and challenging, lived experience of outness.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
GREENSBORO

OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY  
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336.256.0253  
Web site: [www.uncg.edu/orc](http://www.uncg.edu/orc)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

To: Whitney Akers  
Counsel and Ed Development  
Counsel and Ed Development

From: UNCG IRB

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Laurie Wedemeyer'.

Authorized signature on behalf of IRB

Approval Date: 1/04/2016  
Expiration Date of Approval: 1/03/2017

RE: Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)  
Submission Type: Initial  
Expedited Category: 6.Voice/image research recordings,7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups  
Study #: 15-0454  
Study Title: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships: The Impact of the Closet on Connection

This submission has been approved by the IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

**Study Description:**

This research project involves exploring individuals in same-gender couples' experience of outness within their adult romantic relationships and their social arenas through critically examining photographic images taken by participants. Through group discussion of these photographs, the researcher hopes to gain depth in understanding the experience of outness in individuals in same-gender couples' private and public lives, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, and political contexts.

**Investigator's Responsibilities**

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the modification application available at <http://integrity.uncg.edu/institutional-review-board/>). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB using the "Unanticipated Problem-Adverse Event Form" at the same website.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found [http://policy.uncg.edu/research\\_data/](http://policy.uncg.edu/research_data/).

## APPENDIX B

### IRB RENEWAL



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA  
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Web site: [www.uncg.edu/orc](http://www.uncg.edu/orc)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** Whitney Akers  
Counsel and Ed Development  
Counsel and Ed Development

**From:** UNCG IRB

**Approval Date:** 1/12/2017  
**Expiration Date of Approval:** 1/11/2018

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

**Submission Type:** Renewal

**Expedited Category:** 6.Voice/image research recordings,7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups

**Study #:** 15-0454

**Study Title:** Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships: The Impact of the Closet on Connection

This submission has been approved by the IRB for the period indicated.

#### **Study Description:**

This research project involves exploring individuals in same-gender couples' experience of outness within their adult romantic relationships and their social arenas through critically examining photographic images taken by participants. Through group discussion of these photographs, the researcher hopes to gain depth in understanding the experience of outness in individuals in same-gender couples' private and public lives, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, and political contexts.

#### **Submission Description:**

Requested Modifications:

Note: All modifications only apply to Phase 2 of the study. No modifications are needed for Phase 1.

1. The principal investigator will expand the research team by involving the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Craig Cashwell, as a secondary coder for data analysis.
2. Additionally, the principal investigator will involve Dr. Susan Blake as an auditor and add the auditor to the study.
3. The coders (i.e., the principal investigator (Whitney Akers) and faculty advisor (Dr. Craig Cashwell) and the auditor (Dr. Susan Blake) will engage in bracketing activities prior to data collection.

4. To keep focus group numbers to a manageable size, the principal investigator will modify Phase 2 recruitment from recruiting one group of 8-12 participants to recruiting two groups of 7-10 participants (totaling 14-20 total participants) to be split into 2 separate focus groups as opposed to only one focus group as initially proposed.
5. The principal investigator will offer the option for participants to participate in an in-person or an online focus group to potentially increase comfort for participants who are less out and to allow inclusion of participants who live further away.
6. The principal investigator will utilize a private online chat forum through WebEx as the electronic meeting option for participants who choose to participate in group discussion via the online focus group.
7. The principal investigator will change inclusion criteria in the following ways:
  - a. Instead of “participants must be at least 18 years of age” the principal investigator will state “participants must be at least 25 years of age”.
  - b. The principal investigator will add the inclusion criteria that participants must have been in their current relationship for at least 6 months.
  - c. The principal investigator will expand recruitment beyond those who live close enough to travel to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to those who live close enough to travel to UNCG for an in-person discussion group AND anyone in the state of North Carolina who is willing to participate in an online discussion group.
8. In the invitation to participate and informed consent documents, the principal investigator will indicate that both partners in a relationship cannot participate in the same discussion group. If both partners in a relationship want to participate, one can participate in the online discussion group and one can participate in the in-person discussion group.
9. The principal investigator will ask participants to provide a title, caption, and information from the modified SHOWED paradigm to the researcher via google drive submission prior to meeting for the discussion group. Participants will then spend the first 15 minutes of the focus group time looking at the images and reading the information provided by each participant. In the in-person focus group, the principal investigator will have the photographs, titles and captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers posted throughout the meeting room on sheets of paper for participant review before group processing begins. For the online meeting, the principal investigator will have all submitted photographs, titles and captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers posted electronically for participant review before group processing begins.
10. The principal investigator will modify recruitment materials to indicate that the in-person focus group discussion will be audio-recorded and the online focus group transcript will be recorded via text that participants type. The principal investigator will include a consent form granting permission to audio record the in-person meeting and save the textual record of the online discussion.
11. The principal investigator will utilize a modified SHOWED paradigm that includes:
  - (1) S: What is the Significance of this photograph?
  - (2) H: How does this photograph depict your sense of satisfaction within your relationship?

(3) O: How does this relate to Our lives as LGBT\*Q individuals in same-gender romantic relationships?

(4) W: What does this photograph say about your outness in this context?

(5) E: How would you describe your Experience and Emotions taking/selecting this photograph?

(6) D: What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?

12. The principal investigator will modify and resubmit the focus group guide for discussion.

13. For analytic purposes, the principal investigator will include the titles, captions, and data from the modified SHOWED paradigm in addition to the transcript of the focus groups in the data to be analyzed.

14. The principal investigator will modify the research questions to:

**Research Question 1.** How do individuals in same-gender romantic relationships make sense of and/or apply meaning to visual depictions of outness within their same-gender romantic relationships?

**Research Question 2.** How do individuals in same-gender romantic relationships experience the construct of outness as related to relationship satisfaction within and outside of their relationships and within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, social media, and public contexts?

15. In step 6 of Phase 2, in an effort to manage time, participants will be asked to take 10 (as opposed to 27) photographs aimed at depicting their perception of outness within their relationship as it manifests in varying arenas throughout the next two weeks.

16. Step 7 of Phase 2 will be eliminated, as participants will be asked not to send all taken photographs to the researcher, but only up to 3 selected photographs with the accompanying titles and captions and completed SHOWED paradigm. Participants who used a disposable camera will be asked to develop photographs with a stipend provided by the researcher and then mail all documents to the principal investigator. Participants who used phone cameras will review and upload electronic photos to the participant's private Google drive folder or email directly to the principal investigator. This will ensure that participants have full opportunity to review taken photographs before sending to the principal investigator and decrease the chance for participants to unintentionally capture another individual in a photograph that is then sent to the researcher without participant awareness. Additionally, the principal investigator will include an additional precautionary note to participants indicating that sending photographs through the mail or electronically can compromise confidentiality and thus measures to protect confidentiality must be taken (i.e., double-checking email address and physical address prior to sending information).

17. The principal investigator will open photo taking options to include photos of the self on social media so as to offer an additional arena in which to consider outness. This category will also be added to the demographic questionnaire.

18. The researcher will provide a visual example of a completed photograph, title, and caption within the training materials in order to offer participants a concrete example of a completed selected

photograph.

19. The researcher will give participants a maximum word limit of 20 words for captions in order to provide a generalized format and concrete expectation to guide participants in describing their selected photographs.

20. When member checking, the principal investigator will check with participants to ensure that the themes garnered from data analysis do not compromise their confidentiality. If any participant indicates that a theme does compromise their confidentiality, the principal investigator will attempt to edit the theme to maintain confidentiality or if not possible, remove the theme altogether.

21. The principal investigator will clarify in recruitment materials and in the discussion group that participant participation in social action is not a required component of the study. Participants will have the option to participate in social action initiatives as collectively determined by the group, but will not be forced to do so. Also, participants will be able to state if they authorize their photographs to be used (through a signed release) in their absence. If participants do not explicitly authorize use of their photographs, their photographs will not be used in any way.

22. The principal investigator will change the demographic form in the following ways:

- a. The principal investigator will add "Age of Partner" to the demographic form.
- b. The principal investigator will ask for the duration of current relationship on the demographic form.
- c. The principal investigator will ask whether the participant cohabits with their partner on the demographic form
- d. The principal investigator will ask an open-ended question about participant ethnicity on the demographic form.
- e. The principal investigator will add the domain of "social media" to the demographic scaling questions about outness.

23. The principal investigator will modify and resubmit the recruitment materials to include an email that is brief, generates interest, and also includes attachments of all required IRB information and a document of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ).

24. The principal investigator will submit new recruitment flyers to post in local businesses and around the community. When contacted by participants recruited through flyers, the principal investigator will then send all required IRB information and materials to potential participants.

25. The principal investigator will add a signature line to the Photography Release Form for Individuals Depicted in Photographs for the guardian of a minor who may be depicted in a photograph in the case that a participant chooses to photograph their child who is a minor.

26. The principal researcher will create and submit a consent form for the use/reprinting of photographs, titles, and captions for social action purposes, presentation use, and publications by the principal investigator.

27. Due to the increase in sample size, the principal investigator will decrease the incentive to \$15.

### **Investigator's Responsibilities**

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

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Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at [http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research\\_data/](http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/).

CC:  
Craig Cashwell, Counsel and Ed Development

## APPENDIX C

### IRB MODIFICATIONS



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA  
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Web site: [www.uncg.edu/orc](http://www.uncg.edu/orc)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** Whitney Akers  
Counsel and Ed Development  
Counsel and Ed Development

**From:** UNCG IRB

**Approval Date:** 3/03/2017  
**Expiration Date of Approval:** 1/11/2018

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

**Submission Type:** Modification

**Expedited Category:** Minor Change to Previously Reviewed Research

**Study #:** 15-0454

**Study Title:** Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships: The Impact of the Closet on Connection

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this modification is no more than minimal.

