

POOLE, JAY, Ph.D. Shame on You; Shame in Me: The Impact of Degradation on Males Who Identify as Gay. (2009)  
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Literature in gender and identity studies does not reveal plentiful inquiry regarding the impact of shame, particularly with regard to males who identify as gay; however, the literature does reflect that people who identify as non-conformist with regard to sexual and gender identities often experience ongoing emotional and physical degradation in the forms of harassment, taunting, name-calling, physical aggression, assault, and violence. As a result of a void in the knowledge base about the intersection of degradation, shame, and identities, this study explores the experiences of males who identify as gay and who have experienced degradation resulting in shame.

Working from a postmodern epistemology grounded in qualitative and feminist methodologies, using auto-ethnography and dialogue as methods, the author and four participants, deeply explore the experiences of external shame messages, how they became internalized, and how they were/are negotiated. The experiences of the participants including the author's are contextualized within the so-called gay liberation movement. Several theoretical perspectives are examined including gender, identity and queer theories, particularly as they relate to how identities are shaped and how hegemony operates within particular identities that may be considered marginalized from the mainstream.

Working from the perspective that codified identities are exclusive and restrictive, opportunities for (re)imagining identities with regard to gender and sexuality are explored theoretically and pragmatically. Models for confronting heterosexism and homophobia

are presented in the arenas of religion, schooling, the media, and human services.

Visibility as a person who is sexually and gender non-conformist is discussed as are the tensions between boundless and fluid imaginings of identity and the need for boundaries related to the impact on others of identities and practices/acts associated with them.

SHAME ON YOU; SHAME IN ME: THE IMPACT OF DEGRADATION  
ON MALES WHO IDENTIFY AS GAY

by

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Approved by

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*To my mother and father whose life journeys, though over, forever shaped my journey.*

*You are missed.*

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION: FOUNDATIONS FOR SHAME .....	1
Prologue .....	1
Chapter Overview .....	2
Introduction .....	5
A Beginning for Shame .....	7
No Shame .....	12
Sex Games .....	14
Becoming a Man .....	16
Sissiness and Queers .....	18
Jesus, Save Me .....	20
Surviving on Threads .....	23
Discovering Gay .....	27
Being Gay .....	30
Speaking Gay .....	33
Negotiating Gay in Straight Spaces .....	36
Secrets and Lies: Living Gay, Acting Straight .....	38
Coming Out and Coming In .....	40
A New Queer .....	45
Looking Back to Look Ahead .....	47
II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EMANCIPATORY MOVEMENTS IN AMERICA: GAY LIBERATION CONTEXTUALIZED WITHIN AMERICAN FEMINISM AND CIVIL RIGHTS .....	49
Introduction .....	49
Gay Liberation: A Beginning .....	55
A Personal Stonewall .....	63
Race and Gender as Locations for Libratory Social Movements .....	65
The Convergence of Race, Gender, and Sexuality .....	69
Essentialism .....	72
AIDS and the Reunification of the Gay Community .....	79
Same-Sex Marriage: History Present and Future .....	82
Reflective Thoughts .....	90

III. TELLING STORIES: RECALLING EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE(D) WHO WE ARE .....	94
Introduction.....	94
Methodology.....	95
Methods .....	102
Process .....	105
Identifying As and Being Gay .....	106
Resistance .....	110
Gay Lifestyle.....	111
Gender.....	114
Degradation and Shame.....	117
Engaging in Same-Sex Sex Acts .....	118
Coming Out as Degrading and Shameful.....	118
Church and Religion .....	120
Schooling and Education.....	122
Gym Class as a Location for Knowing Sexual Desire and Feeling Shame.....	123
Social Presence and Presentation.....	125
Marriage/Partnerships .....	128
Impact of HIV/AIDS .....	132
Media and Arts.....	133
Resilience.....	136
Queer .....	138
Reflexive Analysis .....	141
IV. INTERROGATING NORMAL: REVISITING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY .....	147
Introduction.....	147
Establishing “Natural” and “Normal” .....	150
Disrupting Normal.....	155
Origins of Degradation .....	160
(Re)Imagining Queer.....	165
Schooling Oppression.....	167
Preaching Oppression.....	170
Liberatory Spaces.....	175
V. CONFRONTING DEGRADATION AND SHAME: (RE)IMAGINING IDENTITIES .....	181
Introduction: Why This Work Matters .....	181
(Re)Imagining Identities.....	184

Values, Attitudes, Politics, and Religion .....	188
Oppressive Spaces: Emancipatory Possibilities.....	195
Religion.....	195
Schooling.....	196
Media .....	203
Human Services .....	208
Visibility.....	212
Boundaries in Boundless Space .....	216
Opportunities for Transformation .....	221
The Post and Beyond.....	224
 BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	 228

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: FOUNDATIONS FOR SHAME

#### Prologue

‘What a shame! What an awful shame!’—is the admonition that has stuck with me above all others . . . until it was shortened into the one-word condemnation that all little sissies must deal with at some point, the one that reverberates in the echo chambers of our collective memory. ‘Shame,’ came the utterance, ‘shame,’ . . .

Kevin Sessums (2007, p. 135)—reflecting on the night he went to the primary school Halloween party dressed as a witch.

As comfortable as I seemed with my gayness on the outside, inside was a different matter. Years of learning to hate myself just didn’t slip away because I came out, and I still struggled with my feelings of self loathing, feelings I would later come to understand as internalized homophobia. Unlike other traditional minorities in American society (Jews, people of color), gay people aren’t raised by people like themselves when growing up. As a result, we internalize the typically homophobic attitudes of those around us, and devaluing and demeaning homosexuality becomes a part of our own self-image. This voice in your own head—the voice that constantly tells you that you are worthless—is the real enemy. Like a lot of gay people, I found that other people sometimes accepted me long before I had completely accepted myself.

Kevin Jennings (2006, p. 121)—reflecting on being “out” in college after having grown up in the South.

Who could I talk to? . . . I had been conditioned into believing that gay is wrong. . . . After years of conditioning, I lost respect for myself and wanted to die . . . [at

school] I was spit upon, pushed, and ridiculed. My school life was hell. I decided to leave school because I couldn't handle it.

Randy—age 18—speaking at the 1992 hearings conducted by the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth in Massachusetts, as remembered by Kevin Jennings (2006, p. 197).

To be gay in an uncompromisingly straight world is to struggle to find love and, once found, to hold onto it. We are men in a world where men are emotionally disabled by our masculine cultural ideals. And we are men who threaten those ideals by loving another man at a time in life when we are neither equipped for the ravishes of love or the torment of shame . . . The memory of the struggle and the scars of the trauma are something we carry with us, long after we've moved on in life.

Alan Downs (2006, p. 62)—writing about the experiences of young males who are identifying as gay.

### **Chapter Overview**

This dissertation seeks to explore relationships between American sociocultural phenomena that influence sexual identities, particularly for males who identify as gay, and the impact of internalized shame that seems to originate externally as people interface with social messages about sexuality and gender identity that emerge within a heteronormative framework. The text explores the roots and impact of internalized shame on males who identify as gay through an examination of personal narratives including the writer's own journey with internalized shame, and through examination of historical and theoretical perspectives that speak to liberatory social movements, theoretical constructs

that address sexual and gender identities, and personal and sociopolitical ideas that may impact the effects of oppression on those who struggle with sexual and gender identities.

Chapter I examines foundations for shame through an autoethnographic exploration of the author's personal narrative with regard to sexual identity as a gay male growing up in the rural, working class South during the 1960s and 1970s. In a feminist tradition, sociocultural phenomena are examined through a lens that calls into question the structure of power that privileges maleness and traditional representations of masculinity. As locations for shame are explored, the impact of patriarchy, hierarchal power structures, and heterocentric beliefs and values emerge as central in the construction of social and cultural structures which promote oppressive social practices that ultimately result in the internalization of shame, deeply affecting the lives of those who identify with so-called deviant sexualities and/or genders.

In order to historically contextualize locations for shame, Chapter II examines reflections on events and social movements in America that disrupt(ed) the status quo, which has been dominated by affluence and patriarchy. History is approached from an existential perspective and is not purported to be a definitive historical record; rather, historical events are viewed through the lens of the author. Thus, history becomes a representation of lived experience colored by complex interpretations and interactions within and among events. It is within this significant historical frame, the American liberatory social movement period of the 1960s and 1970s, that voices emerge which speak to the impact of external phenomena on internalized shame.

Chapter III gives voice to the stories of the participants in this work as dialogue is utilized to explore stories about growing up during one of the most socially significant times in recent history. Using a convenience sampling strategy, the author engaged four people that identify as male, gay, and middle-aged. The dialogue explores how the identity of being gay men is claimed (or not), how that identity is/has been negotiated within the context of degradation in social situations, how that identity has been maintained through time, and how views may shift to begin to imagine identities that disrupt the so-called gay gaze, potentially creating liberation from the effects of internalized homophobia and shame.

Theoretical perspectives regarding identities, particularly related to sexual and gender identities will be (re)examined in Chapter IV. Traditional representations of masculinity and femininity will be taken up as central in the construction of gender and sexual identities which reinforce heteronormative power structures and recent work on so-called queer theories will be highlighted as potential locations for the disruption of hegemonic structures even within marginalized groups that promote oppressive practices.

Following Simmons' (2007) assertion that stories can ascribe new meanings, Chapter V will explore possibilities that emerge with regard to making meaning of gender and sexual identities and how they play(ed) out in the lived experience. A reflexive approach will be utilized to examine the experience of the project and to (re)imagine meanings related to identities present and future. Questions will be raised about heterosexism and homophobia and how personal and political action may be sparked by this project including re-framing identity spaces in a more inclusive context.

Paths for healing will be explored including models for confronting oppressive structures, values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions as well as human connectedness as a space for collective action that enables all of us to live within rich, heterogeneous, and inclusive spaces that can be celebrated rather than degraded.

### **Introduction**

Today in America, more than ever in recent history, males who identify as gay are more visible in the mass media and are more accepted, at least on superficial levels, as being engaged in a way of life rather than being diseased, deviant, and/or sinful. Given this new visibility and apparent welcome to mainstream society, one might expect that those who are negotiating non-traditional sexual identity would enjoy a fairly pain free coming out process. Yet, despite this perceived social shift, recent studies seem to suggest that suicide and suicide attempts by young people who identify as gay have increased (Murphy, 2007). In schools, the most commonly used derogatory slur continues to be naming someone “gay” or “fag” with some young people hearing anti-gay slurs as much as 26 times per day or once every 14 minutes. Additionally, a recent study revealed that 31% of youth who identified as gay had been threatened or injured at school due to their claimed or perceived sexuality (Mental Health America, 2009). While many young people may suggest that using such terms does not refer to a person’s sexuality, the association of sexuality and sexual desire with the vernacular words above exhibits just how demeaning same-sex sexual identity continues to be in many facets of American culture. At a deeper level, the performance of gender roles constitutes an incredible example of hegemony in that males or females who exhibit behaviors which are not

associated with traditional Western gender definitions of masculinity and femininity often become targets for degradation, harassment, and/or persecution in social settings such as schools, churches, families, and community centers. Despite the contemporary social atmosphere of acceptance, for the male whose lived experience includes identifying or being identified as gay, a deep interpersonal shame often develops and challenges the way in which identity and life choices are debated, negotiated, and made (Downs, 2006). Shame has been debated as a concept for many years and has been called the “bedrock of psychopathology,” and the “hidden emotion” (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998, p. 3). I assert that there is no clear definition of shame and, for my purposes here, shame is conceived as an internal sense of worthlessness or devaluation that effects emotional, social, physical, psychological, and spiritual functioning at some level. Ultimately, it is within the script of socially constructed rules of gender and sexuality that shame about sexual identity is played out, often to an ends of internalized oppression reinforced by oppressive social systems that privilege heteronormativity and reified gender norms.

Using what Richardson (2000) terms Creative Analytical Practices (CAP); or more specifically, autoethnography, which Richardson (2000) defines as “. . . highly personalized revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural” (p. 11), I will explore my personal narrative with regard to the construction of internalized shame as it is situated within the context of my interface with sociocultural spaces in order to construct a foundation for my own internalized shame about my sexuality and sexual identity.

### **A Beginning for Shame**

Leaning against the wall of the 6th-grade building and trying desperately to blend into the brickwork, I stood silently and carefully, making sure to avoid any movement or action that would give me away. As he approached, I looked the other direction hoping that my effort to become invisible had worked. I was not so fortunate. As he passed, I heard him mutter “faggot” and then, he spat on me. I fell apart inside. I did not dare move or respond in any way. I did not look at him nor did I look at the spit rolling down the leg of my pants. My ears rang and my eyes watered; I went numb and, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him walk on saying something to his friend who was laughing. As soon as I could, I walked into the building and went to the bathroom where I tried to wipe off my pants and pull myself together. The bell rang, and off to class I went; devastated, degraded, and knowing that no matter how hard I tried, I could not disappear. Now, I was faced with the awful fact that I had to live with the risk of what had happened being repeated, or, something worse happening. I felt alone and at fault. I was flawed and now, I had to live with the consequences. It was in this moment that I solidified the shame that would reside in me for the rest of my days. All my efforts to ward it off had failed and now, I knew that it was truly me who was incomplete. All that I had heard at church about how sinful it was and all that I had inferred from conversations in my family became solidified in who I knew I was deep inside. My attempt to have a girlfriend had not concealed it, nor had my efforts to dress and act like the regular boys been successful in covering up the fact that I was indeed different—a sissy—a queer. Now, as I sat in social studies class, I had to begin to negotiate how I would live with myself as a

diseased, deviant, and worthless 12 year old boy who could not speak to anyone about what had happened to me because in my culture and family one did not discuss issues such as sex, sexuality, and gender. If you were born with a penis, you were expected to become a man as defined by the culture—there were no exceptions. As I reflect on this time in my life, I am curious about how I had come at such an early age to this place of hopelessness, isolation, fear, and internalized shame.

I was born in 1962, just at the time of one of the most profound social changes in American history. My parents, being born and raised themselves in post-depression Southern culture, had become afraid that the lifestyle they knew would change and that in some way, their child, me, would be threatened by this new wave of social justice. In their minds eyes, my parents viewed integration and civil rights as the beginning of the collapse of the American dream. Even more monstrous was the idea that I would have to attend school and socialize with people who they considered to be full of desire to cause upheaval in the social order of the day. I remember my mother telling me not to talk to “one” if they happened to be in my classroom. It is important to note that from their perspectives, Dr. King and his movement was rooted in communism, which spelled the downfall of America. My parents, like many others, were bombarded with messages of fear about what would happen if “black” people were unleashed (be assured that they did not use “black” as the descriptor). It was as if the Jim Crow laws of the South had contained this huge cauldron of change that, if allowed to go unchecked, would boil over and spill into the lap of a social structure that had been carefully crafted to preserve what dignity and possibility of prosperity remained after the Civil War.

Keep in mind, that 1962 was only 100 years after the beginning of the “War of Northern Aggression” that forever changed life in the South. My parents were only a couple of generations away from ancestors who had fought and died in the war that, in the culture of the South, had robbed us all of a way of life that was peaceful, tranquil, and productive. It is no accident that *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was and remains one of the most popular books and films of all time as it portrayed just how “horrible” the Civil War was for the South and southern culture, literally blowing away what had once been a tranquil land filled with plantations, parties, and “happy slaves.” Interestingly, at about the same time of the school yard spitting incident, I had become fascinated with the movie version of *Gone with the Wind* and had probably seen it at least 10 times on the big screen. Looking back on this, I realize that I was immersed in the fantasy, romanticism, and melodrama of the epic story, not to mention the beautiful gowns and finery of pre-war southern life (what a queen I was!). Its pedagogical impact was, for me, confirmation that the north was indeed to be blamed for disrupting the peaceful, beautiful life of the south and my southern identity was strengthened by my sense of anger at losing what we seemed to have; after all, the genteel life portrayed in the beginning of *Gone with the Wind* (GWTW) was what we could all still have—right? I learned to appreciate the Confederate Stars and Bars flag and I proudly displayed it in my room. I read avidly about the Civil War—all books sympathizing with the South—and got my application for the Sons of Confederate Veterans, an organization that revels in white, southern heritage. However, it was not just my southern heritage that had been touched, there was more going on with this film and me and as I sat in the theater, I could put myself in Scarlet’s

place and be swept away in Rhett Butler's arms up that long staircase. Not to become too sidetracked with GWTW, but it is very interesting to me that Ashley Wilkes, Scarlet's true love, was portrayed as a "soft" man who loved books and did not like conflict. Why would she want him? He was a bit of a "sissy," yet he commanded Scarlet's love, though he wound up in misery and tragedy as he lost his wife. I realize now that definitions of manhood were and are clear and portrayed starkly in films and other media. I believe that as I wanted to be Scarlet, I also learned that I should not be Ashley and there I sat as a 12 year old knowing what I was; soft, scared, and sissy. Of course, *Gone with the Wind* was but one of many sources that taught me what it was to be a "southern man."