#### **Submission Description:**

- 1) I would like to modify my study by changing the focus group time from 3 hours to 1.5-2 hours. I will modify all recruitment materials and training materials to depict this change. Due to the current methodology, the time reduction should allow for ample processing and make it less of a time commitment for participants.
- 2) I would also like to remove the \* from "LGBT\*Q" and use the acronym "LGBTQ" moving forward. There has been a shift in terminology, and I want to respect community terminology choices by editing the acronym in this way. I will make this edit in all recruitment materials and training materials.

#### **Investigator's Responsibilities**

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consent forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found [http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research\\_data/](http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/).

**CC:**  
Craig Cashwell, Counsel and Ed Development



OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY  
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore  
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.  
PO Box 26170  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
336.256.0253  
Web site: [www.uncg.edu/ori](http://www.uncg.edu/ori)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** Whitney Akers  
Counsel and Ed Development  
Counsel and Ed Development

**From:** UNCG IRB

**Approval Date:** 3/13/2017  
**Expiration Date of Approval:** 1/11/2018

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)  
**Submission Type:** Modification  
**Expedited Category:** Minor Change to Previously Reviewed Research, Minor Change to Previously Approved Research  
**Study #:** 15-0454  
**Study Title:** Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships: The Impact of the Closet on Connection

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this modification is no more than minimal.

**Submission Description:**

I would like to expand my recruitment to outside of North Carolina so that i can include participants from any state in the United States. I have modified this in all recruitment and training materials, including: the email/listserv recruitment script, the in-person recruitment script, the FAQ document, the recruitment flyer, the electronic questionnaire survey, the adult consent form, and the document "steps for completing your photovoice project". I have also placed a note in the photovoice training video description not he youtube video page that states: "**Please** disregard participation criterion A, as this has changed. You may also participate in the study if you live in a U.S. state other than North Carolina. In order to participate, you must live close enough to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to attend one focus/discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours OR live in any state in the U.S. (including, but not limited to North Carolina) and be willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours".

**Investigator's Responsibilities**

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found [http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research\\_data/](http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/).

CC:  
Craig Cashwell, Counsel and Ed Development



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA  
**GREENSBORO**

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY**  
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore  
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.  
PO Box 26170  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
336.256.0253  
Web site: [www.uncg.edu/ori](http://www.uncg.edu/ori)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** Whitney Akers  
Counsel and Ed Development  
Counsel and Ed Development

**From:** UNCG IRB

**Approval Date:** 3/27/2017  
**Expiration Date of Approval:** 1/11/2018

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)  
**Submission Type:** Modification  
**Expedited Category:** Minor Change to Previously Reviewed Research, Minor Change to Previously Approved Research  
**Study #:** 15-0454  
**Study Title:** Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships: The Impact of the Closet on Connection

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this modification is no more than minimal.

**Submission Description:**

In an effort to expand my recruitment, I would like to reduce my age criterion from at "least 25 years of age" to "at least 24 years of age".

The modified documents include:

Email or Listserv Recruitment, In-Person Recruitment Script, FAQ document, Flyer to attach to email and post, IRB Revised Adult Consent Form, Steps for completing your photovoice project, and I have posted a note on the training video noting the change in the age criterion (the video is still available via the existing link).

**Investigator's Responsibilities**

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found [http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research\\_data/](http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/)

**CC:**  
Craig Cashwell, Counsel and Ed Development

## APPENDIX D

### SNOWBALL SAMPLING RECRUITMENT MATERIALS: EMAIL, FAQ DOCUMENT, AND FLYER

**Recruitment e-mail: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness In Adult Romantic Relationships**

Subject line: Research on same-gender couples' experiences of outness

Hello!

I am a doctoral candidate in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Department of Counseling and Educational Development, and I am inviting you to participate in my dissertation research study. The purpose of this study is to explore individuals in same-gender couples' experiences of outness in adult romantic relationships. I hope to explore couples' experiences of outness in the many arenas of their lives as well as gain an understanding of how levels of outness impact romantic relationships through reviewing participant-taken photographs and discussion of these photographs.

For this study, **outness** is defined as the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not identify as cisgender. To be "out" is to be open and/or visible in one's non-heterosexual sexual orientation or one's non-cisgender gender identity. In conducting this study, I am mindful that LGBTQ people can be out to varying degrees, and a person's degree of outness is likely to shift and change based on their environment, social location, and surrounding influences, whether they be people, social groups, legal structures, or matters of safety.

Participating in this study will involve completing a short demographic questionnaire, taking you approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, in order to help me select a diverse participant group. All people who complete the demographic questionnaire may not be selected to be a part of the larger study due to a limited number of participants needed. You will be notified via email if you have been selected to participate.

Please see the attached Flyer and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document for further information about the full study.

If you would like to participate or learn more, please email me at this address:  
[wpaphotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoice@gmail.com)

**Thank you very much for considering participating! Whether or not you are interested in participating yourself, I invite you to consider forwarding this e-mail to others you know who may be interested in participating in this study.**

Your experience, time, and energy is very important to me, so I thank you in advance if you are willing to participate in this study! Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions!

Approved IRB  
3/27/17

Sincerely,

Whitney Akers MS/EdS, NCC, LPCA, ACS  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Counseling and Educational Development  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Office: Ferguson Building 223

Primary Contact Person: Whitney Akers, M.S., Ed. S., NCC, LPCA, ACS ([wpakers@uncg.edu](mailto:wpakers@uncg.edu))

**Attachments:** FAQ Document & Recruitment Flyer (See below)

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

#### **What are the criteria for inclusion in the full study?**

To participate in this study, you must meet the following requirements:

- (a) live close enough to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to attend one focus/discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours or live in any state in the U.S. (including, but not limited to North Carolina) and be willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours,
- (b) self-identify as LGBTQ,
- (c) be at least 24 years of age,
- (d) be currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and
- (e) have access to a computer.

#### **What happens if I am chosen to be in the full study?**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a web-based initial training session for the purpose of reviewing the prompt for taking the photographs, ethics of participation and camera usage, and camera techniques. This training will last approximately 15-20 minutes and will be accessible via [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). After the training session, you will be asked to electronically sign a consent form for participation. I will then offer you a disposable camera with which you will be asked to take 10 pictures depicting your experiences of outness as an individual in a same-gender relationship. If you would like to use your own camera or phone camera, you may opt to do so. You will then have two weeks to take pictures depicting your experience of outness in various arenas of your life. You are not required to depict yourself or other people in these photographs. Photographs can be artistic and symbolic and need not expose your identity if confidentiality is desired. You will have two weeks to take these photographs, and after choosing up to 3 of your photographs that most depict your experience, I

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will ask you to send these to me electronically or by mail. If using a disposable camera, you will not have to cover any cost for development or postage. All information regarding these transactions will be covered in the training video.

You will then be asked to either travel to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to participate in a discussion group or participate in an online discussion group focused on making meaning of the pictures you chose to share. The discussion groups will last no more than 1.5-2 hours and will be composed of as few as 7 or as many as 10 other participants. Prior to the conclusion of the discussion, the group will have the choice to collaboratively decide if you would like to use the collected photographs and discussion experience to engage with the community, policymakers, or stakeholders in an effort to meet a goal or have an impact of your choice. No one will be required to participate in social action, rather, this will only be an option.

**Can my partner and I both participate?**

Unfortunately you both cannot participate in the same discussion group. If you both want to participate in some way, one partner could participate in the in-person discussion group, and one partner can participate in the online discussion group.

**Is there an incentive for participation?**

After completing participation in the group discussion, you will receive a \$15 gift card. You will also be contacted by email for member-checking purposes and asked for your input and feedback about themes that emerged from group discussion.

**How much time will this take?**

In total, the amount of time required for participation is 15-20 minutes taking the demographic questionnaire, 15 minutes viewing the web-based training video, 1.5-2 hours at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro or online, travel time to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (if meeting in person), and the amount of time it takes you to take and select photographs. Additional time spent utilizing results to engage with the community can vary based on goals of the group and will be optional. The researcher may ask permission to follow up with you if your group decides to use the results to engage with the community, but your participation in any follow-up activities is also completely optional.

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*If interested, please contact:  
Whitney Akers*

[wpaphotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoice@gmail.com)

*Also, please feel free to pass  
this information along to  
others who may be  
interested in participating!*

---

# Photovoice Study

**Are you in a same-gender romantic relationship?**

**Are you interested in photography or art?**

**Do you have an interest in building community consciousness?**



If any of these questions apply to you, you might be eligible to participate in a creative research study exploring the impact of outness on same-gender romantic relationships.

To participate in this study, you must:

- (a) live close enough to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to attend one focus/discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours or live in any state in the U.S. (including, but not limited to North Carolina) and be willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours,
- (b) self-identify as LGBTQ,
- (c) be at least 24 years of age,
- (d) be currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and
- (e) have access to a computer.

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## APPENDIX E

### IN-PERSON RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

**In-Person Recruitment Script: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness In Adult Romantic Relationships**

Hello!

I am a doctoral candidate in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Department of Counseling and Educational Development, and I am inviting you to participate in my dissertation research study. The purpose of this study is to explore individuals in same-gender couples' experiences of outness in adult romantic relationships. I hope to explore couples' experiences of outness in the many arenas of their lives as well as gain an understanding of how levels of outness impact romantic relationships through reviewing participant-taken photographs and discussion of these photographs.

For this study, **outness** is defined as the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not identify as cisgender. To be "out" is to be open and/or visible in one's non-heterosexual sexual orientation or one's non-cisgender gender identity. In conducting this study, I am mindful that LGBTQ people can be out to varying degrees, and a person's degree of outness is likely to shift and change based on their environment, social location, and surrounding influences, whether they be people, social groups, legal structures, or matters of safety.

Participating in this study will involve completing a short demographic questionnaire, taking you approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, in order to help me select a diverse participant group. All people who complete the demographic questionnaire may not be selected to be a part of the larger study due to a limited number of participants needed. You will be notified via email if you have been selected to participate.

**What are the criteria for inclusion in the full study?**

To participate in this study, you must meet the following requirements:

- (a) live close enough to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to attend one focus/discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours or live in any state in the U.S. (including, but not limited to North Carolina) and be willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours,
- (b) self-identify as LGBTQ,
- (c) be at least 24 years of age,
- (d) be currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and
- (e) have access to a computer.

**What happens if I am chosen to be in the full study?**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a web-based initial training session for the purpose of reviewing the prompt for taking the photographs, ethics of participation and camera usage, and camera techniques. This training will last approximately 15-

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20 minutes and will be accessible via [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). After the training session, you will be asked to electronically sign a consent form for participation. I will then offer you a disposable camera with which you will be asked to take 10 pictures depicting your experiences of outness as an individual in a same-gender relationship. If you would like to use your own camera or phone camera, you may opt to do so. You will then have two weeks to take pictures depicting your experience of outness in various arenas of your life. You are not required to depict yourself or other people in these photographs. Photographs can be artistic and symbolic and need not expose your identity if confidentiality is desired. You will have two weeks to take these photographs, and after choosing up to 3 of your photographs that most depict your experience, I will ask you to send these to me electronically or by mail. If using a disposable camera, you will not have to cover any cost for development or postage. All information regarding these transactions will be covered in the training video.

You will then be asked to either travel to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to participate in a discussion group or participate in an online discussion group focused on making meaning of the pictures you chose to share. The discussion groups will last no more than 1.5-2 hours and will be composed of as few as 7 or as many as 10 other participants. Prior to the conclusion of the discussion, the group will have the choice to collaboratively decide if you would like to use the collected photographs and discussion experience to engage with the community, policymakers, or stakeholders in an effort to meet a goal or have an impact of your choice. No one will be required to participate in social action, rather, this will only be an option.

**Is there an incentive for participation?**

After completing participation in the group discussion, you will receive a \$15 gift card. You will also be contacted by email for member-checking purposes and asked for your input and feedback about themes that emerged from group discussion.

**How much time will this take?**

In total, the amount of time required for participation is 15-20 minutes taking the demographic questionnaire, 15 minutes viewing the web-based training video, 1.5-2 hours at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro or online, travel time to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (if meeting in person), and the amount of time it takes you to take and select photographs. Additional time spent utilizing results to engage with the community can vary based on goals of the group and will be optional. The researcher may ask permission to follow up with you if your group decides to use the results to engage with the community, but your participation in any follow-up activities is also completely optional.

If you would like to participate or learn more, please come speak with me now or email me at this address: [wpaphotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoice@gmail.com)

**Thank you very much for considering participating! Whether or not you are interested in participating yourself, I invite you to consider passing the information about this study and my contact information to others you know who may be interested in participating in this study.**

Approved IRB

3/27/17

Your experience, time, and energy is very important to me, so I thank you in advance if you are willing to participate in this study! Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions!

Sincerely,

Whitney Akers MS/EdS, NCC, LPCA, ACS  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Counseling and Educational Development  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Office: Ferguson Building 223

Primary Contact Person: Whitney Akers, M.S., Ed. S., NCC, LPCA, ACS ([wpakers@uncg.edu](mailto:wpakers@uncg.edu))

Approved IRB  
3/27/17

## APPENDIX F

### ADULT RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

#### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

Project Title: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable):

Whitney Akers, M.S., Ed. S., NCC

Dr. Craig Cashwell, Ph. D., LPC, NCC, ACS, CSAT-S

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

#### What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. This study involves research with the purpose of exploring individuals in same-gender couples' experience of outness within their adult romantic relationships and their social arenas through critically examining photographic images taken by participants. Through online or in-person group discussion of these photographs, the researcher hopes to gain depth in understanding the experience of outness in individuals in same-gender couples' private and public lives, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, and political contexts. Additionally, participants will have the optional opportunity to use their selected photographs to reach policymakers through participant-led advocacy efforts.

#### Why are you asking me?

You are being contacted for participation in this study to give depth into your experience of outness as a LGBTQ-identified person in a same-gender relationship. In order to participate in this study, you must: (a) live close enough to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to attend one focus/discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours or live in any state in the U.S. (including, but not limited to North Carolina) and be willing to participate in an online discussion

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Valid from:

3/27/17 to 1/11/18

group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours, (b) self-identify as LGBTQ, (c) be at least 24 years of age, (d) be currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and (e) have access to a computer. If you identify as LGBTQ and are in a relationship with an individual of a gender different from your own, you will not be eligible to participate, because you might not experience outness in the same way as an individual in a same-gender couple who is visibly identifiable as belonging to a marginalized community.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a web-based initial training session for the purpose of reviewing the prompt for taking the photographs, ethics of participation and camera usage, and camera techniques. This training will last approximately 15-20 minutes and will be accessible via [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). After the training session, you will be offered the opportunity to use your own picture-taking device (i.e., phone, camera) or to be sent a disposable camera with which you will be asked to take 10 pictures depicting your experiences of outness as an individual in a same-gender couple. You will then have two weeks to complete this task after which you will select up to 3 of your photographs to either electronically send or mail to the researcher for discussion in a group format. You will be asked to either travel to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to participate in a 1.5-2-hour discussion group or participate in an online version of the discussion group focused on making meaning of the pictures you chose to share. Prior to the conclusion of the discussion, the group will have the choice to collaboratively decide if you would like to use the collected photographs and discussion experience to engage with the community, policymakers, or stakeholders in an effort to meet a goal or have an impact of your choice. Engagement in social action is not required, but only an option.

In total, the amount of time required for participation is 15 minutes viewing the web-based training video, 1.5-2 hours at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro or online, travel time to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (if meeting in person), and the amount of time it takes you to take and select photographs. Additional time spent utilizing results to engage with the community can vary based on goals of the group and will be completely optional. The researcher may ask permission to follow up with you if your group decides to use the results to engage with the community, but your participation in any follow-up activities is also completely optional.

Due to the use of photographs in this methodology, participants might assume greater risk in being associated with living in a marginalized community where increased visibility could potentially compromise safety, and participants could experience reactive harm by others. There are also risks of increased stress involved when participants of marginalized populations choose to document their communities and discuss social and political change or identity. To decrease this risk, participants will be instructed to use personal judgment when choosing which photographs they feel are appropriate and safe to take and use and in which spaces it is safe to engage in photography. This consideration of safety and comfort could be in regard to themselves, friends, families, and their communities. Please prioritize your safety and the safety of those around you, as no picture is worth being harmed or having one's safety compromised.

**Is there any audio/video recording?**

This study consists of producing photographs and audio-recording/transcribing of group discussion. Depending on the photographs you choose to use, you may be identifiable by anyone

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who views the photographs. Also, because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the audio-recording, your confidentiality for what you choose to say on the tape cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will limit access to the tape as described here. The audio-recording will be kept in a locked file cabinet to which only the researcher has a key. The audio-recording will be listened to by a research team of two researchers, including the primary researcher and a secondary researcher, but this will be done in a private room to minimize threats to confidentiality.

**Can my partner and I both participate?**

Unfortunately, you both cannot participate in the same discussion group. If you both want to participate in some way, one partner could participate in the in-person discussion group, and one partner can participate in the online discussion group.

**What are the risks to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Due to the use of photographs in this methodology, participants might assume greater risk in being associated with living in a marginalized community where increased visibility could potentially compromise safety, and participants could experience reactive harm by others. There are also risks of increased stress involved when participants of marginalized populations choose to document their communities and discuss social and political change or identity. To decrease this risk, participants will be instructed to use personal judgment when choosing which photographs they feel are appropriate and safe to take and use and in which spaces it is safe to engage in photography. This consideration of safety and comfort could be in regard to themselves, friends, families, and their communities. Additionally, due to the format of a focus group, confidentiality can not be guaranteed, however, the principal researcher will ask the group not to discuss anything outside of the focus group setting.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact the principal researcher, Whitney Akers who may be reached at 704-576-0607 or [wpakers@uncg.edu](mailto:wpakers@uncg.edu) or [wpaphotovoices@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoices@gmail.com) or the faculty advisor, Dr. Craig Cashwell who may be reached at (336) 334-5112 or [cscashwe@uncg.edu](mailto:cscashwe@uncg.edu).

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

Potential benefits to society may include increasing community awareness of LGBTQ individuals' experiences of outness in same-gender relationships, effecting community or policy change as related to your identity, creating a sense of cohesion within your community, and connecting with policymakers and stakeholders within your community.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to participants for participating in this study.

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Valid from:

3/27/17 to 1/11/18

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study. However, after completing participation in the group discussion either in-person or online, you will receive a \$15 gift card to thank you for your participation.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

All physical information will be stored in a locked file cabinet to which only the researcher has access, and all electronic information will be stored in a Google Drive folder protected by a password to which only the principal researcher and faculty advisor have access. Participants will have the option to use a pseudonym while participating in this study. A master list connecting participant identity to a chosen pseudonym will be stored in a locked file cabinet, separate from the data, to which only the researcher has access. Additionally, the researcher will not identify participants by name when data are disseminated. Data will be kept for an indefinite period, but will remain without identifying information. Pseudonyms will be used when data is used in a journal article. The Google Drive folder will remain password-protected and accessible by only the principal researcher and the faculty advisor. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By completing this survey/activity (used for an IRB-approved waiver of signature) you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate in this study described to you by Whitney Akers, M.S., Ed. S., NCC, LPCA, ACS.

Electronic Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

UNCG IRB  
Approved Consent Form  
Valid from:

3/27/17 to 1/11/18

## APPENDIX G

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Hello and welcome!

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Through this study, I hope to explore individuals in same gender couples' experiences of outness in the many arenas of their lives. For this study, **outness** is defined as the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not identify as cisgender. To be "out" is to be open and/or visible in one's non-heterosexual sexual orientation or one's non-cisgender gender identity. In conducting this study, I am mindful that LGBTQ people can be out to varying degrees, and a person's degree of outness is likely to shift and change based on their environment, social location, and surrounding influences, whether they be people, social groups, legal structures, or matters of safety.