Prior to my birth, my parents, fueled by fear about what was happening in the south, joined the Ku Klux Klan. They were not active in the organization but they certainly believed in many of the positions taken up by it. According to what I knew of the Klan, difference was not a strength; in fact, it was difference that threatened life as it was known in the south. Whiteness, coupled with protestant Christian beliefs and heterosexuality, was upheld as the highest standard and any deviance from that was taken as abhorrent. While not overtly spoken, the rule of the Klan included the rejection of queers and sissies as there was no place for such softness in its mission to save southern life. Besides, no southern boy could ever become such a thing as this (queerness) was something attributable to northern city boys and "foreigners." Southern boys hunted, fished, enjoyed fighting, shooting guns, and playing sports. The mentality of the Klan and its followers did not consider that there may be some biological factor in sexuality and, in fact, in the 1960s most of America did not acknowledge that one's sexual desire could be

anything more than a simple choice of partners. Men should “sew their oats” with naughty girls and settle down with a nice girl. Sure, boys would be boys and secretly play around sexually with each other, but this was not discussed and it was expected that one would grow out of such adolescent tomfoolery. Besides, the Bible and the preachers in the Southern Baptist Church made it clear that having sex with another man was a sin punishable by death. Thus, I was brought up to believe that anyone different from me was to be feared and avoided; that men were strong, independent, sports-oriented, and heterosexual; and that God was the supreme father who would take your life if you deviated from what the Bible said you should do—and that did not include having sexual desires for another male. My upbringing was not very different from most males of my social status as we were all from working class families that held similar beliefs about how life should be lived. Ultimately, I was a “redneck” and it is within the so-called redneck culture that I learned how to see and be in the world.

With its origins in rural Mississippi, “redneck” has historically referred to white people who toiled in the fields and whose necks became sunburned, glowing fiery red—a symbol of low socioeconomic status. While this term has evolved both inside and outside the culture to which it refers, it remains as a descriptor of one who belongs to the white working class rural culture either in lifestyle practices, values, or both. Most people are born into the redneck culture; however, recently, some elect to join it, at least ideologically, based on particular aspects of its value system, which is dominated by patriarchal constructions of social and economic relationships contextualized within heteronormativity. For example, one who has “made it” economically may continue to,

among other things, ascribe to cultural practices that typify the redneck such as driving a pick-up truck, wearing jeans and boots regardless of the occasion, viewing relationships as male dominant, and adhering carefully to gender and sexual roles that are traditionally constructed as masculine and feminine (Campbell, Bell, and Finney, 2006). Despite those who perform as a redneck, it remains clear that a “true” redneck is a Caucasian person, born into a rural, poor, family whose social status is compromised by an unending struggle with poverty. Ultimately, as Roebuck and Hickson (1982) state, “The key criterion [for membership in Redneck culture] is being poor” (p. 2). Poverty was no stranger to my family and though we lived in a small house, we existed at times on the fringe of being destitute, particularly after my mother and father separated. It would not be until I was an adolescent that I realized our rather dire socioeconomic status; thus, my childhood was not one mired in the meagerness that poverty often endows on those who live in and with it. By all family accounts, I was a happy child and, being one of the first born in my mother’s sibling group, I received much attention from my grandmothers and aunts. Interestingly, it would be early in my life that my “feminine” self would emerge and be taken up as entertaining for my family.

### *No Shame*

There is a picture in the family album that now speaks volumes to me. I am in the living room and draped on my arm is a lady’s handbag. I have a huge grin on my face and I am in mom’s pumps. I look delighted! She obviously found this get-up quite amusing and snapped the photo as I was parading around in what was probably my first drag performance. I was approximately two years old. When I look at the picture, there is no

shame and no humiliation; only joy. Even more profound for me is that mom was not ashamed by my stunts. She found them entertaining and delightful. Shame would not come until later and, as I will discuss, was constructed as a result of the expectations that accompany growing into so-called manhood. As a two year old, I could be any identity—and it was fun for everyone!

Yet another picture shows me, a bit older now, standing with mom in the kitchen helping her bake cookies. I am intent on the task and she is helping me. So, who took the picture? I did not have the chance to verify the identity of the person behind the camera before my parents died but I suspect that it was my father. There I stand, his son, baking with mom—and it seemed okay because he documented it on film. Perhaps he had other motives in snapping my picture—he could prove I was a sissy early on—he could show my mom how she ruined me—who knows?! In any case, I was clearly not being a boy as defined by my culture; but, I was not ashamed and neither were my parents, at least not overtly.

The same goes for the picture of me with my ironing board, which I dearly loved. I am enjoying my very feminine (culturally defined) task of ironing my clothes - only pretending to iron—and once again, my picture is taken as I am not being a boy. No shame, no humiliation, just fun. What is significant as I reflect on this is my age. In the ironing picture, I am close to 5 years old and I am defiantly dressed like a boy should dress even though I am ironing. It would not be long until I began to learn that boys should not do such girlish things—underlying this rule was what I did not know at the time; boys would be queer if they were allowed to act like girls. So, dad stopped my

girlish fun. The ironing board was put away. No more handbags and heels, and no more baking. This is when I was introduced to hunting, guns, and basketball (my dad was a basketball player in high school). However, shame was creeping around in my thoughts about wanting to put on those heels just one more time and perhaps, more profoundly, I was about to have my first sexual experience that would not only awaken my sexuality, but would become one of the first bricks in a foundation for internalized shame.

### *Sex Games*

Sexuality and sexual acts were not topics that were discussed with children or with/among so-called decent adults for that matter in the 1960s. The grip of what Foucault (1978) asserts as Victorian silence held strongly in southern culture with sex and sexuality existing only in the privacy of bedrooms, backseats, and other hidden spaces. As I entered second grade, my knowledge about sex was non-existent except for knowing that, on occasion, my parents' bedroom door was locked with no explanation. My lack of knowledge did not preclude my development and one early fall afternoon my friend, a boy of six who lived next door, and I discovered that our penises were a location for pleasure that we could not resist. Without any guide or instruction, we discovered that mutual masturbation and oral sex could fulfill a deep desire for pleasure that one could only experience through the genitals. Somehow, we both recognized that our newly created game was to be secret and, lurking in the secrecy was shame about what we were doing; however, this did not stop us from our almost daily visits to the tree house or small outbuilding where we would often strip off our clothes and engage in sexual play.

The fun and games were interrupted one afternoon when my friend's mother came into the outbuilding unannounced and discovered us, naked and scrambling for our clothes. Her reaction of silence and then questions about what exactly we were doing confirmed what we seemed to already know; what we were doing was absolutely wrong and, moreover, deserved punishment. After telling us to put our clothes on, she marched me to my house and told my mother exactly what she had witnessed. I was devastated! Though I did not have any real knowledge of the deviance associated with homosexual behavior, I recognized that I was profoundly wrong in what I had been doing and, when my mother turned to me for an explanation, I could only offer that it was simply a game we were playing. In no uncertain terms, I was informed that this game would come to an end and that I should be ashamed of what I had done; indeed I was ashamed and would continue to be. After she used a small tree branch to switch my legs, she reiterated just how wrong our "game" was and wanted to know where I had learned to play such games. Through my tears, I answered honestly that we simply made it up, not knowing that children are sexual beings despite societal denial of such an abhorrent concept. Regardless of what one might expect of child development, the pedagogy of punishment was clear; sex, especially with another boy, was shameful, unnatural, and nasty. Despite this lesson, it would not be long until I re-engaged with sex games, though I knew now that they were to be kept absolutely secret at all costs. Of course, the price I paid for playing sex games was the addition of bricks to my foundation of shame. Each time I engaged in clandestine sexual activity, I internally reinforced just how bad I was and my guilt fueled my growing internal sense that I was flawed to the core. Even as I engaged in

learning to become a southern boy/man, I held the secret of my sex games safe inside along with my growing internalized sense of shame about who I was becoming.

### ***Becoming a Man***

My father was an avid hunter of raccoons (“coons”) and his connection to the land was strong as was the case for many “real” southern men. Rural southern culture has its roots in agrarian lifestyles and to this day, males in the rural south are expected to have some tie to the land as a potentially productive and sustaining space. Future Farmers of America clubs are still very prevalent in high schools across the south and 4H enjoys growing membership as young people engage in farming and forestry activities. My father, wanting his son to be a southern boy/man utilized what I now know to be an experiential pedagogical strategy to teach me how to become a man. I was seven or eight when I went on my first coon hunt and what I loved about it was being in the woods at night discovering a world that I had not known.

I can remember the smells and sounds of the men as they took out and lit their cigarettes or their Redman pouches, loading up their jaws with a pungent wad of chewing tobacco. What an interesting linking of the practices of native people and modern tobacco use with this ritual of hunting. I see now the representation of power and control in hunting but then, it was all an adventure. The hound dogs were more excited than I was and once they were released, they darted into the woods barking madly. It was not long until they found the trail of a coon and off they ran with all of us following not far behind. I crossed creeks, jumped ditches, got slapped by tree limbs, and fell, but I kept up as best I could. I noticed that I was not assisted or coddled in any way as this was how a

boy learned to be tough. You had to withstand pain and you had to dust yourself off and get back into the game. No place for tears or quitters. No girls here.

The message was clear, I was now a boy and there was no place for any girlishness . . . period. I carefully learned how to sit, spit and scratch like a man. I learned that men can say curse words and that they pee right out in the open. Men laugh loudly when someone else falls or gets hurt in some superficial way. Men do not cry; they get mad. When men touch each other, they slap or punch—they never hug or embrace each other except on the rare occasion when someone has died and they are in the throes of grief. Men do not wave their hands around and there are no limp wrists. Men cross their legs with one shin squarely over the other thigh—not crossed at the knee or the ankle. Men have short hair on their heads and hairy chests. Men think things through and don't get upset when a crisis occurs, remaining calm and using their heads to figure out a solution (while the women and children huddle in the corner waiting on them to come to the rescue). Men were, above all, in control—not only of their personal selves but of the world around them. If it were not for men, women and children would not know what to do, particularly in a time of stress or threat. Men were important and necessary. They could fight for you or against you and if you were going to be a man, you had to learn how to fight in order to defend yourself and your family. The world was a scary place and men were there to help protect you from it.

I also began to learn that men liked women and not just as friends. While my dad's hunting buddies never talked openly about sex (at least not in my earshot) I got the message that love was located in the arms and between the legs of a woman. Sexual

desire was clearly fueled by the so-called opposite sex. Boys did not have desires of that kind toward other boys—so what was wrong with me? I had already felt the stirrings of sexual awakening and girls were not the image in my mind's sexual eye. I sensed trouble and kept quiet about whom it was that I was finding attractive. I knew by the age of 10 that I was expected to become a man and hunting, sports, learning to fight, and having desires for girls were going to propel me into being all that a man is supposed to be. While I did not fully recognize it then, there were many challenges on the horizon of my life.

### *Sissiness and Queers*

While I had not had a formal lesson in sexual differences, I had heard about sissies and queers at school and what I knew was that queerness was equated with being a sissy, which was a mark of trouble. Sissiness was a target for ridicule, harassment, persecution, and violence and should be avoided by any respectable boy. In *Sissyphobia* (2001), Tim Bergling recounts the fear of the feminine that permeates American culture and society, particularly when males exhibit so-called feminine characteristics. Most certainly, as a boy in the rural south, one of the most damning of all behaviors was and is to act like a girl. For me, being so-called feminine was and is a part of my embodied expression, though I can, as Butler (1990) suggests, *perform* masculine gender roles in order to pass as a so-called man. I learned carefully how to *be* a man though I struggled with proving the extent of my manliness as many boys do—through success in sports.

I failed miserably at basketball and baseball. I could not hit and I could not catch. I became the last one picked at recess—enabling me to construct shame around my lack

of manly ability. Even swimming was a challenge as I stood there unwanted as we picked teams for relays. While I was not “fem” I was certainly not successful as a competitive boy and, what’s worse, I became a target for degradation and harassment. As best I recall, I was called “sissy” for the first time in the fifth grade. It was during a kick ball game and, of course, I played miserably. My embarrassment only contributed to my inability to kick or deflect the ball and I turned to emotional mush. I was negotiating my shortcomings within the context of what I was supposed to be able to do as a boy and what I wound up with was a sense of failure and inadequacy. It was within this combination of thoughts and feelings that I added yet another brick to my foundation of internalized shame. I wanted to be manly; I liked the power that manliness seemed to garner. Yet, I could not seem to disguise something about me that conveyed my sissiness. I felt weak and vulnerable and this only seemed to add to being shameful. All the while, I was positioned in a culture that privileged independence, individuality, competitiveness, reason, and athletic prowess—this all connected to the privilege of having a penis and so-called white skin. What I was learning was that if you were different, you could count on degradation and, perhaps, violence, and that difference meant struggle. It was my apparent inability to conceal my sissiness that marked me as different.

My dad had become disappointed in my hunting with him as I would become afflicted with some virus or other sickness within a few days of returning from the woods (more evidence of weakness) and his dreams of my continuing his basketball glory (he was on a state champion team while still in high school) had been dashed as I could not come close to making a basket consistently. Baseball was a failure and football—oh my -

this was certainly not my sport. To this day, I shy away from participating in any sort of sport that involves a ball. I remember that my mom had a talk with me about being more athletic and she even tried to help me learn to kick a kickball (dad had, I believe, given up at this point) but her efforts, loving as they were, did not help. It seems that I was indeed a sissy and the spitting incident described above became the evidence that I needed to prove just how visible my flaws were to the world. I was caught in a spiral of shame that had been enabled by socio-cultural messages about gender and sexuality and, to my chagrin, no one was challenging them; at least no one I knew. I was alone in this struggle, and isolation seemed to be the emotion that solidified just how shameful I was. I was as silent as I could possibly be as I traversed through the seventh and eighth grades with little to sustain my existence.

### *Jesus, Save Me*

My roots as a fundamentalist Christian reared in the Southern Baptist church became a support to me as I struggled with shame about what I knew I was. To abandon particular beliefs and practices in the South is to abandon God and his son Jesus. As Sears (1991) points out, southern Christianity is contextualized within heteronormative, patriarchal, and hierarchical structures which promote a central idea; God (a male) is omnipotent and omniscient and is to be feared with regard to what He can do to we humans. Denominations in the South vary in the way one's actions should be constructed to please God; yet, the idea that God is in control remains steadfast. The notion that the ultimate male, God, was and is in charge of the goings-on of the world is powerful, particularly to those whose cultural practices and values preclude questioning such

things. Religion has been used through the ages to garner power and this is no exception in the South. Currently, religious fundamentalism and evangelical Christianity play major roles in American politics with an emphasis on keeping a moral code that does not embrace differences (Feldman, 2005). While many tenants of Christianity such as the “Golden Rule” and the notion that we are all somehow connected, albeit through Jesus, offer some hope of equitable views and collaborative efforts, the focus on strict moral codes associated with more fundamentalist Christian value systems, which are often exclusive, tends to thwart the impact of the work for social justice and equality done by people who profess to be “Christian.” For example, I was taught to “do unto others as I would have them do unto me” as long as they were like me—white, Southern, and Baptist. Surely, there are many churches and congregants that work to care for the poor and disadvantaged, and to establish a more equitable environment for all people, and it is in this work that the promise of creating spaces for progressive social change exist; however, there often remains a view that those who are being helped are inferior or lack the desire to bring themselves up to the level of the helper, who is often a member of the so-called white middle-class. My world had been shaped by southern fundamentalist religious values and, as I negotiated my adolescent identity, I turned to those values for help and comfort.