As a potential participant, I am asking that you complete this brief demographic questionnaire prior to selection for participation in the study. I am hoping to recruit participants diverse in gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, age, and geographic location. I am also hoping to recruit participants who differ in their levels of outness. Thus, this demographic questionnaire includes open ended questions about all of these characteristics to aid me in selecting a diverse participant group. The questions are all formatted to be open-ended so that you may answer each question with your own words and your personal experience. All people who complete the demographic questionnaire may not be selected to be a part of the larger study due to a limited number of participants needed and the goal to select for a diverse participant group. You will be notified via email if you have been selected to participate.

If you are not selected to participate in the larger study, any data entered here will not be used and will be deleted to maintain confidentiality.

This survey has two sections. First, I will ask you for demographic information. Second, I will ask you information about your levels of outness in different arenas, your perception of your partner's level of outness in different arenas, and how your level of outness compares to your perception of your partner's level of outness in these arenas.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Sincerely,  
Whitney Akers

## Part One: Background Questionnaire

1. What is your age in years?
2. What is your partner's age in years?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your partner's gender?
5. What are your appropriate pronouns (e.g., they, ze, hir, he, she, your name instead of a pronoun, etc.)?
6. What is your sexual orientation identity?
7. What is the highest level of education you completed?

Did not complete high school  
High school diploma  
Some college, no degree  
Associate's degree  
Bachelor's degree  
Some graduate school, no degree  
Master's degree  
Doctoral degree

8. How many years has it been since you completed your highest level of education?
9. What is your household income?  
Below \$25,000  
\$25,000 to \$45,000  
\$46,000 to \$65,000  
Above \$65,000
10. What is your race?
11. What is your ethnicity?
12. In which city and state do you live?
13. How long have you been involved in your current relationship?
14. Do you co-habitate with your current partner? If so, for how long?

15. Please provide an email address at which you may be contacted if you are selected to be a part of the larger study.

**Part Two: Outness Questionnaire**

1. Have you ever come out to anyone besides yourself about your sexual orientation?  
Y/N
2. Has your partner ever come out to anyone besides themselves and you about their sexual orientation? Y/N/Unknown

Next, please indicate your degree of outness and your partner's degree of outness in this current relationship on a scale of 1(not out at all) - 10 (completely out). If your partner's degree of outness is not known to you, please select "Unknown". You may add comments to further elaborate on your responses, if desired. Additionally, please indicate the length of time you have been out (i.e., 1 year, 10 years, 4 months, etc.).

**Family Arenas:**

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out to your family, how long have you been out in your family (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

**Friendships and Social Arenas:**

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out in your friendships and social arenas, how long have you been out in your friendships and social arenas (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

**Spiritual Spaces/Spiritual Arenas:**

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out in your spiritual arenas, how long have you been out in your spiritual arenas (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

**Social Media Arenas:**

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out in your social media arenas, how long have you been out your social media arenas (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

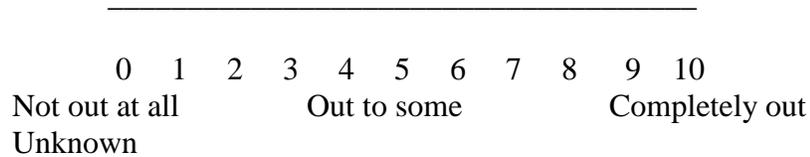
**School Arenas:**

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

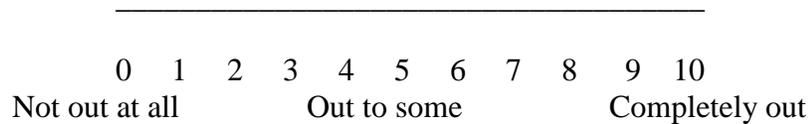


Comments:

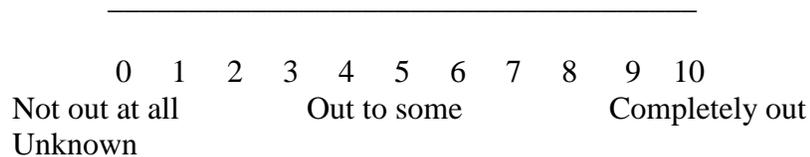
If you are out in your school arena, how long have you been out in your school arenas (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

**Work and Professional Arenas:**

Your degree of outness



Your partner's degree of outness

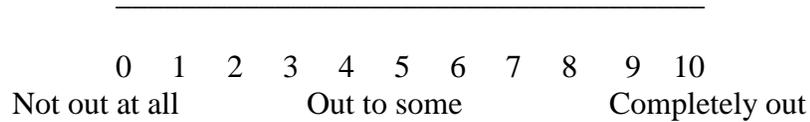


Comments:

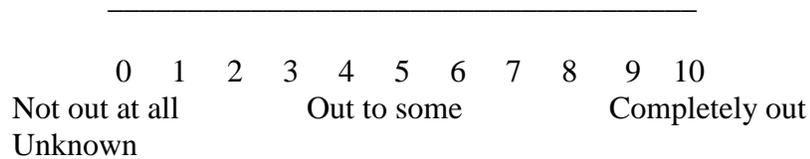
If you are out in your work and professional arenas, how long have you been out in your work and professional arenas (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

**Public Arenas (i.e., volunteering, activism, advocacy, etc.):**

Your degree of outness



Your partner's degree of outness



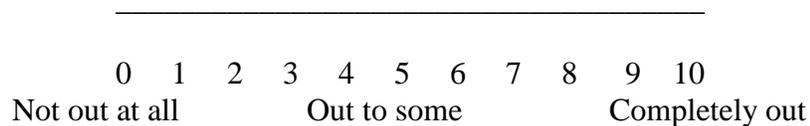
Comments:

If you are out in your public arenas, how long have you been out your public arenas (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

**If you or your partner experience outness in any areas or arenas not mentioned here, please fill in the blank accordingly:**

1)\_\_\_\_\_:

Your degree of outness



Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out in this arena, how long have you been out in this arena (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

2) \_\_\_\_\_:

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out in this arena, how long have you been out in this arena (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

3) \_\_\_\_\_:

Your degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out

Your partner's degree of outness

---

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Not out at all                      Out to some                      Completely out  
Unknown

Comments:

If you are out in this arena, how long have you been out in this arena (Please indicate a time increment of days, weeks, months, or years; please indicate the numerical (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) unit)?

### **Conclusion**

Thank you very much for participating in this survey! I am incredibly grateful for your participation! This completes the survey. Please click below to submit your responses.

Sincerely,

Whitney Akers

APPENDIX H  
PHOTOVOICE TRAINING VIDEO

Link for Photovoice Training Video:

<https://youtu.be/bY56eaPUp5Q>

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3/3/17

## APPENDIX I

### STEPS FOR COMPLETING YOUR PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

#### STEPS FOR COMPLETING YOUR PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

1. Researcher Contact Information:

Whitney Akers, M.S., Ed. S., NCC, LPCA, ACS  
[wpaphotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoice@gmail.com)

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

2. Definition of OUTNESS:

the disclosure of sexual orientation unique to those who do not identify as heterosexual or the disclosure of gender identity unique to those who do not identify as cisgender. To be “out” is to be open and/or visible in one’s non-heterosexual sexual orientation or one’s non-cisgender gender identity. LGBTQ people can be out to varying degrees, and a person’s degree of outness is likely to shift and change based on their environment, social location, and surrounding influences, whether they be people, social groups, legal structures, or matters of safety.

3. Participation Requirements:

To participate in this study, you must meet the following requirements:

- (a) live close enough to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to attend one focus/discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours or live in any state in the U.S. (including, but not limited to North Carolina) and be willing to participate in an online discussion group lasting no more than 1.5-2 hours,
- (b) self-identify as LGBTQ,
- (c) be at least 24 years of age,
- (d) be currently involved in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least the past 6 months, and
- (e) have access to a computer.

\*Both partners involved in the same romantic relationship cannot participate in the same discussion group. If both partners would like to be a part of the study, they must be in different/separate discussion groups (i.e., one partner could participate in person and the other partner could participate online).

4. Aim of Photography:

- a) *Please take pictures of your experience of outness within your relationship as it manifests in public and private arenas, including, but not limited to: personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, and political contexts.*
- b) *When taking these pictures, please keep in mind the way these pictures and your experience of outness relates to your overall feeling of satisfaction within your relationship.*

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*c) I will also ask you how you make meaning of the pictures you take depicting outness and how it shapes your experience of satisfaction in your relationship.*

5. Photovoice Steps:

You will have the option to use your own camera or picture taking device, like a camera phone. If you would prefer to use a disposable camera, I will mail one to you for use in the study.

- **Begin taking photographs**
  - Over the course of 2 weeks, please take 10 photographs aimed at depicting your perception of outness within your relationship as it manifests in varying arenas.
    - Please keep in mind the way your experience of outness connects to your satisfaction with their relationship when taking photographs.
- **At the end of the two-week period:**
  - Participants using their own electronic device (i.e., camera, phone, etc.):
    - Please review taken photographs and begin thinking of which photographs most accurately reflect your experiences.
  - Participants using disposable camera:
    - Please develop the photographs (using funds provided by the researcher), review taken photographs, and begin thinking of which photographs most accurately reflect your experiences. (Note: In order to make these photographs accessible for use in the discussion group, once mailed to the researcher, the researcher will scan photographs into a password-protected computer and upload photographs onto a private google drive folder shared between the researcher and the individual participant.)
- After all photographs have been received and uploaded, then you will enter **Stage One: Selecting Photographs**
  - Each participant will select up to 3 of their photographs that adequately convey their intended ideas.
  - Participants will be asked to develop a title and caption describing how each of their selected photographs depicts their experience of outness and/or satisfaction within their relationship.
  - Participants will also fill out the SHOWED paradigm for each photograph submitted:
    - S: What is the Significance of this photograph?
    - H: How does this photograph depict your sense of satisfaction within your relationship?
    - O: How does this relate to Our lives as LGBTQ individuals in same-gender romantic relationships?
    - W: What does this photograph say about your outness in this context?
    - E: How would you describe your Experience and Emotions taking/selecting this photograph?