As a 13-year-old who had experienced same sex activity and whose sexual desire was directed at members of the same sex, I recognized that if I prayed and lived my life in service to the Lord, I could be healed and saved from the fiery eternity promised to me in the Bible (according to most of the ministers I had heard). I began to follow the Jack

Van Impe crusades and attended several gatherings of followers in the area. My mom was delighted as were my “super-Christian” aunt and uncle. I was “on fire” for Jesus and became a student of the book of Revelation in the Bible.

I was convinced that the end times were near and that God was going to move forward with the plan to cleanse the Earth of those who were not pure. I knew that I had impureness in me and I wanted to rid myself of it. I prayed and I read scripture. I went to church and Sunday school where I learned that if you believe in Jesus you will be saved. Altar call was a regular part of the Southern Baptist service and I went to the altar one Sunday morning to express my convictions about loving and living for Jesus. I whispered my conviction into the minister’s ear and, much to my surprise the minister announced my intent to the congregation. I was taken-aback as I had not expected to become the center of attention of this crowd of people. My mom’s tears confirmed that I had done the right thing and I reveled in the knowledge that now, despite my shameful secrets, I was saved. Having that sense of reassurance is especially comforting when one is questioning one’s worth and value and I can certainly see why, as Caputo (2001) asserts, so many people turn to religion as a means of coping with matters that are laden with burdens.

I suppose that I began to feel disappointment as my salvation did not take away my sexual stirrings that continued to be focused on other males. I thought that this would simply fade and that I would begin to like girls the way I was supposed to. As I grew more aware of the lack of change with regard to sexual desire, I became disillusioned with Jesus and what his plan of salvation (according to what I knew of it) offered to someone like me. I made every effort to hang on to Jesus as my answer (just like the

bumper sticker said) but no real solutions came. While I did not abandon my convictions about being saved by Jesus, I did give in to my growing desire to be sexual with another male. This caused great anguish and personal pain for me as once again, I had failed at something that was supposed to be my salvation. Shame was alive and well as I looked at those pictures of Jesus in my Bible and allowed myself a fleeting thought of just how attractive he was with his olive complexion, blue eyes, and long flowing hair. How could this be! Jesus was supposed to save me, not turn me on! What a lost sinner I was.

### *Surviving on Threads*

It was my mother's love of music that prompted (almost forced) me in sixth grade to join the band and, to my surprise, I liked learning to play the trombone. In fact, there were a few other guys there that 'fit' in the misfit world in which I was living. I would not say that they were sissy, but they were different and that alone was enough to keep them in the margins. It was this thread of music that would carry me through what I consider to be my darkest days of junior high—now called middle school. It is well documented that middle school becomes the ground for adolescent struggles with individuation and identity construction and I would say that it is a war zone with regard to these tasks.

Erickson (1959) asserts that adolescence represents a developmental struggle around identity versus role confusion and implies that so-called teenagers are working to construct identities that define who they are becoming. Of course, Erickson contextualizes this process within internal psychodynamic mechanisms that relate to ego and superego struggles and I am not claiming that theory as truth; yet, I do believe that I

and my peers were struggling within the socio-cultural context with what would be called our identities. I assert that identity is created through negotiative processes that involve internal sensations, desires, and positions and socio-cultural norms and rules that dictate overtly and covertly expectations regarding particular identities. The task of the adolescent is to survive this negotiation and to emerge with some sense of belonging and self-worth—not easy for one who is identified by the environment as different. The thread that enabled me to bridge my self to high school was band.

My only sense of success was grounded in my ability to play my instrument and read music. I was successful in the band room. I would occasionally get a compliment from the band teacher (no compliments from other teachers—especially the physical education coach). By ninth grade, I was in the marching band, which was involved in competitions. While I remained fairly silent and invisible, I did experience a sense of belonging as I contributed to the winning of trophies at local competitions. Some of the older guys would occasionally harass me, which confirmed that I needed to be quiet, but overall, I found a fairly comfortable lifeline for myself during band class. This in contrast with the hell I experienced in gym class as I was forced to engage in sports that exposed my lack of ability and my weakness, creating opportunities for complete humiliation.

I begged my mom to write notes to get me out of the dreaded “dressing out.” It worked sometimes, but most days I had to put on the shorts and t-shirt and try to “play.” Bergling (2001) and Downs (2006) both speak to this ritual of so-called straight masculinity that is sports. I truly lived the humiliation that my sissiness brought on as I was required to play like a boy/man. My experience with gym class seemed to tear down

some of the positive sense of belonging that I had while in band, reiterating that I was indeed flawed and worthless with regard to my manliness. Despite my growing internal sense that I could never be a man, I continued to try.

By ninth grade, the pressures of having a so-called girlfriend were great, and my previous attempt to fulfill this requirement of adolescent manhood had failed miserably. What I was recognizing was that I could talk to girls fairly easily if they started the conversation and this helped me negotiate the waters of relationships with them. While I did not have an official girlfriend, I did have some female friends and I began to learn that this could pass in some instances for liking girls, which was helpful in avoiding degradation and harassment. Despite the comfort I found in my friendships with girls, I could not seem to muster any sexual desire for them and I thought that maybe if I tried, I could make it happen. I remember an incident with one of my girl friends where she let me touch her breast. It felt dangerous but not sexual. My sexual desire was clearly aimed at males and, ironically, the dreaded gym class was a location that confirmed this for me.

It was during the dressing out ritual that I fully realized just how much I experienced my sexual desire toward the so-called same sex. While seeing naked or almost naked male bodies was thrilling, it was extremely uncomfortable and that was part of the dread I experienced as I stood at the locker and tried desperately not to stare at who was in or out of the showers. A large part of this experience was related to my own perception of my body, which at the time was not thin but was not what would be considered obese; yet, I was hyper-conscious of how I looked. I certainly did not have the muscles that some of the *real* boys had. Nor did I have the developed upper thighs,

buttocks, and chests that those who played sports carried around proudly in the locker room. And then, there was the penis. I certainly had one but it seemed to pale in comparison to some of the equipment that passed uncomfortably close to me as I tried to quickly get my underwear and jeans back on. Peter Murphy (2001) discusses the image of man as machine and suggests that, “The most powerful cultural metaphor for masculinity is the machine, a cold, disembodied efficacious piece of equipment . . .” (p. 33). Indeed, manliness seemed to be very mechanical even in the ninth grade and those with machine-like bodies were deemed best to produce. The penis becomes the site of production (quite literally) and, as Murphy indicates, the male experience, conceptually, is centered on erections and ejaculation. In fact, the penis and testicles are often the location of power, ridicule, and shame depending on how one’s genitals are perceived by self and/or others. Size matters in all respects (legs, arms, chest, and genitals) and I believe that it is within the hidden curriculum of gym class that many boys learn this lesson. I was an excellent student in this environment and with my lessons came more shame. I was ashamed that I was not “big” and muscular; I was ashamed that I could not perform athletically; I was ashamed that my body did not fit the ideal, which allowed the privilege of strutting naked around the locker room showing off the machine. As Lambert (2006) notes, the so-called gay community has not been immune to the lessons about masculinity constructed in and through the body and males who identify as gay are subject to incredible scrutiny about body image and the body as mechanical. Images of gay masculinity are heavily dominated by well toned, muscular bodies with large bulging genitals concealed by skimpy underwear or, in many cases, a nude body with a large

penis proving that the sissy boy in the picture *is* a real man, conveying the message, “If you don’t believe it, just look at his huge dick!” How could any man be so bad when he is such a well oiled and productive machine? Even the so-called Bear gay community adopts the hyper-masculine image of maleness with hairy chests and beards, large bellies and/or body builder physiques and, most definitely, a large penis ready for plenty of man-on-man sexual action. How masculinity looked was and remains clear in our society—even in sub-cultural groups - and I was not fitting the bill in the mid-1970s. It was at this time in my life that my body became one of the locations of shame for me and, unfortunately, has followed me into middle age.

### ***Discovering Gay***

By tenth grade, I had become what many would consider a rather pudgy adolescent, which only added to my insecurities and my sense of shame not only about what was inside but about my outside as well. I had distanced myself from church and the safety it promised and turned more to band, which continued to be a location of relative safety for me. I had made a few friends that I considered allies; most were girls and all of us were not among the popular crowd. I was not outstanding academically and at home, my mom and dad had separated. I was relieved that dad had gone because their arguments were becoming more frequent and he scared me. We had grown further apart as I had stopped hunting with him and had not become an athlete so there was little we could share. He had told my mom when I turned 13 that she was making me a sissy and a queer—I overheard this argument—and, of course, she blamed him for not making me a man. This only confirmed that I was indeed flawed and that even my parents could not

arrest my deviant condition. I continued to hear the occasional “faggot” or “sissy” at school (“gay” had not yet become the derogatory word it is today) but I had learned to be insulated and tried to shrug these comments away. For some reason still unknown to me, I decided to audition for the colorguard in band and low and behold, I made the rifle line.

Colorguard involves the manipulation of flags and rifles mimicking the military’s use of flags and weapons to symbolize and guard the “colors” of the United States. In marching band in the late 1970s, colorguard had become a means for providing a visual component to the band’s show and our marching band was very competitive at the time. The colorguard was regarded in band circles as an elite group requiring specific skills to handle the flags and rifles. What I did not know was that only girls had been doing colorguard in my area; therefore, it was off limits to boys. Interestingly, the woman who coached our colorguard had decided to allow boys to join and I was the first to audition. After I made it, she recruited two other guys so I was not alone. However, I did not realize how this would turn up the heat with regard to being degraded, harassed and persecuted. The name calling ensued in full force and we (the three boys) all almost quit. It was only the respect that we got from our other band members that kept us going and it was my talent in this area that would begin to help me build some self esteem.

While colorguard brought on degradation, it also provided an outlet for me to experience success in something that I began to love. Interestingly, I made more friends and the other guys in the group helped to take the sting out of the name calling. As we (the rifle boys) became more skilled, we became more popular in band and this boosted my sense of importance. I began to discover that I could be successful despite my

knowledge that I was really flawed and my abilities to disguise my shame and enjoy success despite it were in their fledgling stages. What I did not know until a bit later was that colorguard would become the ground in which I cultivated my identity as a gay man, largely because it helped me to meet the first male with whom I became emotionally intimately involved.

In eleventh grade, the person who would become my “first love” joined the colorguard and we quickly became very close friends and confidants. We did not talk about sex and certainly not same-sex issues; however, we did hint at finding other guys attractive. We discovered the newly emerging world of disco music and danced for hours in the back yard to Donna Summer. We choreographed rifle routines to Chaka Cahn and began to toy with queering our gender roles and gender expression as we draped a scarf around us or moved our bodies in what some would consider effeminate gyrations. While we were rather loud in our exploration of gender, we discovered sex in the safety of silence.

While I had spent the night, we had never slept in the same bed with each other but on one particular night just before a color guard competition, I stayed over and we wound up deciding that we would share a bed. In hindsight I realize that we both had experienced sexual attraction toward each other and this was a subtle way of setting up a situation where we could become sexual; however, at the time, we did not speak of why we slept together, we just did. Our sexual encounter was wonderful and horrible at the same time. We were swept away in the passion of mid-adolescent sexual energy; yet, we both recognized how profoundly wrong we were and this was echoed in the awful silence

of the abyss of shame that we experienced as we lay there in the aftermath of orgasm. The shame and guilt from my earlier sexual experiences crashed in my psyche like a tsunami. We did not speak the next morning, though I know that we were both reeling from what we had done. We went on about the day carrying with us the knowledge that we were undeniably, irrevocably, christened as same-sex sexual beings and the only names we really had for ourselves wreaked of disgust and disdain. There was no doubt that I was ashamed of who I now knew I was. We were alone with each other and our shared queerness.

Queerness was far away in the city, not in our town or school and we could not even speak about what we were. All we could do was to give in to the sexual desire that brought us to this place and give in we did. Spending the night was the order of most days and as I reflect on this, I am sure that our mothers (both single parents) were aware that something was going on behind the closed bedroom doors; yet, neither of them ever verbally questioned why we insisted on sleeping in the same bed. Silence became golden for all of us. If you don't speak about it, maybe it is not real. It would not be until I met an older male couple who introduced the world of the so-called gay community to me that the silence was broken between John and I, allowing us to name ourselves "lovers" and to launch ourselves into post-Stonewall gay liberation that was just beginning to creep into the South in 1979.

### ***Being Gay***

When I went to work at a local floral shop, I had no idea I was embarking on an experience that would change my life. John and I had continued our exploration of disco,

queer genders and same-sex sex; yet, we remained fairly isolated and ignorant about the world beyond Trinity, North Carolina. What I knew of gay only existed in my imagination and with the few bits and pieces of information that filtered through the media of the day, and given that we only received three television stations in my home, there was little to no exposure to anything that resembled gay. My knowledge of gay had come from the negative press it received in church and from my parents who, without any lengthy discussion, made it clear that queers were to be feared and were defiantly damned. What I would come to know as the gay community came from my desire to have an after school job, which was fulfilled when my mom agreed to let me go to an interview at a local florist shop that became the location for schooling about being gay.

I had always loved flowers (more evidence of my sissiness) and this job seemed perfect. To my surprise, Bill and Jim, two males, owned the shop and they were delighted that I wanted to work for them. For about three months, I would go in after school three or four days a week and help sweep up and even do some arrangements. They were always lively and funny. I noticed that on many occasions, other men would come in to the shop and they would speak in whispered tones then giggle wildly. I was naïve and did not ask questions. I told John about my experiences but he had no insights, though we both suspected that they may be queer. On one particular day, I became enlightened.

Bill sat me down and said rather plainly that I had been there about three months and that it was time for he and Jim to let me know that they were “lovers,” which meant they were “gay.” I was stunned. As I sat there, I was not sure what to do or say. I had not really used the word gay to describe myself though I had heard it used. Here he was

claiming this identity and naming himself this word that was associated, ironically, with happiness, yet implied deviance and sexual perversity. I mustered up the strength to say back to him that I was “gay” too and he further rocked my world when he said, “I know!” How could he know? Was it written on me? I didn’t even know so how could he? He went on to tell me that many of the men who came into the shop were gay and that they were glad to have me there. I sat there, mouth agape, as he told me about “gay bars” and “cruising” on Lindsey Street in Greensboro. I could not wait to get home to call John and tell him about this newly discovered world that I had heretofore not realized was nearly in my own front yard. He was amazed and we began to explore our newly claimed gayness.

I took him to meet Bill and Jim and, in turn, we were introduced to the gay lifestyle of the south in 1979-1980. John and I “came out” to some of our closest band friends and we felt empowered to claim ourselves as gay. I took a huge risk and revealed to my cousin, with whom I had become very close, that I thought I was indeed gay. This prompted a sharing of secrets and I felt that at least one of my family members would be supportive. As John and I revealed our newly claimed identities as gay, the internal shame about what we had been doing sexually was disrupted and though it was not gone it felt diminished, especially in the context of our new “community.” In 1980, we spent our senior prom with each other by taking “girlfriends” (who were in on our scheme) and later, we went to the gay bar in Greensboro—a place that we had discovered through a friend of Bill and Jim’s that could get us in despite our being underage. Interestingly, in that same year, the first legal challenge regarding same-sex dates at high school proms

was taking place in Rhode Island as Aaron Fricke made the personal political by bringing suite against Richard Lynch, the principal of Cumberland High School after Lynch banned Fricke and his same-sex date from attending the senior prom (Fricke, 1981). The court found in favor of Fricke and, under the blaring lights for the television cameras, he and Paul Gilbert walked into the Cumberland High prom as a couple, publicly displaying their gayness for the world to see. While John and I did not go to court and certainly did not have television coverage, we were together at the prom and what we considered our real prom occurred in the dark spaces of the gay club after the ballroom where the school prom was held fell silent. We both had the sense that we were gay and finally, despite the lingering feeling of shame, it felt good to *be* what I had known that I was; a gay man.