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- D: What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?
- Participants will submit selections to the researcher via the google drive folder or email in preparation for group discussion.
  - In submitting this information, please upload the selected photographs, their titles and captions, and the SHOWED paradigm with each accompanying photograph into the google folder entitled “Photograph Submission” or email to the researcher at [wpaphotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoice@gmail.com)
  - Please be mindful of confidentiality when uploading, emailing, or mailing pictures. Please double-check addresses to ensure your materials come directly to the researcher.
- Here is an example of a completed Photograph with all accompanying materials (i.e., title, caption, SHOWED paradigm):



*Two Moms: When a kid celebrates marriage equality by coloring a picture of her moms in rainbow wedding dresses, and then gives them the picture at church.*

- S: What is the Significance of this photograph?  
*For the first time, I was able to not only be out in a spiritual community, but my child was able to see/create visual representations of my relationship and our family.*
- H: How does this photograph depict your sense of satisfaction within your relationship?  
*It makes such a difference to be out as a family unit. This makes me feel more satisfied in my romantic relationship, because there is no pressure to closet ourselves in our church.*
- O: How does this relate to Our lives as LGBTQ individuals in same-gender romantic relationships?

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*I think this celebration of our identities and families is something that needs to continue to grow so that other LGBTQ people can be out and be celebrated in all areas of life, and specifically in their faith communities.*

- W: What does this photograph say about your outness in this context?

*That I am out, and I am so comfortably out that my daughter takes pride in being a part of a family with same-gender parents.*

- E: How would you describe your Experience and Emotions taking/selecting this photograph?

*I felt overjoyed to have this as a photograph option. I also felt sadness that not everyone would be able to experience this in their spiritual/faith communities.*

- D: What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?

*We need to engage with spiritual and political leaders to change the environment of their churches and the overall attitudes about same-gender marriage. I think that there has been a lot of progress, but we are not done, and we also need to work for the safety of all in our LGBTQ communities so that we can all be out without fear.*

○ **Stage Two: Contextualizing and Storytelling**

- Participants will then be asked to meet either in person or online for a group discussion of photographs and captions. The in-person group meeting will be held at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and last no more than 1.5-2 hours. The group discussion will be audio-recorded and transcribed with participant consent in an effort to capture the nuances of verbal exchanges. A research assistant will also be present to take field notes to capture any in-the-moment experiences of or reactions to group discussion. This researcher will be bound to the same confidentiality agreement as the principal researcher. The online discussion group will be held through a private online chatroom, and the transcript from the group discussion will be kept for data analysis.
- Prior to the in-person focus group, the researcher will print all submitted photographs, titles and captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers to post throughout the meeting room for participant review before group processing begins. For the online meeting, the researcher will have all submitted photographs, titles and captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers posted electronically for participant review before group processing begins.
- Participants will spend the first 15 minutes of the focus group time looking at the images and reading the information provided by each participant.
- To facilitate a dialogue about and analysis of the photographs, the researcher will act as the group discussion facilitator, asking discussion

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questions in a semi-structured interview. The researcher will pose the questions:

- 1) What did you notice about the pictures?
  - a. Which pictures stood out to you?
  - b. What ideas/thoughts felt new to you in regard to outness in your relationship?
  - c. What ideas/thoughts felt new to you in regard to relationship satisfaction and outness in your relationship?
  - d. What ideas/thoughts felt familiar in regard to outness in your relationship?
  - e. What ideas/thoughts felt familiar in regard to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in your relationship?
  - f. What emotions did you feel when viewing the pictures?
- **Stage Three: Identifying Themes**
  - After reviewing all photographs, participants will additionally be asked to consider any themes they feel have emerged from discussion. Questions are as follows:
    - 1) What themes did you see in the pictures, titles, captions, and SHOWED paradigms? For the purpose of our discussion, a theme will be defined as having approximately 4 compelling photographs/titles/captions/stories (or a combination of these) that emerged during your walking around.
      - a. What were repeated images, ideas, or experiences specifically related to outness in same-gender romantic relationships?
      - b. What were repeated images, ideas, or experiences specifically related to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in same-gender romantic relationships?
      - c. What were other general repeated images, ideas, or experiences?
- **Stage Four: Planning for Action**
  - Before group discussion ends, the researcher will revisit (6) of the SHOWED paradigm (i.e., D: What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?) defining *we* to be inclusive of people in power at all levels, inviting participants to engage in critical thought and dialogue about their power to effect change and desired responses from their communities at large.
  - The researcher will facilitate a collective discussion among the group members exploring if or how they would like to see the results of this study used within the community. Participation in group action is not a required component of the study. You will have the option to participate in social action initiatives as collectively determined by the group, but will not be forced to do so. Also, you will be able to state if you authorize your photographs to be used (through a signed release) in your absence. If you do not explicitly authorize use of your photographs, your photographs will not be used in any way.

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- In order to begin preparation for the group's action plan, if one emerges, the researcher will gain consent from all participants, indicating if the researcher has permission to reprint all participant photographs, selected participant photographs, or no participant photographs for use in the project and dissertation (Photovoice Project Photo Release form for Participant Photographers). The researcher will bring this form to the group discussion meeting or send a link to an electronic version of this form for the online discussion group.
    - **Stage 5: Analysis**
      - After the researcher analyzes the transcript of the group discussion paired with the photographs, the researcher will electronically send themes to all participants, and solicit participant feedback. Your feedback in this phase is important in helping to ensure that I have accurately captured your experiences of outness and the group discussion, however, your level of involvement here is completely optional. I will also check with you to ensure that the themes garnered from data analysis do not compromise your anonymity. If any participant indicates that a theme does compromise their anonymity, the researcher will attempt to edit the theme to maintain anonymity or if not possible, remove the theme altogether.
    - **Stage 6: What can we DO about it?**
      - The researcher will assess next steps based on participant-directed goals and action plan
      - Participants can be involved in whatever capacity they see fit
6. Ethical considerations
- Identity Exposure
    - You will be known by group members as you are being asked to appear in person to discuss your experiences. You may use selected pseudonyms or your names. It is completely up to you. I will just ask that you indicate your preferred pseudonym/name on the Pseudonym Selection Form.
  - Potential for harm
    - Your safety and well-being are vital. Please take extra care to maintain your own safety.
    - There are risks to including yourself or other human subjects in photographs. For example, depending on the safety of your surroundings, physical harm and loss of privacy may result from participation in this photovoice project.
    - exposing your identity through pictures you choose to take
    - Remember, no picture is worth taking if it begets the photographer harm or ill will
  - Rights of non-participants
    - I would be remiss if I didn't facilitate critical thought about respecting others' privacy and rights
    - Every person has the right to avoid identity exposure by a picture that is taken without consent being given—this could happen if you take a

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picture of someone who is not publicly out, potentially exposing their identity or outing them.

- Participants are asked to obtain written [consent](#) from the people they photograph. This form will be accessible to you in the google drive folder labeled "Training Follow-Up Materials".
- Additionally, if you choose to include a photograph of a minor to which you have custody/guardianship, please be sure to sign the consent specifically for minor inclusion in photographs.
- Photographed individuals also have a right to receiving a copy of the picture in which they are depicted. You can give this picture as an expression of appreciation, respect, or camaraderie.
- Power of the Camera Holder:
  - Also important is training about power and authority that comes with using a camera in the community.
    - Do not intrude on someone's space publically or privately
    - You have the ability to portray someone in a photograph in a positive or negative light.
    - Please do not take photographs of illegal activity.
- Questions to Keep in Mind:
  - What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take their picture?
  - Should someone take pictures of other people without their knowledge?
  - What kind of responsibility does carrying a camera confer?
  - What would you not want to be photographed doing?
  - To whom might you wish to give photographs, and what might be the implications?

## 7. Camera Techniques

- Positioning photographs
  - Subject:
    - Explore positioning the subject in the center, off to the side, close up, and far away in photographs.
    - Feel free to depict people, objects, patterns, nature, etc. in your photographs. You have freedom in deciding how you want to depict your experiences. If people other than yourself are depicted in photographs, they must sign a wavier. You may find this wavier entitled "Photovoice Project Release Form for Individuals Depicted in Photographs" in the Google Drive Folder entitled "Training Follow-Up Materials".
  - Frame:
    - Position yourself to capture only what is needed in the frame. Photographs often have extra things in the frame that distract from the focus of the photograph.
    - Remain aware of the background in your photo
    - Watch for clutter or for unintentional inclusion of objects in the photograph. This also includes unintentional inclusion of people who have not signed a consent to be photographed.

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- Explore if there are objects or elements in the background of the photograph that are important in communicating your desired message/idea.
- Lighting
  - When trying to avoid harsh shadows, shoot photographs of people in covered shade so the light is more even across your subject(s).
  - Try to place the sun at your back when you are shooting your photographs. This will help you avoid backlit subjects with shadowy faces.
  - Allow yourself flexibility to creatively play with light, experimenting with lighting and how light will affect your pictures.
  - Remember that the flash will not reach very far in dark conditions like nighttime. Therefore, try to limit dark/night photographs to objects that are within arm's length.
  - During the daytime, if you are outdoors, keep the sun behind the photographer and illuminating the subject.
  - You may need to use the flash even on a sunny day outdoors.
  - Keep your finger away from the lens and flash to make sure you capture the intended picture.
- Taking a Photograph
  - When taking a photograph, hold the camera steady and release the shutter/button carefully
  - Sturdy yourself so that you may avoid shaking or moving the camera, which can lead to blurry or less-sharp pictures.
- Creativity
  - Be creative and experiment with your photographs. You have the freedom to use your imagination when depicting your experience of outness.
- Access to cameras
  - You may use your own device (i.e., phone, camera) or a disposable camera
  - If using a disposable camera, please email me to request one, and I will send one to your address. Please follow instructions for use on the device.