### ***Speaking Gay***

As Leap and Boellstorff (2004) point out, the gay/queer community has long held a tradition of creating its own language, principally as a means to encrypt communications in order to conceal being identified as gay/queer. Modern gay slang began to develop as early as the 1900s and, as pockets of urban homosexuals began to establish social networks, the development of encoded language began to flourish (Loughery, 1998). Thus, as I began to *be* gay I learned to speak gay. Much like “Terry” in Sears’ (1991) *Growing Up Gay in the South: Race Gender and Journeys of the Spirit*, largely through my exposure to the gay men who inhabited the flower shop, I began to engage in the language of being gay and soon, my friends were my “girlfriends” regardless of their sex, laying claim to the social construction of gay as a location for the perversion of “natural” gender.

My male gay friends became “Miss Thang,” or “Miss T,” and “get it girl!” was a show of support (note that these expressions have now become a part of mainstream culture). My gay high school friends and I (there were 4 of us total) began to develop ways of identifying cute guys and we were able to talk about them within earshot because they had no idea they were the objects of our conversations. In our senior year of high school, our gayness had become a central location for pushing the social envelope and we began to be “out” to more of the people we thought would/could be supportive. For the most part, we were tolerated by our band and chorus friends but there were those who could not stomach the rather bold way in which we began to express our newly molded sexual identities around campus. Largely, our open expression was through language and gesture; so, as I would pass my friend Mike, he would exuberantly call out to me, “Hey Miss Thang!” more as a gesture of defiance rather than a salutation. While we and our confidants found this to be edgy and exciting, many of those who were, shall I say, less tolerant, found our expression offensive and, we often became targets for verbal and mild physical harassment.

“Faggot” was often uttered in response to some languaged gesture on one of our parts; thus, our vernacular gay speak began to be answered with the language of hate and hurt. We were reminded that we were not “normal” and that we were certainly not desirable to the mainstream. Our gayness could only be enjoyed in particular spaces that were carefully crafted through a process that involved testing the limits of those that we suspected to be tolerant. Our small group of supporters became our lifeline to survival in our senior year of high school and thank goodness this group remarkably included the

quarterback of the high school football team—who just happened to be in chorus with us. He would often run interference (forgive the pun) for us with guys who made threats to do us harm. As we pushed the envelope, we learned not to push too far because it became obvious that our testing the social fabric could result in dangerous situations. It was difficult to engage in “gay pride,” which we had heard about through the flower shop crowd, because being proud meant being out and being out meant taking risks. Pride was the site of potential threat; thus, pride was elusive and responsive to the ever-present shame that stirred inside us. Of course we could speak pride among ourselves, declaring that we were “proud to be gay” when, in reality, we were also afraid and ashamed of what we now claimed as our identities.

Thus, we spoke gay-speak, we cavorted sexually, we imagined living someplace where we could be totally out, and we secretly negotiated our spiritual fate all the while dancing the night away when we could sneak into the gay club. What I did not know then was that gayness was only one of my identities and that even it would shift and change as time wore on. I also did not realize that I would be swept up in the hegemony of being a gay man and, of course, I could not know that AIDS was lurking just around the corner bringing with it more changes to being gay. However, at the time, I was young, gay, and finally “free” from what I was supposed to become. I could now be me and my shame, while living inside, was muffled by the sounds of Dianna Ross’ *I’m Coming Out* and the reflection of the mirrored disco ball on my sky blue satin shirt.

### *Negotiating Gay in Straight Spaces*

I attended college largely by accident because culturally, being from a working class southern family, intellectualism was not something that was desirable or encouraged. As Roebuck and Hickson (1982) point out, the “redneck” culture is contextualized within suspicion about those who are educated and, if a member of the working class aspires to higher education, he or she may be ridiculed or shunned by those who ascribe to traditional working class cultural norms. College was for those who were wealthy, smart, and/or snobbish. I had been destined to work in the factory, following in my dad’s footsteps. Interestingly, it would be my love of band and color guard that intervened in my journey and, as I graduated high school, I and several of my band friends including two that were gay became involved in a drum and bugle corps. The drum corps was the equivalent of a professional marching band and we were obsessed with continuing our participation in what we had come to love. The group we joined was located in Western Pennsylvania and, the day after we graduated, we moved there to begin our summer adventure. This was the first time in my life that I had been away from home for more than a few nights, and certainly it was the first time that I had been north of Virginia. People spoke with strange accents and many of them were either in college or planning to go in the fall. Thus, when I returned home in August, I was confronted with whether or not to follow the path of my new friends from the north or, was I to be a good son and pick up my father’s occupation?

The day before classes started, I enrolled in a local community college and, filled with anxiety, launched my college career. I had no confidence in my scholastic abilities

having been an average or less than average high school student, never taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test. This coupled with the shame and isolation I was feeling as I realized that my high school gay safety net had evaporated upon graduating and going our separate ways after the summer. I felt disconnected and afraid as I sat in classes in a strange new place with people whom I did not know and whom I believed to be far superior to me in terms of intelligence. Additionally, I could not spot any other gay people and there was no gay support organization. Thus, I began to (re)learn how to be gay in straight spaces.

I did manage to make a few friends though I carefully guarded my identity secret and could only be gay on the occasion that I reunited with some of my high school friends. The flower shop job had ended though I maintained a few contacts with some of the people I had met there, and John (my boyfriend) and I had parted when he moved to Durham to seek a job. I began to feel closeted again and my sexual outlet became located in contacts with various acquaintances and anonymous partners. I seemed to lose my way and I found that I could “pass” as straight in order to avoid social isolation.

As I transferred to a four year school to finish my degree, I found myself rooming with a very straight “jock” who, I was sure, could “read” me as gay, though he kept silent about this until after our college careers had ended. Additionally, the guys on my hall in the dorm were mostly athletic and traditionally masculine. There was no room for a sissy or a faggot. In order to fend off any suspicions, I became involved with a female who seemed to be completely ignorant of what I considered to be my true sexual identity. As Isay (1989) discusses, it is not uncommon for gay males to become engaged in seemingly

romanticized relationships with females in an attempt to internally and externally demonstrate heterosexual identity and/or the perception of heterosexism despite other sexual desires. In my attempts to negotiate my gayness in the straight spaces I occupied, I, as Butler (1990) suggests, *performed* heteronormatively constructed maleness and, at the same time I was dating Susan, I would sneak away on weekends to be with my male sexual partners. Yet again, this plural identity became another location for shame because I knew that I was being unfair to my girlfriend and to my boyfriends as well as my hall mates, my roommate, and myself. As college drew to a close, Susan's hints about marriage grew stronger and I grew more afraid. Despite having met the parents and getting my mother's hopes up that she would become a mother-in-law, I shirked my responsibilities and disappeared from Susan's life once we had graduated. I had once again discovered love with another male and my relationship with him confirmed that indeed, I was not going to be able to *become* heterosexual. Thus, I left in my wake a wonderful person and some great friends with whom I was deceptive and exploitive, and shame about my actions weighed heavily on me in my dark, internal spaces.

### ***Secrets and Lies: Living Gay, Acting Straight***

Once I graduated college, my relationship with Tom had become, at least for me, more intense and, as I entered the workforce, I recognized the importance of becoming a so-called professional. In the mid-1980s, careerism was central in American culture and the "yuppie" generation was constructing professionalism around fashion and material wealth as evidence of success. The Reagan era had ushered in a new conservatism and the dangerous edginess of pushing sexual and gender boundaries was become less

popular in mainstream culture. The south was no exception in this cultural shift and, as I became a professional, I once again encountered spaces where my gayness was not only undesirable, it was not allowed. I could not discuss my relationship status, nor could I engage in revealing my opinions about who was or was not considered attractive with regard to males. I could not be “sissy” and I carefully protected any actions or gestures that could be read as effeminate. Though my work environment was comfortable, I was keenly aware of the unspoken cultural rules about who I was supposed to be and what I was not supposed to be: I wore my dress slacks and button down shirts, I cut my hair short, I avoided crossing my legs at the knee, I did not use my hands too much when I spoke, I talked about my “girlfriends,” and I was charming and flirtatious with the women. Thus, as I performed straight, my so-called gay life was lived on weekends or in the darkness of evenings when I could occupy or create gay spaces. My life at home was also a location for secrets and lies as I could not afford to move out and, much like the office I was busy weaving a complex identity even in my private life.

Still living at home with my mother, I was very careful to keep my gay life secret despite my frequent trips to the beach or to “spend the night” with a friend. I would later discover that she had been suspicious of my sexuality and lifestyle for many years but, we both found solace in silence or in the lies I would spin to create the illusion of normalcy. The tension was thick between us and I expelled much energy in my effort to conceal what and who I was. I recognize now that had I been able to “come out,” much of the tension would have been dispelled; however, at the time, I was invested in protecting my mom from what I believed to be the most devastating truth she could know—that her

son was gay. As Grant (2006) points out, the influence of a dominant mid-twentieth century ideology about the impact of the over-protective mother and the absent father as a central explanation for homosexuality was greatly influential in mine and my mother's unspoken understanding of why I was who I was. I would discover that she blamed herself for my gayness and, in some ways I suppose I blamed her for not helping me to become a real man. I believe that my secrets and lies about my identity were not only a means of concealing my internal shame, they were also an effort to protect my mom from what I knew would be devastating to her; that she had played a major role in creating the sexual pervert I was. I simply could not bring myself to reveal to her the truth about me and my charade required great care and elaborate lies. I had reduced my friendships to people with who I could be gay; thus, I did not have to construct altered identity with them. Most of my twenties were lived in this web of secrets and lies and I lived gay with my friends and the person I loved as I also acted straight at home and at work. It would not be until I was twenty eight years old and on the verge of leaving home that mom would directly confront me about my identity.

### ***Coming Out and Coming In***

Coming out to my mom was the most difficult and simultaneously rewarding experience of my life thus far. I had vowed to my self and my gay friends that I would never come out to her and it was she that initiated the conversation that began as a confrontation. My boyfriend had been in the Navy and was coming home and his discharge finally pushed me to act on buying a house, the American symbol of launching successfully into adulthood. Mom had apparently discovered some letters we had written

each other (this was pre-email) and her long time suspicions had been confirmed. I had made an offer on a house and it was accepted so I had begun packing for my move. One evening, I had come in from work and mom was sitting, suspiciously silent, in a chair amongst some of the boxes in the living room. I greeted her and she blurted out the question I had avoided and dreaded, “are you gay?” I was stunned and silent. I thought about lying but I sensed that she already knew the answer so I cautiously replied, “yes.” The tears were stinging my eyes as the truth was revealed and those moments of silent anticipation about what would come next were deafening. Shockingly, her next question was, “do you have AIDS?” My head was reeling! At the time, AIDS was the most prominent national issue with regard to sexuality and the AIDS “panic” had swept every corner of the country. My friends and I were riddled with fear and concern about ourselves and our shame kept us from being tested despite the anonymity of the process, a fact that would later lead to the deaths of several people I knew. Thus, I responded by taking offense and answering, “No! How could you think such a thing?” She remained silent for a few beats while I secretly wondered if I did in fact have the deadly virus swimming in my blood. The conversation that followed included questions seeking explanations about why I was gay, was it her fault, who else was gay, was Tom my boyfriend, why could I not tell her before now, and the list goes on. All this, discussed through tones that were laden with anger, tears, curiosity, and relief. The closet door had finally been flung open with the person whom I believed would never be able to discuss my identity, much less accept it.

As the weeks and months went by, mom and I were able to engage in more discussions about who I was and what I was doing as a gay man. Our relationship deepened and I believe that we both dispelled the sense of blame we harbored. While this process of coming out was incredibly mollifying, the sense of shame about who I was remained and I was able to share some of my feelings with mom. Over time, she would become an ally as I continued to navigate a world that did not seem to be as understanding as she became. My struggles seemed to shift from concealing my self from her and other family members to negotiating how to be gay in what had become defined as the “gay lifestyle.”

Butler (1996) suggests that as one “comes out” one may indeed be coming in to ongoing dominant structures that persist in naming what may be unnamable. For example, if one claims the identity of “gay,” there is myriad of expectations about how one behaves (depending on the aspect of the particular community with whom one is identified) and how one engages with others who claim identities that are not congruent with one’s own identity. As one attempts to express desires or actions that are not congruent with the chosen identity group, one may experience a loss of the interpersonal and/or political power that was gained by claiming that group’s essential qualities. Also, if one is unable to conform to the expectations of his or her identity groups, additional opportunities for experiencing shame ensue and as Downs (2007) asserts, “The avoidance of shame becomes the single most powerful driving force in his [young gay male] life” (p. 29). Indeed, as I entered my thirties, my struggle with identity became located within

how I was gay and between and among spaces that existed within and outside what gay had become for me and others.

My life had been lived as a gay man though I was recognizing that I was much more than that identity had become. I had tried to have gay relationships, which were modeled within a heteronormative frame where a dominant/subordinate binary dictates roles within a monogamously constructed partnership. My relationship with Tom failed as we both experimented with attraction to other people as we simultaneously continued to love each other. Our shame about “cheating” became a wedge between us and resulted in the end of a deep and meaningful relationship. I also experienced shame about being “out” in most of my life spaces except for work.

My career as a social worker was unfolding and, despite and as a result of being in a mostly female professional environment, I continued to resist being honest about my identity. I believe that the potential and perhaps actual openness of my work environment was suppressed and interrupted by my own compulsion to be “masculine” in what was contextualized as a “feminine” environment. It was this paradoxical situation that launched what would later become a critical questioning of how masculine and feminine are constructed and aligned so closely with sexuality and sexual identity. A dominant construct in gay identity was and is identification and performance of traditionally defined masculinities (Kendall & Martino, 2006; Lambert, n. d.).

Being out meant being and practicing particular constructions of what is conceived as gay male identity; an identity that had become, by the mid 1990s, an exclusive space reserved for people whose lives boasted lucrative thus successful careers,

muscularly toned and tanned bodies, sexual appeal, and material wealth. For someone like me, an overweight, liberally socially conscious, sexually experimental, and lower-middle class, southern and white male, the ideal gay identity seemed far away from how I was living. Yes, in the 1980s I had bought designer clothes, become career oriented, purchased nice things, and partnered with the man I thought I would live with forever but somehow, that was not working for me now. Thus, shame about who I was came from a different space; it came from the very place that had freed me as I began to know and acknowledge my sexuality—the gay community. I realize that the liberation I experienced by claiming a gay identity was simply a transition into another set of rules and judgments that would bring with them their own shaming.

I began to search for spaces in the gay world that would allow me to exist as I desired and, while fringe groups such as the Radical Fairies promised to allow “oddball” gayness, I was not satisfied. I began to realize that I was more than what the gay I had come to know offered and that I could exist within spaces of plurality where my interests in music, art, nature, my cultural roots, academics, polysexuality, and food could intersect and overlap as I negotiated my cognitive, spiritual, emotional, and physical evolution. I found ways to view gender differently and my relationships with women became deeper as traditional gender constructs were unearthed and unpacked from the box that had been so carefully constructed by patriarchy and heteronormative cultural influences. Indeed, I had begun to experience a sort of second coming out as I recognized that my coming out as gay had brought me into a space that was restrictive, constrictive and exclusive, though it had offered emancipation at a time when I need it most. I certainly want to give gay its

due as a space where I thrived in many respects; however, it is with caution that I reflect on what Durkman (1995) called the gay gaze—“a term that implies the existence of a unified, singular and identifiable ontological category (gayness)” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 199). My identity as a gay man was constructed through the lens of the gay gaze and it would not be until I was introduced to theoretical concepts that offered more multi/poly-lens views that I could deconstruct and critically examine gay as an oppressive and shame inducing space.

### **A New Queer**

My introduction to queer as a re-languaged new space for identity did not occur until the early 2000s when a friend gave me a curious book titled *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Jagose, 1997), which revealed to me that what I had known as a slanderous and shameful term had been (re)languaged to critique the exclusiveness created through the residue of structuralism in codification and classification, particularly of identities. While I had begun to enjoy living my life between and beyond gay spaces, my discovery of what I would come to know as queer theories afforded me the opportunity to deeply consider the impact of defining identity within restrictive and constrictive spaces. My father had warned my mother that she would make me queer as if to caution against such a dreaded and shameful existence and now, I was framing queer in a much different view; one that offered glimmers of cautious emancipation.

What I had come to know was that gay, while offering me an identity with a community of sorts, was a location of shame for me despite my revelry in its identity as a space where I could have sex with and love other males. I had not seemed to live up to all

of what gay supposed and queer as an identity space began to fit more comfortably for me. What I would come to learn is that queer was never indented to become its own codified identity; rather, it was co-opted to critique the boundaries that particular identities created (de Lauretis, 1994; Hall, 2003; Jagose, 1997; Sullivan, 2003). Indeed, as my formal education progressed through my doctoral work, I would come to know queer as a complex space that should remain indefinable and elusive if it is to truly reflect a deconstructive paradigm whose purpose is to support pluralism to a point of post-pluralistic ideology where, rather than the existence of multiple simultaneous separates, infinite blends of identities intersect and interact without structural bounds. As I engage in reflexive work I recognize that indeed, I have existed in a post-pluralist state as I live though and in spaces that represent a swirl of rural, southern, white, working class, college-educated, gay, queer, same-sex loving, polyandrous, shameful, and celebratory identities. As Fuss (1989) points out, we exist within multiple subject positions creating the “. . . opportunity to occupy several “I-slots” at the same time . . .” (p. 35); a concept which allows one to engage in fluid identities that do not come to rest; rather, they represent a constant metamorphosis. Such a fluid state, as I am beginning to discover, offers liberatory opportunities and begins to disrupt reified paradigms whose roots run deep in patriarchy, heteronormativity, and rigid constructions of gender and sexuality.

As I experiment with a new queer, I am aware of the foundation of shame that I have constructed through my interface with socio-cultural forces and institutions and I recognize that I cannot exist outside those influences. My *weltanschauung* (world view) is tied to my experiences and to my perceptions of myself within and among those

experiences; thus, despite my best efforts to become emancipated, I am bound to my foundations. However, my foundations are but a resting place for myself which, as Freire (1998) would say is unfinished; a work in progress.

### **Looking Back to Look Ahead**

As existentialism teaches, each of us has a unique vantage point and it is from that shifting point-of-view that we glimpse ourselves and our worlds. As I explore my shame, I am compelled to consider how shame does or does not exist in the lives of others and it is this question that begs the mining of how shame about identities, particularly sexual and gender identities, is constructed through the complex interaction of social, cultural, psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual phenomena. My own life is a narrative of social clashes interfacing with some internal, perhaps biological desire for sexual expression in a manner that does not fit the dominant, normative paradigm. Natural for me disrupts what has been constructed as natural within the large social context of my culture of origin and now, I am discovering my ability to affect what my culture is and can be, which allows a (re) imagining of natural.

Thus, I am simultaneously bound and freed by socio-cultural phenomena as I become an agent of action existing within its clutches. My point(s) of view are evolving and what I see behind me now is colored not only by my past, but also by my current and future existence. As Evans (1997) points out, we are in a continual process of interpreting the world around us (re)creating reality maps and my so-called reality map is constantly being charted and re-charted as I interpret and re-interpret that with which I come into contact, including my own thoughts, feelings, and views.

History then is central to understanding what my reality is; yet, history is read through my unique lens and its application to and for me becomes a product of my interpretation of the people, events, places, and occurrences that surface as I reflect on the past. Shame plays a role in my history past, current, and future and exactly what that role is will be the work with which I engage as I move forward with understanding how degradation, in all its forms, has supported shame and its place in social and internal spaces. Chapter II, which follows, will examine my historical perspective with regard to so-called gay liberation, other related social liberatory movements, identity, and locations for shame.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EMANCIPATORY MOVEMENTS IN AMERICA: GAY LIBERATION CONTEXTUALIZED WITHIN AMERICAN FEMINISM AND CIVIL RIGHTS**

#### **Introduction**

As I was growing up in the rural southern United States during the 1960s and 1970s, events were occurring in other places around the country that would begin to shape new perspectives with regard to African Americans, women, and those whose sexualities and genders did not fit dominant ideologies, which had been shaped by patriarchy and white privilege. Thus, a review of and reflection on history becomes central in this dissertation work as my own lived experience and the lived experiences of my participants interfaces with historical occurrences in such a significant time in the (re)shaping of American culture. Here, history is approached from an existential perspective and is not purported to be a definitive historical record; rather, historical events are viewed through the perspective of the author while recognizing and attending to the influences of sociocultural phenomena, power structures, and codified locations of identity that are exclusive. As historical events are recounted, the author's voice is positioned within them in an effort to weave personal stories and events together as locations for shame are unpacked and examined. Thus, history becomes a representation of lived experience colored by complex interpretations and interactions within and among events.

Doing history is a troubling process. Many rely on so-called historical facts to outline particular events in time that mark what have at some point, usually latter, been deemed as historically significant. In America, history is usually connoted by specific events that are believed to have shaped the development of social, political, governmental, cultural, environmental, spiritual, and familial phenomena; events which often involve tension between collectives of people who hold particular beliefs that shape value systems, which form normative practices and behaviors. At the surface, so-called historical events seem rather straightforward and usually, through the process of being schooled, people are exposed to the “facts” of events via texts including written, verbal, and film/media textual materials. For instance, one may read several accounts of a specific historical event, see a film about it, look at materials on-line and come to some conclusions about how that event(s) shaped or did not shape current socio-political climates. Some may explore alternative accounts of events in an effort to more deeply understand what happened and how the happenings affected people in the past and present. In any event, history is defined through the interpretation of events that mark what seems to be important to the human condition. So, what is the trouble?

It is often said that if you asked ten people to tell you what they witnessed at any given event that you will get ten variations/versions of what is often described as “fact.” Indeed, it is impossible to dispel the impact of our life experiences and world views on what we believe to be true, particularly about so-called historical events. History is often presented in an objectively constructed context which asserts that what the reader is offered consist of the facts of the event in question. Indeed, history is often recorded as an

objective series of happenings which are to be read as fact, with the reader applying his or her interpretation to how the facts impacted the environment in which they occurred. Breisach (2003) suggests that postmodernism has troubled how history was/is told/shaped and that postmodernism has developed/occurred within the multifaceted historical narratives constructed within and influenced by Western cultures during the past century. Postmodernism generally asserts that truth(s) can only be understood within a critical examination of the point(s) of view of the teller of truth(s). Many have said that within the context of the postmodern, the truth of an event exists only as it is constructed by one who claims its occurrence. Windschuttle (2007) points out that dismissing the existence of any truth (defined loosely as what is known) may be unhelpful or destructive given that we have the ability to know despite our reservations to push into the boundaries of what we cannot or will not know. For instance, it would not be helpful to pour large amounts of energy into verifying who the presidents of particular nations may have been since we have many records that verify for us who they were. Trouble begins when we make assertions about the impact of what they did politically and socially that affected the construction of political and social environments. Therefore, we seem to be able to grasp some objective, factual information as historical as we simultaneously experience the impact of our own interpretative action on those so-called facts; thus, the struggle with history can be pacified with a blended approach utilizing the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity as a means to ascertain what is “historical.” Not so fast!

The notions of objectivity and subjectivity becomes troubling if we begin to deeply examine the so-called facts of any situation—even when we read something as

benign as a list of the Presidents of the United States. We can be fairly certain that those who are recorded as being President held the office; however, were they the only “Presidents” in the United States? Were there not other leaders who claimed the title “President?” Perhaps they were not officially sworn into office but many saw them and continue to see them as being presidential. Recent events are an example of the notion that what appears objective/factual may be in question. Consider the American Presidential election of 2000. The popular vote was cast in favor of Al Gore while the electoral vote favored George W. Bush, who was ultimately sworn to office despite the fact that many Americans held that Mr. Gore was indeed the President and refused to acknowledge Mr. Bush’s title as President. Thus, from the points of view of many of those who supported Mr. Gore, he was elected President. While history will record Mr. Bush as President of the United States, history will also demonstrate that indeed, the voters in America elected another person as President. Thus, it is important to interrogate the notion that the subjective exists as separate and apart from the objective (given that *subjective* is taken to mean having one’s own interpretation and *objective* means the reality of how something exists).

Traditionally, from a modernist perspective, the subject/object dichotomy has divided the “real” (observable) from the “un-real” (interpretation), keeping reality separate from interpretation or imagination. Often, largely as a result of the Platonic separation of the mind (intellect/reason) and the body (emotion), objectivity is associated with logic and reason and subjectivity is associated with feelings and emotions. Since logic and reason are traditionally associated with a patriarchally constructed definition of

masculinity, and feelings and emotions, in the same patriarchal frame, are associated with femininity, the objective is often viewed as masculine and the subjective is viewed as feminine. This binary, based in the principle of bivalence, which can be traced to the Parmenidean Myth predating Plato, perpetuates the notion that something either *is* or *is-not*; it exists or does not exist (Evans, 1997). Thus, when we consider the subjective, we must contextualize the term and the experience of being subjective within the historical frame of patriarchy and the privilege that its hierarchical construction of power gives to the masculine, thus the dominance of reason and objectivity over emotion and subjectivity. To trouble this construction of the subject/object split, I refer to Arthur Evans (1997), who suggests that pure subjectivity cannot exist because this would presuppose that there was no previous interaction with anything “real” that had influenced one’s interpretation of the current phenomena. Evans (1997) argues that “I” and the “World” are “strictly correlative; it is impossible to maintain that either of these is more real or more basic than the other or that one is the mere after effect of the other.” (p. 16). Following Evans’ assertion, how something is interpreted is the result of the accumulation of knowledge that has heretofore been based on interactions with the world, creating a correlative relationship between the World and I, where one cannot exist in isolation from the other. Hence, the purely objective and the purely subjective are impossible states as the objective and the subjective are linked inextricably through the interpreter, whose interpretation is based on the accumulation of interactions with phenomena. For me, subjectivity is situated within this blurred boundary and my subjectivity is informed by the ongoing interaction I have with what Evans (1997) calls

the interpretanda (that which is to be interpreted). The concept of self is therefore not merely an “I” that exists apart from the world; indeed, the self is the result of the world just as the world is the result of the self with interpretation being the mechanism that binds the two. Thus, situating my self as a researcher/knower I must consider that my self is linked to my interpretations, both current and historical, of the world. History, viewed as a product of the interaction of the self and the world, becomes a broad, rich, and deep collection of narratives that give the reader/hearer glimpses of the experiences of others as interpreted freshly and newly by one who is reading/hearing history currently; thus, history is constantly (re)constructed through the interface of what is past with what is present and what is imagined as future. It is within this interface of past/present/future and my subjectivity that I tell the history of what I understand to be significant social movements of the late twentieth century in the United States particularly related to identity within gender, sexual, and racial contexts. I begin where others have begun, with a particular event that is held up as the so-called beginning of the modern gay rights movement and as I examine this event, I call into question its position as a beginning, its association with other social movements, and my position within the struggle for so-called gay rights. I examine how “gay pride” speaks to shame about non-traditional sexualities and identities and how essentialist practices became a politically transformative weapon in the battle for recognition by the dominant heteronormative culture that existed/exists in modern American society. I engage in a discussion of history present and future as I consider the struggle for gay marriage and its position within the

gay rights movement. I conclude with a reflection of how historical points of view impacted/impact the ongoing dialogue about gender and sexual identities.

### **Gay Liberation: A Beginning**

On June 28, 1969, at approximately 1:20 a.m. police officers entered the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York in what seemed to be a routine raid on yet another nightclub whose patron's were labeled as sexually deviant. While most patrons escaped arrest, there were some whom police took into custody as it was a crime to be indecent and, at the time, any show of perceived sexual affection toward a person of the same sex was considered indecent. In addition, any person who dressed in clothing deemed for the opposite gender was considered indecent and subject to arrest in raids. At the Stonewall Inn many of the patrons were African-American or Hispanic and there were a good number of cross-dressers, who were perceived to be drag queens and/or transgendered. During this particular raid, at least one person (accounts vary) resisted and, according to one account, encouraged the crowd that had gathered outside the club to resist as well. Indeed, the crowd did resist and the eight officers involved in the raid retreated back into the building as the growing mass became more angry and destructive, setting fire to the building with police officers inside. Word of the resistance spread quickly and at least 2000 people were on the scene within a short time. The New York City Police Department called in the tactical resistance team that had been organized to deal with Vietnam War protests and they were unable to disburse the crowd. Finally, the scene calmed; however, the next evening brought a new crowd and new protests. Calls for "gay power!" are said to have erupted from the protesters and, while they were less

violent, they continued to engage in skirmishes with police (D'Emilio, 2002). A third night of protests occurred, giving a very public face to the anger that had been growing within many of the so-called gay communities around the United States. By the end of July, 1969 the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) had been formed in New York and it and other organizations with the mission of addressing oppression against people who identified as or were identified by others as gay began to publicly demand legal rights and action. In June of 1970, on the anniversary of Stonewall, a parade was held in New York to commemorate the event and "gay pride" was born not only as a slogan but as a call to move away from the shame and silence of being gay and into a space where one could claim gay with pride. While the Stonewall riots or Stonewall as it is often called became a flashpoint for the modern gay liberation movement, it did not occur as a random event. In fact, at least two decades of activity centered on gay liberation were simmering under the surface and Stonewall seemed to signal the first eruption of what would prove to be a very active cultural and social volcano.

It is difficult to identify a specific point in history, modern or ancient, where one can definitively say that those who perceived themselves to be sexually oppressed began a struggle against the authoritative people and institutions that would deny them the rights and, sometimes, the ability to engage in sexual intimacy or expressions of sexual and/or gender identity that they desired. In fact, one may imagine that our early human ancestors may have encountered concerns related to how one expresses sexual desires and identities. Foucault (1978) points out that in western culture, prior to the seventeenth century, sexual practice, which had always been colorfully variant was far less secret than

it would become as society entered the age of the bourgeoisie and, a bit later, the Victorian era. As sex moved into the charge of the family, the couple became the model for all that was deemed truthful and decent about sexual practice. More specifically, the couple was defined as a male and female whose sexual practice should have as its mission the production of children. Any sexual activity that did not end in human reproduction became undesirable and, later, deviant. Most certainly the church, as an institution, upheld the sanctity of marriage to the point that it has been reified as a social institution, and the importance of reproduction as sacred. As was and is so often the case, religious bodies utilized biblical passages to uphold the definitions of sexual deviance that had become practically any sexual activity that occurred out of wedlock and whose means did not possess the end of human reproduction as a goal. Much like sexuality in general, deviant sexual practices became part of what Foucault (1978) calls the silence of sexuality in the Victorian era. Sex was simply not discussed. One did not speak of things sexual and public sexual expression was expressly forbidden both socially and legally. Foucault (1978) asserts that the age of sexual repression can be marked by the advent of the seventeenth century and he believes that it is no accident that the dawn of modern capitalism coincided with the silence that fell upon sexuality and sexual practices.

The production of workers was an essential element in the success of the project of capitalism and it is clear that the emphasis on sexuality with the mission of reproduction was integral in literally growing workers for the emerging wave of manufacturers and industrialist that would wash over and drown the agrarian lifestyle that had been the chief existence for many in Europe and the new America. Factory work

required discipline and this left little room for pleasures, including the pleasures of sex. Sex was framed as a necessary component of the capitalist mission—to produce; therefore, sexual activity for pleasure is not considered productive, thus it is undesirable. As material profits from capitalism fueled the unquenchable thirst for wealth, sex as production became the norm. Of course, prior to the age of artificial insemination, to reproduce a human life one must engage in sexual activity with another person who can contribute to the unification of sperm and egg. Coupled with the long history of patriarchy that dominated western culture, the desirable outcome of sex as productive became contextualized in the coupling of a male and female in order to achieve the preferred outcome—a healthy human infant that would grow to become a productive worker. What then was the fate of those who did not conform to the codification of sex as productive? Frightened by the ramifications of unproductive sex for pleasure, they quietly engaged in any number of sexual practices under a dome of silence as society buzzed loudly with the hum of the machines that marked the new age of manufacturing.