8. Thank you!

**Thank you very much for participating! I value your energy and creativity!**

- From this point forward, please address any questions to me at the email address: [wpaphotovoices@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoices@gmail.com)
- Electronically sign informed consent: Available as a Google Document in the Google Drive electronic folder entitled "Training Follow-Up Materials"
- Review training guidelines and procedures: for detailed explanations, please see document entitled "Steps for Completing Your Photovoices Project" in the electronic folder entitled "Training Follow-Up Materials" on Google Drive
- Begin Photographing: for detailed steps, please see electronic document entitled "Steps for Completing Your Photovoices Project"

9. Thank you!

**Thank you again for considering participating! Whether or not you are interested in participating yourself, I invite you to consider passing the information about this study**

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3/27/17

**and my contact information to others you know who may be interested in participating in this study.**

**Approved IRB  
3/27/17**

APPENDIX J

PHOTOGRAPHY RELEASE FORM FOR PARTICIPANT PHOTOGRAPHERS

**Photovoice Project: Photography Release Form**

**Study title: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships**

**Principal Investigator: Whitney Akers**

**Permission for use of images (titles):**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (photographer's name), grant Whitney Akers from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro the right to use photographs/images of me and/or taken by me in connection with the Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships photovoice research project.

I authorize Whitney Akers to use and publish the photos in print and /or electronically and/or in presentations.

Print Name or Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person who took photograph: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person in photograph (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate how you would like the photograph to be credited: (circle one and fill in blank, if applicable)

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_      Your Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_      Anonymous

**Approved IRB  
1/4/16**

APPENDIX K

PHOTOGRAPHY RELEASE FROM INDIVIDUALS DEPICTED IN PHOTOGRAPHS

**Photovoice Project: Photography Release Form**

**Study title: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships**

**Principal Investigator: Whitney Akers**

**Permission to images:**

I grant to \_\_\_\_\_ (photographer's name) and the dissertation study being carried out by *Whitney Akers* from *The University of North Carolina at Greensboro* the right to use photographs/images of me in connection with the *Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships* photovoice research project.

I authorize *Whitney Akers* to use and publish the photos in print and /or electronically and/or in presentations.

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person in photograph \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Approved IRB  
1/4/16**

APPENDIX L

PSEUDONYM SELECTION FORM

Pseudonym Selection Form

Participant name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

In an additional effort to preserve confidentiality, participants have the option to use a pseudonym (a name you will use instead of your real name) while participating in this study. This name can be anything you wish. You are not required to select a pseudonym and may use your name throughout the study if you choose.

A master list connecting participant identity to a chosen pseudonym will be stored in a locked file cabinet, separate from the data, to which only the researcher has access. Additionally, the researcher will not identify participants by name when data are disseminated. Pseudonyms (if chosen) will be used when data is used in a journal article.

I wish to be addressed by a pseudonym for the remainder of the study:

Yes      No  
(Please highlight or underline)

Please indicate your preferred pseudonym below. If you choose to use your name, please write your name below, instead:

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX M

### ONLINE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

#### Online Focus Group Guide

Hello, everyone! Thank you all for your participation this far and for joining me online to discuss your photographs. I hold great gratitude for each person's energy, generosity of time, and photographic creativity. Today, we will be discussing your selected photographs and their accompanying captions, titles, and SHOWED paradigms. In order to review your photographs as a group, I have sent you all a link to a google-drive folder containing all submitted photographs with their accompanying information in one document. Please take about 20 minutes to look through the document and view each photograph. Feel free to take notes on any that feel important to you or feel necessary to discuss. As you recall, you all answered 6 questions for each photograph:

- 1) What is the Significance of this photograph?
- 2) How does this photograph depict your sense of satisfaction within your relationship?
- 3) How does this relate to Our lives as LGBTQ individuals in same-gender romantic relationships?
- 4) What does this photograph say about your outness in this context?
- 5) How would you describe your Experience and Emotions taking/selecting this photograph?
- 6) What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?

Please keep these in mind as you engage with the photographs. After these 20 minutes, I will ask you all to come back to our online discussion screen so we can begin discussing your experiences and things that may have come up for you while looking at all of the submitted photographs. Are there any questions before we begin?

(After 20 minutes) Please come back to our discussion meeting. We will begin to discuss your experience of interacting with the photographs, titles, captions, and SHOWED paradigms. You are free to directly refer to the photographs or statements when discussing them. I will type a question and wait for responses. I will also work to facilitate engagement with responses before moving into the next question. In an effort to me mindful of your time, I may not respond to all comments and I may halt certain discussion to move forward to another question so that we stay on track. Please know that

even if I do not respond directly to a comment, all responses are important and are being recorded for further exploration after our discussion ends.

Discussion Guide:

Q1) What did you notice about the pictures?

- a. Which pictures stood out to you?
- b. What ideas/thoughts felt new to you in regard to outness in your relationship?
- c. What ideas/thoughts felt new to you in regard to relationship satisfaction and outness in your relationship?
- d. What ideas/thoughts felt familiar in regard to outness in your relationship?
- e. What ideas/thoughts felt familiar in regard to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in your relationship?
- f. What emotions did you feel when viewing the pictures?

Q2) What themes did you see in the pictures, titles, captions, and SHOWED paradigms?

- a. What were repeated images, ideas, or experiences specifically related to outness in same-gender romantic relationships?
- b. What were repeated images, ideas, or experiences specifically related to how outness influences relationship satisfaction in same-gender romantic relationships?
- c. What were other general repeated images, ideas, or experiences?

Q3) How did participation in this study impact you, your experience of outness, and your experience of relationship satisfaction?

- f. How did you experience your outness shift?
- g. How did you experience your outness about your relationship shift?

- h. How did you experience your relationship change?
- i. How did you experience overall satisfaction in your relationship change?
- j. Would you like to share any further comments about your experience of the process of participating in this study?

[Facilitate discussion about themes by repeating group member words and asking if the group agrees.]

[After all photographs have been discussed, the Group Facilitator will address the entire group:]

Thank you all for your thoughts and participation in exploring the nuances of these photographs.

Now, before group discussion ends, I want to revisit question number 6: What feels important for us (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) to Do now?

I want to define *we* to be inclusive of people in power at all levels, extending an invitation to each of you to think and discuss your power to effect change in your communities at large. Many people feel that photovoice studies have the potential to impact community by raising awareness of community members and leaders, policymakers, journalists, and stakeholders.

There is no pressure to do anything with this research and the information we have here today, but the option is available to you all. This time can serve as a brainstorming session for those who do want to further work with this project and the photographs. There is also a group of participants meeting in-person who will be having a similar discussion, and there is the option to unite efforts if this feels appropriate for folks, but we can also keep plans separate.

Again, no one is required to participate in any form of social action, but you all have the opportunity to do so. If you do want to be involved, you can choose to be involved in many different ways. For example, you may just want to listen to this conversation, or you may want to give ideas but not be on a team to carry them out. You may also just want to offer your photographs for the group's use in their choice of social engagement, or you may want to keep your photograph out of this next opportunity. Only photographs with written consent from their photographer can be used in whatever decision is reached.

(1) How would you like to see the results of this study used within the community?

[If participants need ideas about ways photovoice studies have been used in the past, the group facilitator will offer ideas, but will not endorse any ideas to avoid coercion of group members.]

[If asked for, the group facilitator will offer these ideas as a starting point]:  
Some potential ways participants might opt to enact might include but are not limited to addressing or increasing visibility of the issues related to outness and sexuality- or gender-based oppression, creating safe spaces, or advocating for larger policy change.

[The facilitator will also indicate that the group can brainstorm the action and ask the facilitator to carry out the plan.]

(2) What do you want counselors, counselor educators, and/or counseling researchers to know?

[After discussion concludes, the group facilitator will thank the participants, give further instruction for photograph release forms, and electronically send incentives to participants].

Thank you all for your time and energy today. The richness of this study would not be possible without your efforts over the past two weeks and today. I will be contacting you all via email once more after I analyze the discussion here today. The email will list the themes I found after analyzing our discussion. I will also ask for your feedback (i.e., whether you agree, disagree, or want to amend the themes) so that I can incorporate it into my final set of findings. Additionally, and importantly, I will also ask for your feedback as to if you feel any theme compromises your anonymity. If you indicate that a theme does compromise your anonymity, I will edit the theme or remove it if editing is not effective.

I also have an electronic form for you to sign indicating your degree of consent to the release of your photographs for use in presentations, publications, or social action inspired by this project. If you do consent to the use of your photographs, please indicate which photographs I may use by stating the title and if you would like photographs credited to your name, pseudonym, or anonymous. This form is available through this link:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScRAnOpSBdh6FbVyZy4cOecXEhf2J4N2TyWb9LeQxJ8-HI\\_fg/viewform#responses](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScRAnOpSBdh6FbVyZy4cOecXEhf2J4N2TyWb9LeQxJ8-HI_fg/viewform#responses)

Please follow the link now.

After you fill out this form and I receive your responses, your gift card incentives will be electronically sent to you, unless you prefer them to be sent by mail. Please let me know if you do not want them sent to you electronically! Thank you again!  
If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to email me at [wpaphotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:wpaphotovoice@gmail.com).

APPENDIX N

CONSENT TO REPRINT/USE PARTICIPANT PHOTOGRAPHS

## Photovoice Project: Online Photography Release Form

Study title: Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships  
Principal Investigator: Whitney Akers

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_ (photographer's name), grant Whitney Akers from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro the right to use photographs/images of me and/or taken by me in connection with the Individuals in Same-Gender Couples' Experiences of Outness in Adult Romantic Relationships photovoice research project. (please write name/pseudonym)

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

2. Permission for use of images (if granting permission for only certain photographs, please list photograph titles separated by commas, or state "All" to grant permission to use all photographs, or "None" to deny permission to use any photographs):

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please initial beside all permissions you chose to give:

- I authorize Whitney Akers to use and/or publish my photos in print and /or electronically
- I authorize Whitney Akers to use my photos in presentations of this project
- I authorize Whitney Akers to use and/or publish my photos in social action related to this project

#### 4. Electronic Signature of photographer

Your answer

---

#### 5. Date

MM DD YYYY

/ / 2017

6. Please indicate how you would like the photograph to be credited: (Please check applicable box)

- Your Name
- Your Pseudonym
- Anonymous

**SUBMIT**

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

APPENDIX O  
BRACKETING GUIDE

**Bracketing Exercise**

- **Personal History**
  - Please state your current roles within counseling (i.e., counselor, supervisor, counselor educator, researcher, etc.) and length of time in these roles.
  - Please state how you identify including, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, education, ability, language, and anything else you find important.
  - Do you have experience using Photovoice as a methodology? Please explain.
  - Do you have any vested interests in participating in this research study?
  