As D’Emilio and Freedman (1997) have pointed out, historical practices have been clear in the essential link between heterosexuality (contextualized as a productive practice rather than erotic), whiteness, and white morality. It was within the sexual coupling of a white male and female, both of whom were of “good breeding,” that ownership could flourish as so-called legitimate heirs inherited the wealth and property of their forbearers, particularly in light of the newfound wealth brought on by the industrial revolution. Sexuality and sexual practice, while obviously pleasurable physically, was not historically contextualized as recreational. Indeed, as Foucault (1978) has asserted, the

Victorians viewed sexuality as having no place in moral social spaces; yet, sexual practices became eroticized and rampant within a dome of silence that, as Foucault (1978) points out, continues to operate currently, reinforcing oppressive systems and practices. As Katz (1995) reports, the use of the term “heterosexuality” did not emerge in medical literature until 1892 and was, interestingly, a signifier of the perverse, referring to its use a descriptor of sexual activity “divorced from reproductive imperatives” (Stokes, 2005, p. 132). At the turn of the nineteenth century, the modernist project of medical research began to define what is natural and unnatural with erotic sex being clearly categorized as radical to the natural order of things and, at about the same time, science, through the eugenics movement, was also heralding the natural superiority of whiteness; thus, what became defined as natural, normal, and desirable in the twentieth century included gender and sexual practices (contextualized in whiteness) that privileged sexual activity whose goal was the production of offspring within a legally recognized bond of marriage that ensured the passing of property and material goods to legitimate and pure heirs. It is quite a paradox that heterosexual practices also had been and would continue to be the location of so-called impurity within racially defined heritage, creating the firestorm of what would become the struggle for civil rights in America.

For anyone whose identities, whether self-imposed or constructed by social and culturally defined codifications, are outside the boundaries of the so-called natural, normal, or desirable, the opportunity to experience one’s self as an outsider abound; thus, possibilities for experiencing shame flourish as one constructs *being* particular races, genders, and/or sexualities within the context of what has been defined as natural,

normal, and acceptable by dominant sociocultural structures. Not only is the debate about gender, race, and sexuality located in sociocultural spaces; indeed, the debate about what one *is* also occurs within psychic locations, whose contexts are inextricably connected to external definitions of what one is supposed to be. Silence, while comforting in many cases is also suppressive and as silence around sex became more pronounced, so did oppression of those who dared to break it.

As the modern project of science began its relentless search for the truth through rational, deductive processes, the structuralist project of categorization emerged as a means of identifying and classifying phenomena. Undoubtedly, an element of control is involved with structuralism, particularly in the face of what is perceived as the chaotic randomness that challenges the existence of life as we know it. Sexual identity and practice did not escape the efforts of scientific structuralism, which helped to coin the terms heterosexual and homosexual as identities that describe essentialized sexual behaviors (Katz, 1995). The power that had become embedded in sexual normalcy was fully exercised to suppress and oppress those who began to be identified within the context of the newly emerging categories created by science. The homosexual became abnormal as the science of psychology came upon the scene in the late nineteenth century and a sexual practice (same-sex engagement) that had existed perhaps since the beginning of humanity became simultaneously sinful, deviant, and pathological. At last, the social institutions of church and family had an interesting bedfellow in science's classification of the homosexual as sick and those who dared to engage in same-sex practices were, without question, abnormal, deviant, mentally ill, and destined for eternal damnation.

Perhaps, as Foucault (1978) suggests, it is the act of naming the homosexual that ultimately led to the efforts of those who bore the label to empower themselves to take up the struggle to challenge those individuals and institutions that pressed down upon them.

The dawn of the twentieth century saw several efforts by homosexuals both in Europe and the United States to invent ways of coming together through hidden codes of behavior in order to create supportive communities and, presumably, to engage in relationships. George Chauncey (1994) writes about New York at the turn of the century up to the 1930s and points out that there were several communities in the city where men proclaimed themselves rather openly as “fairies” and “queers” despite threats of harm. In the 1920s, the vernacular term *gay* emerged initially as a way of describing sexually unconstrained heterosexual lifestyles but quickly became associated with and was claimed by homosexuals who were stereotyped, fairly or not, as silly, carefree, and sexually unconstrained (Wikholm, 1999). While small and unrecognized on a national scale, the people we often think of as suffering in silent self-hatred prior to more public efforts were making political statements with their actions early in the twentieth century. Many times, the action people took involved claiming the identity that science and society had bestowed upon them in order to protest the oppression that was associated with it. In 1924, efforts by Henry Gerber and a small group of Chicagoans to demand rights for homosexuals paid off when the state of Illinois granted a non-profit charter to the organization known as the Society for Human Rights; the first known gay rights organization in the United States. Though short-lived due to the arrest of several of its members, the Society had set a stage for others to consider injustice in the treatment of

homosexuals (Katz, 2008). It was not until the 1950s that organized groups of political activists rekindled the fires beneath the demand for homosexual rights, beginning the work that would lead to Stonewall and the political transformation that followed those nights of social resistance.

The Mattachine Society began in November of 1950 in Los Angeles California when Harry Hay, a man with ties to the Communist Party and the anti-Korean War movement, organized several people to make public political statements about the oppression of homosexuals and began publishing *One*, a newsletter whose intent was to bring consciousness to the lack of rights afforded to people based on sexual practices (Hall, 2003). At about the same time, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon organized a group of homosexual women in San Francisco California forming the Daughters of Bilitis in an effort to have somewhere else to create community besides the bars. The group also published a newsletter that called for awareness of homosexual oppression and the need for protection of rights. Several chapters of these organizations in major American cities followed suit, thus inaugurating what would become the gay rights movement. Interestingly, the very institution that had ascribed the homosexual label would give the fledgling liberation movement some nourishment in the form of scientific evidence generated by what would be considered one of the most astounding research projects on human sexuality ever undertaken, the Kinsey Reports.

Alfred Kinsey published his work *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, creating a firestorm of controversy about what men were doing sexually in the privacy of their lived experiences. Kinsey's research, while criticized highly by the scientific

community for its methodological approaches, seemed to reveal that a large number of males (37%) had engaged in post-adolescent same-sex behavior to the point of orgasm. Additionally, Kinsey's data indicated that at least one quarter of the participants reported repeated same-sex activities between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five, though many of them did not identify as exclusively homosexual (Hall, 2003). D'Emilio (2002) suggests that while the Kinsey reports served to confirm the dangers of homosexuality it also served to confirm the lived experience that, indeed, there was a group to which homosexuals could belong. The sense of belonging was vital in the formation of community that would become the heart of the gay liberation movement. Identity with essential qualities was central in the identity politics that emerged in the 1960s, ultimately leading to Stonewall and other events that marked gay liberation.

### *A Personal Stonewall*

Being born in 1962 to parents who were conformists to the social order of the south and who feared the social changes that were sweeping America at the time, I was immersed in the development of my worldview as exclusive with regard to racial, gender, spiritual, physical, and sexual difference from the status quo. Interestingly, at the same time Stonewall was occurring far away from my rural North Carolina home, I was experiencing my first same-sex encounter with a neighbor boy who was, like me, living in a culture of fear, which explains why at seven years old, we hid in an outbuilding as we experimented with the forbidden and exciting world of sex. While I do not recall knowing about homosexuals or sex at the time, I distinctly remember knowing that what we were doing was somehow wrong and was to be a guarded secret; one whose silence

would be broken when his mother discovered us one summer afternoon, nude and engaged in sexual play. Needless to say, this began an inter-psychic process of internal shame around sex and sexual behaviors that would later be confirmed by my social experiences. The discovery of my sexual games and the reprimand from my mother that followed did not deter what I now knew to be deviant sexual acts; indeed, it only served to reinforce how vile my behavior was and that I must, at all costs, keep my encounters secret. Thus, at an early age, my sexuality was aligned with abnormality, sinfulness, and shame, all of which continue to reside in my private psychic spaces. I suppose that my personal Stonewall was to continue to do what I desired despite efforts to show me that what I was doing was somehow horrible and disgusting. Liberation for me was to engage in my sexuality despite knowing that it was unacceptable, sick, and sinful—much like those in New York and San Francisco who claimed and lived “gay” and “gay pride” despite being beaten, spat-on, kicked, verbally harassed, and killed. My “gayness” would not come until later though my sexuality was clearly leaning toward same-sex sexual desire and practice.

While my knowledge of sexuality was at best limited, it was clear to me that, according to my parents, frightening things were occurring, particularly in the South, that would forever disrupt a long established pattern of racial prejudice and discrimination. I remember being warned by my parents to avoid African Americans (my parents used a derogatory explicative) when I started school in 1969 as North Carolina had only recently complied with *Brown v. Board of Education*. I was terrified that something horrible would happen and, in reality, I do not recall having an African American peer in my class

until high school, and certainly nothing happened at all except that I learned that there seemed to be nothing to fear. While I did not recognize it then, I was engaged in a system of oppression which relied on fear to perpetuate dominance over those deemed to be different and/or inferior.

### **Race and Gender as Locations for Libratory Social Movements**

As one considers the radical social activists overtone that seemed to dominate the 1960s in America, what stands out is the unity that emerged within African-American communities as well as communities of women. It seems that decades and even centuries of oppressing women and African-Americans had, ironically, given rise to a sense of empowerment that would not only transform the cultural landscape, but would also reverberate in other oppressed communities. Women's rights and civil rights dominated sociological change during the 1960s as both movements began to organize around essential qualities. Group identity became a necessary building block in resistance and in the offensive actions that empowered and politicized oppressed groups. Interestingly, for both the women's movement and the civil rights movement, it was the white male dominated social and political systems that became the culprit of all that was and had been oppressive. Indeed, America was without question organized by and around privileged white males who focused on building a capitalist utopia despite political claims for democracy and equality; however, two centuries of oppression had existed long before there was any substantial effort on the part of the oppressed to rise against the establishment, begging the question why did it take so long? After all, there were several noble individuals who gallantly attempted to organize efforts to challenge the power

structure; however, despite some small scale successes, there was no significant social shift until the 1960s.

For African-Americans, liberation that was legislated by the Lincoln's executive order known as the *Emancipation Proclamation* did not ensure equality and justice at all. In fact, some would argue that freedom from slavery became enslavement to the social and political systems of America that emphasized the acquisition of wealth under the guise of hard work and morality, and that were constructed to promote the efforts of people with means and power rather than those who were viewed as undeserving, deviant, or different from what had become the model of an American—a hardworking, well-schooled, white male who established himself as shrewd and successful within a morally sound context. Interestingly, the current model of a good, successful American citizen may not be far from the model described above, which might explain why American society continues to hurl itself toward the production of college educated, hardworking, and so-called morally sound young adults whose desires to approach life differently are often scorned and squelched. In any case, freed African-Americans often found themselves figuratively chained to laborious tasks with little opportunity to transform their lives. In some cases, if one acted white enough, personal and political success (as defined by the white establishment) may be realized, though it is doubtful that any non-white was or is accepted as equal. Interestingly, it was a homosexual man, Bayard Rustin, who was central in the collective efforts that lead to national attention on civil rights in the 1960s.

Rustin, a student of Gandhi influenced by Quakerism and Communists ideals, moved to New York City in the mid-1930s where he became active in so-called radical movements. In New York, he met two political activists that launched his efforts to become involved in political efforts for civil rights. Fairly early in his activist career, Rustin was incarcerated for lewd acts (as defined by law at the time) that involved two young men, bringing unwanted attention to his sexuality. After his release, Rustin made every attempt to totally cover his sexuality and eventually he was able to re-establish himself in political activism. He became involved with many organizations and met Martin Luther King in Alabama in the 1950s as the bus boycotts emerged. It was Rustin who influenced King in his use of non-violent techniques and Rustin became one of King's closest advisors. Rustin organized key events and, "throughout this period, King rarely made a decision of any consequence without consulting him" (D'Emilio, 2002, p. 13). In 1960, Rustin had been organizing large protests for the election year and a colleague and congressman, Adam Clayton Powell, who viewed himself as the black power broker in the Democratic Party threatened to accuse King and Rustin of having a homosexual relationship if King did not dismiss Rustin. In fear, King did dismiss Rustin and he returned to peace work in Europe and Africa while keeping an eye on events in the United States. It was the famous march on Washington in 1963 that once again re-established Rustin as a figure in American civil rights despite public accusations of his perversion as a homosexual (D'Emilio, 2002). Ultimately, Rustin and other civil rights leaders confronted the struggle that surrounds moving from margin to center when the center is so strictly defined by the status quo. Rustin was not able to bring protests against

sexual oppression into his work, but what he endured foreshadowed the coming gay liberation movement. Likewise, for women a similar struggle had been played out against the white male establishment; however, white women did and do have the privileges afforded simply by skin color; whereas, non-white women feel the effects of both racism and sexism, not to mention oppression based on sexual orientation.

Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, particularly through the efforts of Susan B. Anthony, attention was brought to inequalities experienced by women (the focus being on white women at the time) and, much like the civil rights movement, there were some political successes but no real sense of unity in large numbers. It is interesting to note that there has been much speculation that Anthony was indeed a lesbian, though there is no clear evidence other than her very close and long-term relationship with Elizabeth Cady Stanton (“Susan B. Anthony,” 2008). Both Stanton and Anthony worked tirelessly to call attention to what they perceived as social injustices toward women and people of color. Women’s suffrage was emphasized and by the beginning of the twentieth century, women had been granted the right to vote by the nineteenth amendment to the U. S. Constitution, which paved the way to addressing issues of inequality in the workplace.

As early as the 1920s several political activists gave voice to the struggles of women in the workplace and, despite a multitude of oppressive experiences, there was no collective action by affected women or politicians until the Kennedy administration established the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in 1962, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The report by the Commission confirmed what was known; women were subject to inequality and discrimination in the workplace. Around this time, *The*

*Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963) was published and its message brought together White, middle-class housewives in large numbers to protest the role ascribed to them by the establishment and the inequity it promoted. Another important note is that the birth control pill was legalized in 1960, thus making the choice to avoid pregnancy while continuing to engage in sexual practice a very real possibility. Having the ability to control one's destiny in terms of parenthood, coupled with collective acknowledgement of discrimination, empowered America's largest group of women—White, middle-class—to come together in the modern movement for women's rights. Obviously, the collective efforts of this particular group of women, while large, excluded other groups of women; however, their efforts can be credited with inspiring some of the other waves of protest against the patriarchal establishment. The growing understanding of a location for sociocultural power in the white, heterosexual male establishment would fuel the gay rights movement as the 1960s progressed toward the new decade and beyond.

### ***The Convergence of Race, Gender, and Sexuality***

While Lesbian voices seemed to be excluded from the roar of the gay male dominated political discourse that marked the beginning of the 1970s, they were heard loudly in the women's movement of the time. The intersection of the civil rights, women's, and the gay liberation movements is best identified in the work of the so-called radical lesbians who began to question the quest for equality with men (white, heterosexual, and successful), contextualized traditionally as a liberal position, as the goal of the women's movement. In fact, the radical feminists railed against assimilation to the standards set by the establishment and called for the creation of equality as respect for

diversity rather than a performance of what was expected by the status quo. It is in this context that the gay liberation movement and the women's movement began to evaluate the assimilation politics that were at their foundations (Sullivan, 2003). The pioneers of gay/lesbian and women's equality had worked to become accepted by the mainstream, largely by proving the nothing was really different just because of a person's sex or sexuality. The radical surge challenged this approach and began to call into question the need to be accepted. What became important was for the mainstream to recognize that different was just as acceptable as being the same. Rather than making differences invisible, the radical movement began to celebrate differences, calling for a new status quo. This same phenomenon can be observed in the civil rights movement with the emergence of the Black Panthers and the work of Malcolm X, who, in contrast to Martin Luther King's message of peaceful equality with Whites, called for the Black community to find its own identity rather than adopting the identity of the White establishment (Toonari, 2008). Historically, all three movements, Civil Rights, Women's, and Gay Liberation began to venture toward resisting the status quo rather than assimilating toward it. Perhaps it is this radical influx that began to turn the national tide during the 1970s to a more conservative stance, leaving behind the liberal demeanor that seemed to prevail in the 1960s. The radical approach also began to deconstruct the essentialist position that seemed to bring together so many people, particularly as individuals began to celebrate their differences rather than their similarities. What is interesting is that by 1980, socially dominant positions in the United States embraced Ronald Regan and his conservative ideals wholeheartedly as the radical changes that were fueled during the 60s

and early 70s became an ember in the sociocultural fire. Individualism seemed to prevail and the loss of an essential, collective identity seemed to diminish the power that was enjoyed by transformative groups just 10-20 years earlier.