- **LGBTQ Identity**
  - Do you have experience counseling LGBTQ individuals? Please explain.
  - Do you have experience conducting research with LGBTQ individuals or couples? Please explain.
  - What beliefs do you have about LGBTQ people?
  - What beliefs do you have about counseling LGBTQ people?
  - How might your LGBTQ-identity or non-LGBTQ-identity impact your involvement in this study?
  - Are there any other ways your personal identity or professional work with LGBTQ individuals might influence your work on this research team?
  
- **Adult Same-Gender Romantic Relationships**
  - Do you have experience counseling LGBTQ couples? Please explain.
  - Do you have experience conducting research regarding relationship satisfaction in same gender or non-same gender couples? Please explain.
  - What beliefs do you have about adults engaged in same-gender romantic relationships?
  - What beliefs do you have about counseling adults engaged in adult same-gender romantic relationships?
  - How might your experience of being engaged in romantic relationships impact your involvement in this study?
  - Are there any other ways your personal experience or professional work with LGBTQ couples might influence your work on this research team?
  
- **Outness**
  - Do you have experience counseling LGBTQ individuals or couples focusing on outness? Please explain.
  - Do you have experience conducting research on outness? Please explain.
  - What are your general beliefs about outness?
  - How might your experiences with outness in your own life impact your involvement with this study?
  - How might your personal experiences with outness in same-gender romantic relationships in your own impact your involvement in this study?
  - What experiences do you have counseling clients regarding outness in adult

- same gender romantic relationships?
- What beliefs do you have regarding the impact of outness on same-gender romantic relationship satisfaction?
- Are there any other ways your personal experience or professional work with outness might influence your work on this research team?
- Expectations
  - What expectations do you have for how participants will portray experiences of outness?
  - What expectations do you have for how outness will impact participant experiences of relationship satisfaction in their relationships?
  - What expectations do you have about participants' experiences when discussing their experiences of outness on their satisfaction with their same-gender romantic relationship?
- Is there anything else in your experiences that might influence your work on the research team?
- Do you have any hesitations regarding engagement around disagreements within the research team?
  - If so, how can the team best support and facilitate dialogue in an effective manner?

## APPENDIX P

### PILOT STUDY

#### PILOT STUDY

##### **Purpose**

The purpose of the pilot study was to test the photovoice process and gain feedback surrounding the demographic questionnaire, photovoice training materials, and overall experience of the photovoice process and discussion group. The researcher implemented the photovoice methodology as planned for the full study, however, instead of using snowball sampling to recruit pilot study participants, the researcher asked two individuals the researcher knew through spending time in similar social circles and who were out to the researcher and engaged in same gender relationships. The researcher aimed to use the pilot study as an opportunity to experience the process of the photovoice methodology and facilitation of the discussion group. The researcher also the participants would offer feedback surrounding these processes, allowing the researcher to implement any needed changes to improve the full study.

##### **Research Questions**

In the pilot study, the researcher tested the following research questions:

*Research Question 1.* How do individuals in same-gender couples experience the construct of outness as related to relationship satisfaction within and outside of their relationships and within their public and private domains, including but not limited to personal, familial, social, work, spiritual, and political contexts?

**Research Question 2.** How do individuals in same-gender couples make sense of and/or apply meaning to visual depictions of outness as within their same-gender romantic relationships?

The researcher addressed research questions one and two through asking participants to take and select photographs, generate titles and captions describing selected photographs, and participate in a discussion group in which both participants verbally described the experience of taking and viewing each photograph using the SHOWED paradigm (see Appendix M: Discussion Group Guide).

### **Participants**

The researcher selected the pilot study participants after holding a casual conversation in which the participants discussed their levels of outness and interest in the ways their experiences were similar and different from others. The researcher had previously become acquainted with the two participants through a shared involvement in similar social arenas, and after discussing the topic of the study, asked the two individuals to participate in the pilot study. In an effort to maintain consistency between the pilot and full study, both participants were required to meet all inclusion criteria required of participants in the full study.

Both participants consented to be involved in the study. Both participants lived in North Carolina, identified as white women and used feminine pronouns. One woman self-identified as lesbian and the other self-identified as queer/primarily lesbian. Educationally, one woman had acquired her Master's degree and was in the first year of

her doctoral studies, and the other woman had taken some undergraduate courses, but did not have a college degree. The participants ranged from 30 to 34 in age.

In terms of outness, both participants had come out to people other than themselves and their partners about their sexual orientations, one participant being mostly out to her family for 5 years, and the other fully out to her immediate family for 7.5 years. In terms of outness within social and friendship arenas, one participant was fully out and has been fully out for 18 years while the other participant has been mostly out for 5-8 years. Both participants were fully out in their spiritual arenas for 8 years, one participant stating that she has been fully out in these spaces since joining a Universalist-Unitarian Church. One participant has been fully out in the school arena for 16 years and professional arena for 8 years while the other participant has been fully out in her school arena for 4 years and somewhat/sometimes out in her professional arena for 4 years. Additionally, both participants identified as being fully out in their political arenas, one participant for 18 years, and the other for 8 years. All in all, one participant identified herself as presently being more out than her partner in 2 arenas (school, professional), less out than her partner in 0 arenas, and similarly out as her partner in 4 arenas (family, friendships/social, spiritual, political), and the other participant identified herself as presently being more out than her partner in 1 arenas (school), less out than her partner in 3 arenas (family, friendships/social, professional), and similarly out as her partner in 2 arenas (spiritual, political).

## **Procedures and Results**

Through the demographic questionnaire was not used for participant selection in the pilot study as it will be in the full study, the researcher asked participants to complete the demographic questionnaire prior to participation so as to gain feedback on this component of the study. The researcher emailed the initial demographic questionnaire through Google Forms to ascertain information regarding participant gender identity and appropriate pronouns, sexual orientation identity, age, race, ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic status, geographic location, level of outness of the potential participant, and the potential participant's perceived level of outness of their romantic partner in various arenas.

After completing the demographic questionnaire, the researcher emailed the participants a link to the web-based photovoice training video posted on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) through which participants: (a) received education on the photovoice project design, methodology, and research questions, (b) acquired general electronic informed consent information, including education about participation criteria, the potential for harm (i.e., taking a picture of and exposing someone who is not publicly out), ethical considerations, and rights of non-participants (i.e., the right to avoid identity exposure by a picture that is taken when consent is not given), and (c) learned camera techniques. Additionally, the researcher provided participants with a supplementary electronic document detailing and expanding upon topics covered in the training video and informed participants that they could email the researcher with any questions or

concerns regarding the training video. As both participants chose to use their cell phone cameras to take photographs, the researcher did not mail a disposable camera to participants.

After completing the training, participants began the data collection process over the course of one week. Each participant took 10 photographs aimed at depicting their perception of outness within their relationship as it manifests in varying arenas.

Additionally, the researcher asked participants to keep in mind the way their experience of outness connects to their satisfaction with their relationship when taking photographs.

At the end of the one-week period, participants emailed pictures to the researcher for uploading to the private google drive folder shared between the researcher and the individual participant.

After all photographs were received and uploaded, the researcher initiated the first three stages of critical reflection as identified by Wang, Yi, Tao, and Carovano (1998):

(1) selecting photographs, (2) contextualizing and storytelling, and (3) identifying themes. The fourth stage, planning for action, did not apply to the aims of the pilot study.

Thus after completing stages 1-3, the researcher asked participants to offer positive and constructive feedback as well as suggestions for the full study.

### **Stage One: Selecting Photographs**

As participants entered into the critical reflection phase of the project, each participant selected 3 of their 10 photographs that adequately conveyed their intended ideas. Participants then developed a title and caption describing how each of their selected photographs depicted their experience of outness and/or satisfaction within their

relationship. In preparation for discussion, participants submitted selections to the researcher via the google drive folder shared between each individual participant and the researcher.

### **Stage Two: Contextualizing and Storytelling**

During stage two of critical reflection, the researcher, research assistant, and participants met for a group discussion of selected photographs, titles, and captions. Prior to this meeting, the researcher compiled participants' selected photographs and captions into a PowerPoint presentation to allow for projection of photographs, titles, and captions onto a screen to guide group discussion.

The participants met the researcher and the research assistant in a reserved room at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and participated in a discussion that lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes in duration. With participant consent, the researcher audio-recorded the discussion in case the researcher needed to review participant feedback at a later time. As the results of the pilot study will not be integrated into the results of the full study, the discussion was not transcribed. The researcher and research assistant also took field notes to capture any in-the-moment experiences of or reactions to group discussion.

To facilitate a dialogue about and analysis of the photographs, the researcher, acting as the group discussion facilitator, employed Wang's (1999) interpretive paradigm as amended by Smith, Brattini, and Appio (2012), using the acronym SHOWED, in a semi-structured interview. The researcher will pose the questions: (1) What do you See here? (2) What is really Happening? (3) How does this relate to Our lives? (4) Why does this situation exist? (5) What has been your Experience taking/selecting the photographs?

(6) What can we (participants, researchers, families, lawmakers, religious leaders, counselors, the general public, etc.) Do about it? (Smith et al., 2012; Wang, 1999). The researcher guided discussion using the SHOWED paradigm for each selected photograph, allowing for individual followed by group critical engagement with the photographs, titles, and captions.