As a young adult in the late 1970s and early 1980s, my gay identity had been solidified through my interface with the gay community which, in Greensboro, North Carolina continued to cling to a fairly secretive, clandestine existence in the shadows of gay bars, bookstores, and dance clubs. For me, *being* gay was about living in the fringes of southern society and while oppressive, it was also a very edgy and exciting identity. In many ways, I was part of an underground culture, a culture that existed just out of view of the eyes of genteel, folksy, southerners whose women and men held tightly to racial, gender, and sexual identities constructed within a patriarchal, heteronormative frame that seemed as strong as steel. I reveled in my position as an outsider while I carefully maneuvered through the cultural landscape in which I was raised; a landscape that taught me about *being* a southern man and about the shame that comes with deviating from expectations. Paradoxically, I could be gay and proud, but only in particular locations and only if I conformed to the rules of being gay. My gayness became a space for being but it was not liberating with regard to the larger social contexts of my culture. My being was oppressed by my culture and I was oppressed by being gay. My sexual desire for other males had become much larger than secret sexual games with neighborhood boys; I had become gay and in that becoming I had adopted rules, values, attitudes, and norms of the gay culture of the south in the early 1980s. Caught up in a paradoxical whirlwind I was not to be too effeminate; my body should reflect a traditionally masculine physique; I

should wear designer clothes; I should enjoy disco music and show tunes; I must own at least one Barbra Streisand album; I should go to the gay club on weekends and, given my age, I should be sexually active with as many men as possible; I should enjoy fine things such as nice crystal, silver, and china; I should participate in the arts; I should be able to help my mom and aunts decorate their homes; I should be charming at all times with “straights” so that I would be seen as socially desirable; I should not be ashamed of my gayness despite the fact that my church, my school, and my family believed that it was an immoral sickness; I should not become depressed or consider suicide despite the fact that most media representations of gayness at the time portrayed gay men as dejected, rejected, depressed, unhappy, lonely, suicidal social outcasts. While I attempted to negotiate this curious blending of the masculine and feminine, the safety, sense of community, self-identity, and freedom I found in gayness came at a price though I was happy to pay it at the time; I sold the nuances of my individuality in order to *be* gay.

### **Essentialism**

Perhaps it is the power of essential identity that is galvanizing and necessary for social change; yet, it is vital to examine the consequences of essentialism on those who engage with and in it in order to become empowered. Addressing aspects of power and its presence in sexual and gender identity, Fuss (1989), Foucault (1978), and Butler (1990) point out that when a particular act or desire is named and/or categorized not only is it marginal, it is also made powerful as it takes on an essence that can be and often is used politically by those who claim it. A project of post-structural radical movements including queer theories has been to disrupt the essential categories that emerged largely

as a result of the modern project of reductionism, through deductive scientific processes. While labels such as “homosexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and others have been the source of oppression, as some of the queer theorists have noted, they have also been utilized in the struggle for rights and power in the political arena. What has emerged from the liberation movements centered on sex, gender, sexuality, and race is the claiming of particular identities as a source of personal and political power in the face of the dominant heteronormative, patriarchally influenced social structure and, while this is important, the post-structural project of de-classifying and de-categorizing has disrupted the use of essential identities and the political power that often accompanies them. For the gay liberation movement, which did not truly emerge onto the national political stage until the 1970s, the sense of collective unity that was manifested at Stonewall was fairly short-lived; however, the quest for gay rights did not fade away.

The new gay movement had opened spaces for people in larger metropolitan areas to form communities and revel in being proud of who they believed themselves to be; yet, for mainstream America, gays continued to be viewed as fairly isolated to the urban centers and certainly, gays did not wield much if any power in terms of cultural shaping. 1977-78 brought a new awareness to the political power of the gay movement as the first openly gay male to hold a significant political office in the United States, Harvey Milk, urged all those in the so-called gay community to “come out” and be visible to family, friends, relatives, and the world. Milk asserted that it was life in the closet that served to perpetuate so many of the myths about gayness and, in many cases, his calls were answered as people, gay and straight, poured into the streets of San Francisco, New York,

Los Angeles, and Washington, D. C. proclaiming their support of policy that supported the rights of all gay people (Shilts, 1982). Homosexuality in the late 1970s was no longer a psychological disease, as the American Psychiatric Association had removed the diagnosis from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973 under pressure from many factions of the gay rights movement; however, the removal of the label did not remove the idea that, in fact, gay people were sick and further, they were immoral. As gay people emerged from closets in places where people did not realize they existed; namely, rural areas in the United States, fear about the loss of moral structure was empowered and the struggle to demonize homosexuals as immoral and perverse emerged in full force. As people emerged from the so-called closet claiming their pride in being gay, questions about morality created a media firestorm and the all-American girl, Anita Bryant, as well as a prominent senator from California, John Briggs were at the forefront of calls to legislate limits on where and with whom homosexuals could interact (Shilts, 1982). As Foucault (1978) points out, it is the dance of power between people and groups that constructs an environment where those with opposing views can become empowered to act with regard to their respective positions. It seems that the gay community discovered power by coming together and rallying against efforts to politically and socially obliterate it and, likewise, those claiming moral righteousness empowered themselves by organizing around the preservation of so-called Christian values as defined by a fundamentalists and literalist approach to Christianity.

On the 1978 anniversary of the Stonewall riots, Harvey Milk stood before a crowd of over 375,000 people who had gathered in support of opposing what is known as the Briggs Initiative to urge all gay people in America to,

. . . make the commitment to fight. For themselves, for their freedom, for their country. . . . Gay people, we will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets . . . . We are coming out. We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I am going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it. You must come out. Come out to your parents, your relatives. I know that it is hard and that it will hurt them, but think of how they will hurt you in the voting booths . . . (Shilts, 1982, p. 224)

Images of the crowd and portions of the speech were broadcasts over and over again around the nation creating both an outpouring of concern for the “legislation of bigotry” (Shilts, 1982, p. 225) and virulent opposition to gays having specific rights. Despite the continuation of the argument for and against rights, it was clear that the gay community and its straight allies were framed as united and gay identity became solidified by the so-called clone image in the Castro district of San Francisco, which co-opted machismo and hyper-masculinity (defined traditionally) as its persona. Gays around the nation adopted the “Castroized” look and donned work boots, flannel shirts, tight jeans/jean shorts and the “wife-beater” t-shirt that could be ripped off on the dance floor to reveal a rock solid abdomen and muscular back. The gay identity reached to the south through the clandestine system of communication that existed in the shadows of the straight dominated culture and, despite not really knowing about the political movement, I dressed in my gay attire and began to frequent one of the two gay clubs in Greensboro, North Carolina where I, along with others, began to define myself as a gay man.

What is important to note is that despite my identification with the gay community and my celebration of engagement with same-sex partners, I did not know about or answer Milk's call to come out and remained closeted to my family and to my employer until 1990 when I was 28 years old. My "gay pride" was relegated to the supposed secrecy of the dark spaces of the bars where I could *be* gay, and to the candid conversations and private parties I enjoyed with my friends. None of my high school or college classes addressed the gay rights movement or homosexuality to any significant extent. What I learned about the gay movement was from other gays with whom I associated. Our history was fabricated from what we heard through the local gay grapevine, which was noisy albeit small. I was only gay when it was safe to be gay thus location was a central element in my gayness. My work boots and flannel shirt did not dispel the shame and remorse I felt when my mother or my aunts would ask me about a girlfriend. So, while I was *being* gay, I was also being what I was supposed to be as a southern white male through a masquerade that involved a very nice young woman with whom I formed a hopelessly false relationship. This dual identity further confused my sense of self-esteem and certainly was hurtful to the people, both males and females, with whom I formed romantic relationships. In retrospect, I now see that internalized shame was at the root of this polymorphic identity that permeated my college years. Because the south was socially behind the nation in many ways, it would not be until the mid 1980s that I realized that the gay community, shortly after it had solidified itself as a political force, began to splinter based largely on particular sexual practices and/or gender identities and gender roles. It is not that new sexual practices and/or gender identities

emerged out of some homogenous location; rather, sexual practices and desires moved from the shadows into the light of the cultural day as people began to claim identities such as “bear,” “S&M or leather queen,” “twink,” “Diesel Dyke,” “lipstick lesbian,” “top,” “bottom,” and “straight-acting”; the list goes on. Ironically, it was the sense of emancipation enjoyed by the collective efforts of the unified gay community that enabled fragmentation to occur as those who were “out” enjoyed discovering others with similar interests, enabling the formation of sub-cultural groups within what had come to be the collective gay culture. As with civil rights and the women’s movements, liberation, or at least the perception of it, became a location for minimizing or leaving the collective effort for a more specific agenda with like-minded people (Loughery, 1998). The controversy around the 1980 William Friedkin film *Cruising* illustrates the separation that occurred as so-called darker aspects of the gay life-style emerged and, in the film, were literally displayed on the silver screen.

*Cruising* presents its audiences with an inside look at the gay male leather/sadistic/masochistic scene of the 1980s, which, though it seems to be a fairly accurate portrayal filmed in actual clubs using their patrons as extras, set off a firestorm of negative criticism from the more “mainstream” gay community, who insisted that the portrayal of gays in the film did not reflect “normal” gay life; rather, it served to, “. . . reduce the whole gay community to nothing more than sex-hungry primitive animals” (Caals, 2005, p. 3). Indeed, the film was advertised with a disclaimer that compelled its audiences to recognize that it did not represent the gay life-style. Thus, within ten years after gay men of many colors and sexual persuasions, lesbians, drag queens, and other

sexual deviants stood united in the streets during Stonewall, many similar people were pointing fingers at each other in what is presumably an effort to present the “normal” image of the gay community. I remember seeing *Cruising* in High Point, North Carolina in 1982 after several months of hearing about its controversial topic and, with eagerness, a couple of my gay friends and I sat in a nearly empty theater with our jaws agape when “real” men touched, kissed, fondled, and otherwise engaged in very provocative acts of sex right there on the screen. I could not believe my eyes! I was witnessing something that I never thought I would see in my lifetime, particularly being raised where and how I was. In many ways, this moment was an omen for things to come as American society faced the reality not only that gay people existed, but that they were dynamic, diverse, and often dramatic in their expressions of identity. Most certainly, not all gay people were or are the same despite the efforts of some to present an “acceptable” version of gayness to the reluctant heteronormative world. Liberation meant that straights and gays alike had to confront the plurality of sexual and gender identities whether or not this was desirable.

Interestingly, once liberation was discovered, the gay community began to liberate itself from its powerful essentialist identity and while this newfound liberatory project offered spaces for the exploration of more public practices and/or identities, the political power that had been enjoyed through essentialism was diluted and the blowback from conservative political forces found new ground as Ronald Regan emerged as a political leader supported largely by fundamentalist and evangelical Christians who, by the way, flourished in the south. For a brief time, it seemed that the gay community,

seemingly preoccupied with its work in establishing particular gay identities, would fall back into the proverbial closet socially and politically as the “Reganites” reveled in the dismantling of social policies and programs that emerged during the 70s and 80s. Just as the gay community found itself splintering into lesbians, transgendered people, fems, butches, and any number of other identities, Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) came upon the scene in the 1980s and suddenly the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/etc. community was untied once again.

### **AIDS and the Reunification of the Gay Community**

The Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic was central in renewed efforts to press for sexual liberation. The life and death nature of the disease and the accusations from the politically and socially conservative right about AIDS being a natural consequence of presumed promiscuous sexual practices in the gay community once again galvanized those who identified as sexually oppressed with lesbians, gay men, transgendered people, bisexuals, and others working to bring attention to the plight of the victims of AIDS and those who were deemed immoral and perverse because of sexual and/or gender differences. The conservatism of the Regan administration was just what the sexually oppressed community needed to propel itself into action, and 1987 saw over 500,000 people converge on Washington D. C. in protest (D’Emilio, 2002). Politics again became important and ACT UP was founded in the same year, bringing a new militancy to the liberation movement for those who were sexually oppressed with direct confrontations toward politically conservative individuals and groups. This resurgence of the gay movement was not dominated by gay males; rather, it included the loud voices of

lesbians, bisexuals, and those who identified as transgendered in the struggle to stop the pandemic that AIDS would become. While gay men seemed to be the population most affected by AIDS, this did not stop others from becoming involved in the movement. In the south, AIDS at first seemed to be something in a far off place but by the late 1980s, it was not uncommon for gay people to know someone who had been diagnosed with AIDS or who had died from it. In North Carolina, the call to unite was answered with several AIDS related service organizations emerging to help victims with the coordination of care and services including assistance with obtaining costly medications (Lekus, 2001). Many allies came into the AIDS battle from the straight community and from other communities that had heretofore been absent or marginally present in gay liberation. One of my best friends from high school, who was one of the first people to whom I came out, was diagnosed in the late 1980s and died in the early 1990s, bringing AIDS directly into my life. Since that time, several friends have been diagnosed and some have died, the most recent being in 2007. For me, AIDS has been a reconnection to the gay community as I have attended fundraisers and volunteered time to work toward a cure. I believe that the general public was exposed to the humanness of gay people through AIDS and that, in part, this helped to soften some of the most stringent ideas about gay people being sick, deviant, dark, and sinful. For gay people, males in particular, AIDS became another location for shame as its victims had to come out to family friends (many for the first time) and tell them that they were terminally ill. Many people with AIDS, friends, and family members suffered silently and alone as a result of the shame of having the “gay plague,” with some taking drastic measures to minimize suffering and/or public exposure

(Harris, 1997). Cleve Jones, the originator of the AIDS Memorial Quilt Project and former political assistant to Harvey Milk, worked diligently to publicize the impact of the epidemic by borrowing from the feminists movement and making the personal political through the creation of blankets or quilts that illustrated the life of a person who had died from AIDS. The quilt, evoking folksy images that are foundational to America, was displayed across the nation and on several occasions, was laid in the Mall in Washington, D. C. The image of thousands of panels, each representing a dynamic person, was profound and provoking with regard to the hard-heartedness that seemed to be stereotypical of the “moral” right. I remember when several hundred panels were displayed in Greensboro, N.C. and I and many of my reunited gay brothers and sisters walked somberly among them feeling a curious combination of dread, pride, and hope for ourselves and for gay liberation. After all, how could we be so hated when the quilt made us so human? As Harris (1997) points out, the quilt, for all its tugs on the heart-strings, also illustrated the efforts of activists to market the product of liberation, particularly equality, with gays being just like straights. Indeed, equality began to imply that gays, who had existed in the margins, could be welcomed into American society as consumers; thus, the gay liberation movement trumpeted the impact of its purchasing power as society began to evaluate gays as potential members of the mainstream, which plays well to consumerism. Of course, if one is to become a part of the mainstream, one must act as those in the mainstream act; thus, the “gay life-style” began to look oddly like the straight life-style and the hegemony of heteronormativity and its worship of the dominate/subordinate binary were co-opted, perhaps somewhat unknowingly, by the so-

called gay community as same-sex couples began to buy houses together, engage in “normal” careers, even have and raise children whom they dressed in expensive designer clothes.

### **Same-Sex Marriage: History Present and Future**

By the 1990s, hate crimes legislation that included language about gender and sexuality had emerged and the media began to include gay and lesbian issues as well as characters. The scientific community had introduced biological explanations for so-called abnormal sexuality, an idea that gained popularity in the sexually oppressed community because it took the blame away from individual lifestyle choice and placed it into one’s genetics. Openly gay and/or lesbian candidates were running for office and Bill Clinton’s nomination saw the first presidential candidate who, at least partially, supported the gay and lesbian community. Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy with regard to gays in the military was in some ways a step forward as it allowed gay people to serve; yet, it was a step back in its call for silence, echoing the silence of the closet. As one might expect, the move toward what was perceived as political and social liberalism created resistance and, as Foucault would predict, once again a conservative backlash developed in mainstream American society. By 1996, a high school student in Utah, Kelli Peterson, along with a small group of friends had formed the first Gay Straight Alliance at East High School in order to create support for those who suffered degradation by their peers at school due to actual or perceived sexual and/or gender differences. The effort set off a national firestorm of controversy about the presence of such organizations in public high schools, reiterating the conservative resistance toward the inclusion of gender/sexual differences

in public social spaces (Dupre, 1998). The Christian right found its footing in political action and the turn of the century and millennia ushered in a heavy dose of right-wing morality and political calls to arms.