### **Stage Three: Identifying Themes**

After discussing the 6 participant-selected photographs, the researcher asked participants to consider any themes (Wang, 2006; Wang et al., 2004; Wang et al., 1998) they felt had emerged from discussion. For the purpose of this participant discussion, a theme was defined as an idea supported by at least 2 compelling photographs or stories shared by participants during group discussion. Participants were also encouraged to consider any ideas that were repeated or emerged more than once.

After consulting with one another, participants collaboratively identified five main themes and related subthemes found within the photographs, titles, captions, and discussion. The five main themes are as follows: (1) visibility of LGBTQ romantic relationships, (2) authenticity of queer relationships, (3) access to LGBTQ-affirming resources, and (4) the impact of the cultural environment on outness, and (5) the impact of outness on the romantic relationship. For description of the subthemes, please see Pilot Study Table 1. Additionally, participants discussed their individual experiences of coming out and how these experiences, positive and negative, shape their hopes for visibility and safety within mental health arenas, romantic relationships, and larger society, in general.

Pilot Study Table 1. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Visibility of LGBTQ Romantic Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility is important</li> <li>• Visibility as an active choice</li> <li>• Visibility as a source of support for younger LGBTQ-identified folks</li> <li>• Visibility to shift society and social norms, at large</li> <li>• Online and social media presence offers different possibilities for presentation and visibility of LGBTQ identity and romantic relationships</li> </ul>
Authenticity of Queer Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living authentically as a queer family unit</li> <li>• Feeling validation of one's queer family unit as a support to living authentically</li> <li>• Feeling validation of one's queer romantic relationship from family</li> <li>• Refraining from policing the self</li> </ul>
Access to LGBTQ-Affirming Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of needed support sources for LGBTQ-identified individuals and couples</li> <li>• Removing stigma to seeking support and help</li> <li>• Need for affordable and quality counseling for LGBTQ-identified people and families while coming out within the family unit</li> <li>• Need for affordable and quality counseling for LGBTQ youth without supportive family units</li> <li>• Making counseling a first response as opposed to a last resort</li> </ul>
Impact of the Cultural Environment on Outness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ability to be out in certain cultural environments can increase happiness in a relationship</li> <li>• Shifts in levels of outness based on the safety of cultural environments</li> <li>• Experiencing different levels of comfort in outness as a queer couple in different geographic locations</li> </ul>

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>
Impact of Outness on the Romantic Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in the ability to be out aligns with an increase of the health of the relationship</li> <li>• Relationship stress results when partners experience different levels of outness in different arenas</li> </ul>

### **Participant Feedback**

After discussing themes, the researcher asked participants to offer overall feedback on the process including, but not limited to strengths and weaknesses of the study design, arrangement and order of discussion-based processing through use of the SHOWED paradigm, technical aspects of uploading and accessing documents, needed changes in consent forms and demographic questionnaire, and any need for increased support from the researcher. With regard to the study design, one participant expressed concern about lacking a visual example of the finished product of a photograph with a title and caption. The participant had originally created captions that were 1-2 paragraphs in length, and stated that providing a visual example and a word cap for captions could support participants by modeling the appropriate length of titles and captions, increasing the perceived manageability of the procedure. Additionally, with consideration to time management in the full study, the participants suggested that the researcher limit the overall quantity of photographs taken to 10 to decrease the difficulty of selecting photographs to submit and request that participants select 2 photographs, as opposed to 3, so as to allow for review of all submitted photographs. Relatedly, participants offered the recommendation of increasing the duration of the discussion portion of the full study and

offering refreshments and breaks to participants throughout. Both participants also stated that the prompt for taking photographs was clear and understandable.

When offering feedback on the discussion portion of the pilot study, both participants agreed that the researcher should lead the participant photographer through the entirety of the SHOWED paradigm before opening up to the group for further interpretation. This method was deemed more effective than processing through each step of the SHOWED paradigm asking for photographer and group feedback on each individual letter. Both participants identified the former method to both save time and allow for the full voice of the photographer to be heard. Participants also commented on appreciating the structure of the SHOWED paradigm and the manner in which the specific questions provided prompts for consideration. Participants recommended that for the full study, the researcher utilize a second screen on which the SHOWED paradigm can be projected and remain to be referenced throughout the discussion. Participants also asked that the researcher adapt one question in the SHOWED paradigm from “How does this relate to Our lives?” to “How does this relate to Our lives as LGBTQ-identified individuals in romantic relationships?” in an effort to refocus participant responses on the construct of relationship satisfaction. Additionally, both participants preferred when the researcher reflected participant statements and used probing questions to deepen understanding of participant statements, as opposed to only using minimal encouragers without reflections or probing questions. Both participants stated that the questions offered a chance to clarify and further develop ideas, however, both participants recognized the time constraint of the study and recommended only asking questions and

reflecting to intentionally gain clarity into participant statements. Finally, one participant asked if the researcher planned to hold space for group introductions during the discussion group to increase familiarity with one another.

Considering the demographic questionnaire and consent forms, both participants suggested the researcher broaden the areas of outness on the demographic questionnaire to include social media arenas, as one participant felt she was more out on social media than in physical spaces in her life, and thought that less out participants might be able to more easily participate in the study if the arenas and pictures included social media presences. Additionally, one participant requested that the researcher make it clear that signed releases of photographs are required for any person depicted in the photographs in order for the photographer to use images in the study. (This information was included in the training video and the document, *Steps for Completing Your Photovoice Project*, and thus, no changes are needed.) This participant also requested the researcher add a signature line to the *Photography Release Form for Individuals Depicted in Photographs* for the guardian of a minor who may be depicted in a photograph in the case that a participant chooses to photograph a child or other minor.

With regard to the technical aspect of the study, one participant suggested adding more specific folders within the Google Drive Folder to increase ease of access and organization as participants upload forms and photographs. The three suggested folders are folders containing the total photographs taken, the selected photographs with titles and captions, and the completed consent forms. One participant voiced having trouble

using Google Drive, as she was unfamiliar with the format, but stated that the option to email photographs to the photographer was helpful and effective.

As participants considered areas of further needed support from the researcher, both participants voiced feeling supported by researcher's use of language "our lives" thereby outing or locating the researcher within the LGBTQ community, and making the participants feel at ease. One participant disclosed feeling stress due to realizing that she was not as out as she originally thought she was when beginning the pilot study. This participant stated that preparing participants for this experience might be helpful and reduce associated stress. Both participants voiced feeling safe and comfortable with both the researcher and the research assistant during discussion. Other than these comments, participants did not state any additional need for researcher support.

### **Modifications for the Full Study**

Based on participant feedback, faculty consultation throughout the preparation for the dissertation proposal, and reflection on the researcher's experience of the pilot study, the following list of modifications will be implemented in the full study.

1. The researcher switched the order of the research questions for sake of clarity and flow.
2. The researcher changed the inclusion criteria to require that participants be actively engaged in an adult, same-gender romantic relationship for at least 6 months.

3. The researcher expanded the recruitment geographic range from within North Carolina to any state in the U.S.
4. The researcher opened participation to both partners engaged in the same relationship, but partners had to participate in separate focus groups.
5. The researcher increased the age criterion from 18 years of age to 24 years of age to recruit participants who were closer age 25, the developmental definition of “adult”, rather than the legal definition.
6. The researcher modified the recruitment materials to decrease the amount of information in the recruitment email by supplementing the email with a brief FAQ document and visually-attractive flyer to initially engage potential participants.
7. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by adding questions about participants’ partners, including age of partner, gender of partner, and sexuality of partner.
8. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by adding questions about the relationship, including length of relationship and cohabitation status.
9. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by asking questions regarding participant ethnicity.
10. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by adding a Likert scale question about participant and partner levels of outness in social media arenas and opened this as an arena in which participants could take photographs.

11. The researcher modified the demographic questionnaire by changing the arena of outness entitled “political arenas” to “public arenas (i.e., volunteering, activism, advocacy)”.
12. The researcher was intentional in being explicit in all documentation about the risks and ethics involved in using pictures in research and consistently encouraged participants to consider safety as an ultimate priority.
13. The researcher provided a visual example of a completed photograph, title, and caption within the training materials to offer participants a concrete example of a completed selected photograph.
14. The researcher gave participants a maximum word limit of 20 words for captions to provide a generalized format and concrete expectation to guide participants in describing their selected photographs.
15. The researcher modified the SHOWED paradigm to align with the research questions and focus on outness and relationship satisfaction within participants’ current romantic relationships. Additionally, to provide more time for group discussion, the researcher asked participants to complete the modified SHOWED paradigm prior to the group discussion meetings to enable group review of all photographs, titles, captions, and modified SHOWED answers during the first 15 minutes of group discussion.
16. To manage time and increase accessibility for geographically diverse participants, the researcher created two online discussion groups in an effort to be able to

discuss 3 selected photographs with accompanying titles, captions, and modified SHOWED paradigm answers.

17. Throughout discussion, the researcher used minimal encouragers, reflections, and probing questions sparingly, and with the intention of deepening understanding of participant responses.
18. The researcher added a signature line to the Photography Release Form for Individuals Depicted in Photographs for the guardian of a minor who may be depicted in a photograph in the case that a participant chooses to photograph a child or other minor.
19. The researcher created specific and separate folders in the Google Drive Folder to increase the ease of uploading photographs and documents. Folders were entitled “Upload Photographs Here” and “Photovoice Training Materials”.
20. The researcher intentionally outed herself to participants and included herself as a part of the queer community, through using language of “we” and “us” when discussing LGBTQ communities.
21. Prior to data collection, the researcher, also serving as a coder, engaged in bracketing activities with an additional coder and an auditor.
22. As the researcher engaged in member-checking, the researcher checked with participants to ensure that the included themes did not compromise their anonymity.

23. The researcher separated the step of completing social action from the larger study. Instead, the researcher will initiate participant discussion future steps toward social action, if this is desired by participants. The researcher clearly conveyed in recruitment and training materials that the social action component of the study was not required, but completely optional.