Ironically, the 2000s witnessed media embracing sexually diverse people and characters comically, dramatically, and politically and, despite the ongoing conservative atmosphere, sexually diverse people are securing political positions at the local and state levels in unexpected areas, e. g. Wyoming and North Carolina. The emergence of gay, lesbian, and queer studies in the academy introduced new ways of considering how codification plays a role in the construction of identity and practices with particular regard to gender and sexuality (Sullivan, 2003). What is interesting is that the gains made by the sexually oppressed liberation movement do not seem to have been lost; rather, they have dramatically slowed during this conservative time. The calls for same-sex couples' marriage rights have become a central issue for conservatives as well as gay activists, creating a point for unity on both sides. Most certainly, sexual diversity, while not exactly accepted by the mainstream, is a part of the American tapestry and seems to be poised to continue to make its presence known.

At the heart of much of the debate about so-called gay rights and, in particular gay marriage is the preservation (or deconstruction) of the American family. Nostalgically, marriage marks the beginning of a life-long commitment to another person (traditionally the opposite sex) through a legal and spiritual contract. The wedding day is marked in American society as one of the most celebrated occasions and certainly, from the standpoint of commodity, the wedding ceremony and celebration boasts a hefty price-tag

with the average American wedding ringing in at \$30,000 (Scott, 2008). The prevailing cultural norm continues to be centered on a model of marriage that privileges monogamy and supports a heteronormatively based binary that is contextualized in a traditional construction of coupling; namely, that the couple reflect a dominant/subordinate structure with the male usually viewed as the “head of household.” Of course, the intent of marriage is usually based in the production of children, enabling the perpetuation of the human race, the family, and the perpetuation of property and wealth within particular family/genetic lines. As Hartog (2004) writes, marriage has historically been

. . . a world in which men possessed property rights in children understood as necessary labor power and as valuable resources. Marriage was how the legal system marked children as owned -- possessed legally or legitimately -- just as all legal systems develop mechanisms for marking valuable property as possessed. And for the wealthy, who were the main consumers of marital law until the nineteenth century, it was also a way to define lineage and to negotiate alliances between families. Happiness (and love) had nothing to do with it. (para. 6)

Interestingly, the twentieth century saw the concept of marriage coupled with love and, rather quickly, a couple was expected to be “in love” before they could consider marriage.

Of course love was reserved as something that occurred between males and females who were, hopefully, of the same social stature and good breeding so that the match produced desirable offspring who could inherit property and wealth, expanding it for the next generation. Thus, love did not eliminate the intent of marriage; rather, it complicated the process of binding together property, cash, and material goods by interjecting a rather umbrageous concept in what had been a clear practice whose end was

amassing wealth. Love was messy and often the root of dramatic conflict between what may have been perfectly good matches between families who wanted to secure their futures; none-the-less, love rose to prominence as the twentieth century witnessed the advent of World Wars, an incredible boom in industry and opportunity for the average person to acquire wealth, the women's rights movement (which brought a critique of marriage as an oppressive practice), and questions about what constituted love and who could be loved and in love. Personal happiness became a location for understanding the importance of coupling and those who were not coupled were often viewed as lacking the security, happiness, and love solidified by marriage. It became not only desirable to be married as part of the quest for happiness; it became normal. Thus, one who was not coupled was somehow not normal and science helps to support this by pointing out that those who were coupled reported being less stressed and they lived longer (Center for the Study of Aging, 2008). Given the normalcy of coupling, the liberal faction of the gay rights/gay liberation movement found it desirable for same-sex couples to be viewed as normal for the gay community; thus, the heteronormative model was adopted and widely practiced in the world of same-sex relationships (Eskridge & Spedale, 2006). Of course many same-sex relationships prior to the gay liberation movement reflected the heteronormative model and, most probably, there were those that did not; however, the gay rights movement, for all its revelry in sexual freedom and decadent sexual practices, demanded that the public view gays as "normal," which included coupling just like straight people. Gays who did not conform to traditional coupling were marginalized and defined as unrepresentative of the gay lifestyle. Thus, the demand for the legal right for

same-sex couples to marry rose as the twentieth century came to a close. Once again, this call for so-called equal rights witnessed the blowback of conservatism and the early 2000s witnessed a power play between same-sex couples, state legislatures, state and federal politicians, and the Supreme Court.

In 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declared that the state ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, igniting a national debate on the legal status of so-called gay marriage and creating opportunities for people to apply for and receive marriage licenses in states that followed suite with Massachusetts. As anticipated, the backlash from the conservative point of view was strong giving the gay community an event more urgent call to marshal. The gay community seemed to answer and, much as the AIDS crisis had done in the late 1980s and 1990s, people who had strayed away from gay politics to pursue their own personal desires and ways of life mustered to action as the Presidential election of 2004 loomed on the horizon. While I did not have a personal agenda for marriage rights, I supported the new cause as did many of my friends. It seemed to become a rallying cry for the gay community which, as Archer (2004) argues was at the beginning of its end as a unified force largely because identity as gay had been blurred as a result of pluralistic lived experiences, which (re)defined sex between and beyond the spaces that emerged during the gay rights movement of the 1980s and 1990s. American President George W. Bush supported a federal constitutional ban on same-sex marriage and proclaimed, with the support of the Christian right, that marriage was the blessed union between one man and one woman. His 2004 re-election campaign used an age old tactic, fear, and its leverage on the issue to win Bush a second term in the White

House. Interestingly, the presence of those who are sexually and gender divergent from the norm continued to exist in the media and, in many cases, “normal” gay people were seen by the public as existing happily in their suburban homes, bothering no one and actually being an asset to the neighborhoods in which they lived. Covert as it may be, these images beg questions about why people simply cannot be married regardless of sexual/gender differences. It was this question that helped move the gay community (now contextualized within the broadness of mainstream diversity) into action around the marriage issue. In states where marriage was “legal,” people flocked to the courthouse to get a license. Indeed, they wore wedding gowns, tuxedos, had ceremonies, and toasted over cake just like any straight couple; so what was all the fuss about?

As so-called gay marriages became sensationalized media images, the calls to halt same-sex marriages grew from a rumble to a roar, largely due to concerns and questions of morality and acceptance of same-sex ideology and practice. As the prominent conservative writer Dr. James Dobson (2004) asserts, allowing same-sex marriage disrupts the moral foundation of the institution of marriage in America and, if same-sex couples are allowed to marry, the stage will be set for polygamy and other “immoral” forms of marriage to occur, public schools will have to teach that the perversion of homosexuality is morally equal to traditional marriage, matters of adoption and foster care will be muddled and preference will not be given by the courts to traditional family placement, the spread of the Christian message will be curtailed as the family has been a primary site for evangelical work, and the so-called culture war will be lost with America falling into moral interpetude that will undermine the foundations of the culture. Indeed,

same-sex marriage from a conservative point of view is an assault on the moral bedrock of America and, it seems, that many Americans, despite growing evidence of support for same-sex issues, do not believe that marriage should be a right enjoyed by same-sex couples. Lakoff (1996) asserts that American conservatism is based in what he calls “strict father morality,” which assumes a model where the father (a leader) sets the rules and the children (the people) learn to follow and obey them in order to gain self-discipline. The laws set by the “father” are made in order to avoid chaos in the family/society, thus they become the roadmap for a moral life. If one deviates from the laws, there is a real risk of the crumbling of social order and the perpetuation of moral chaos; thus, those who stray from the rules must be reigned in at the costs of social collapse. If we follow Lakoff’s assertion, it is not difficult to see just how critical the question of same-sex marriage is in this current and future political and historical climate. The recent (November 4, 2008) passage of Proposition 8 in California, which overturned a decision by the Supreme Court that same-sex couples had the right to marry, and the passage of similar measures in Florida and Arizona are evidence that same-sex marriage is not something that is readily accepted by the American public. Indeed, some in the so-called gay community are asking if marriage within the model of heteronormativity is desirable at all.

From its origins in the gay liberation movement, queer theories have opened space to consider alternatives to what has been reified as natural and normal with regard to human identities, practices, and ideas. Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt (2004) point out that “Normative frameworks, including heteronormative frameworks, are the scaffolding

that holds in place an entire system of power and privilege that endeavors to regulate young people, people of color, queers, and women to the symbolic fringes of society” (p. 3). Indeed, it is so-called normal that allows the creation of so-called abnormal, which sets in motion an incredible system of oppression contextualized in hierarchy and binarial paradigms with gender and sexuality being prominent in the discourse of what is and is not normal. Queer calls normal and natural into question, and queering notions of marriage is not excluded in the dialogue about what defines relationships. Authors such as Anapol (1997), Mazur (2000), and Easton (1997), among others, call into question the idea that marriage is relegated to a monogamous couple. History future will witness a fray of debate over models of relationships that embrace serial monogamy, polyamory, pluralism, egalitarian structures, and other yet-to-be constructions of what it means in body, spirit, and mind to be/become intimate with others. As the present marriage debate rages, the voices of those who would slough off the oppressive weight of traditional heteronormative relationship models are growing louder if not politically, then in practice. Perhaps the location of the new gay cause will move beyond being equal to straights by obtaining the right to marry and into spaces where relationships are (re)imagined as locations for love, happiness, freedom, and emotional serenity beyond the bounds of a solitary life partner. In my own life and the lives of some of my peers, relationships have taken on many forms between, among, and beyond the traditional model. In many ways, non-traditional relationships seem to work the margins regardless of sexual orientation and, perhaps, same and opposite sex couples/groups will discover common ground in their mutual marginal existence. In any case, the current and future

history of sexually and gender oppressed movements will continue to call into question what has been defined as dominant in American culture.

### **Reflective Thoughts**

As America steps forward in the twenty-first century it brings with it a legacy that is rich in a multitude of experiences by those who identify as American. Among these experiences are narratives of oppression and resistance, enslavement and liberation, power and powerlessness, and unity despite difference that were played out in the streets of Alabama, New York, and across America. The gay liberation movement is one of many efforts that particular groups of Americans have undertaken in the struggle for recognition, freedom, rights, and political power. Inspired by the work of those struggling for civil rights and those who work for women's and gender rights, the sexually oppressed community has experienced the ebb and flow of establishing itself as an integral part of American society, and, while there have been many gains, the work is far from complete for all oppressed groups. There are many questions that confront the social liberation and justice movements including questions about what liberation truly means. Is it enough to simply become equal with the status quo or should the establishment be confronted, deconstructed, and reformed to create a new way of being? Locating pride within one's marginalized identity gets much lip-service in social change movements, e.g. gay pride, black pride, etc.; yet, efforts to truly feel pride about one's self seem to mask a sense of shame, albeit occurring at different levels of intensity within inter-psychic spaces. For me, gay pride is really about shame constructed within my gayness and, as I marched in my first gay pride parade in the late 1990s I was cognizant of just

how shameful I felt about my sexuality as evidenced by my vigilant awareness of any television cameras that might transmit my image into the homes of my friends, family, and co-workers with whom I had not shared my still secret identity. Liberation presupposes that one is free from that which is oppressive; yet, gay liberation or other social liberatory movements have not shattered the chains borne of internalized shame constructed through the interplay of the self and sociocultural norms both in the larger context and within the context of particular sub-cultural and/or so-called marginal groups. Liberation is more than a shift in ideology or a change in social policy; indeed, liberation involves a complex undoing of social, cultural, and personal bindings that have served to oppress, suppress, and repress who and what people are and can be/become. In a prophetic voice, Greene (1988) calls upon all of us to recognize the promise of emancipation by looking for, “freedom developed by human beings who have acted to make a space for themselves in the presence of others, human beings become[ing] “challengers” ready for alternatives, alternatives that include caring and community” (p. 56). As we scan the horizon for promises of freedom, current historical events have ignited what many see as more than a glimmer of hope for change.

I was struck during the recent inauguration of the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, at how often onlookers and media commentators referred to the “pride” felt by so many people as he reveled in his historical position; pride that seemed to counter the underlying shame about racial and, perhaps, other identities. The hope that Obama and his messages seem to exude reaches beyond the promise of better economics and more just social policy into personal spaces where people continue to negotiate who

they are among the reflections cast through the mirror of social acceptance. As we are poised on what some call a new, hopeful era of government, I am filled with hope that history future can respond to a message of pluralism, communal effort, and collective action rising through the broken economy and divisive political residue of the previous government's administration, taking root in the work of individuals who are aware of and committed to an examination of restrictive and exclusive personal and social actions. There is an air of morality within the promise of what is to be and certainly, as individuals we must all begin to evaluate what it means to be moral, not from a traditional perspective; rather, from collective, communal, and humanitarian perspectives. How do we treat each other? How do we address diversity? How do our choices about living affect others? How do we use power through, among, and within our relationships with others? Perhaps these are the questions that should be the focus of our efforts to educate not only ourselves as we struggle with liberation and social movements, but our students and children, who will become, without a doubt, the future.

Chapter III of this dissertation will call upon the voices of others who, like me, came of age in the historically significant 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and who identify as male and gay. The aim of this effort in engaging others is to explore the impact of sociocultural phenomena on lived experiences, particularly as they shifted during this historical time frame. Like me, the people who participated in this work were largely unaware of social movements related to sexuality and gender concerns, yet we all experienced the impact of these efforts in subtle and, sometimes, pronounced ways. We were growing up in many ways as American society called into question reified ideas and

ideals that disrupted racial, gender, and sexual boundaries that had perpetuated oppressive structures for centuries. Chapter III reflects the interface of events and lives and how identity was and is (re)imagined. How timely this effort when one considers history present as America moves into new territory with regard to locations of power.

Current history has called upon us to reflect on past events that demanded civil rights as America elected and inaugurated a non-white President. As Barak Obama stood at one end of the National Mall in Washington, D. C., the shadow of Dr. Martin Luther King stood at the other end reminding us that his dream may be in the collective grasp of a society that forty years ago would not allow people of color to inhabit the same public spaces and certainly would not allow people who expressed sexuality and gender in non-conforming ways to be visible at all. Indeed, the dreamy imaginings of Dr. King may be realized if we begin to embrace our abilities to imagine and construct realities that are truly liberating.

### **CHAPTER III**

## **TELLING STORIES: RECALLING EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE(D) WHO WE ARE**

### **Introduction**

Perhaps this chapter is truly the heart of this project as it gives voice to the lived experiences of people who, like me, grew up during a wave of social change in America that opened opportunities to engage in a more open discourse about identity. Before delving into the narratives of those people who were gracious enough to participate in this work, it is important to discuss my reasoning for choosing to use their stories and my own in an attempt to explore the impact of internalized shame, related to sexuality and gender, in our lives. After all, I could have chosen to use a more conventional approach in doing this research, such as using survey methods, to gain understanding and develop some common ground. I might have chosen to garner a statistically significant number of responses to a questionnaire in order to assert generalizability with regard to the impact of shame; however, as I considered my options, I found that I gravitated away from positivist approaches and toward approaches that offered glimpses of detail and nuance. I knew that my own life was filled with multifaceted reactions to and with sociocultural phenomena and events that influenced my being and as I began to consider how to understand the impact of shame in the lives of males who identified as gay, I knew that I must be deeply introspective. Working from a postmodern point of view and drawing on what has been termed reflexive practices, which are often associated with feminist

approaches to knowing, I began to deconstruct my experiences with degradation as read in Chapter I of this work and, as Chapter II reflects, I contextualized my experiences within historical perspectives. Chapter III of this dissertation, through the use of personal narratives as related through dialogue between myself and the participants as a research method, begins to explore the lives of others as identity is recalled and explored through the voices of males who, like me, grew up during the socially significant 1960s, '70s, and '80s in America.

### **Methodology**

Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) point out that using personal narratives in research draws on a practice often associated with what has been contextualized as a feminist view of the role of agency in the development of the self, particularly with regard to how the variety of human experiences interfaces with larger social and cultural narratives. Further, as many historians have come to embrace the use of the human story in the exploration of events and phenomena, social scientists seem to be taking up the impact of personal narratives on how and what he can know and, as Britzman (1998) might point out, what we cannot bear to know. Postmodernist perspectives locate the human experience within plurality and variety and offers critique of essentialist and structuralist notions of human development, identity formation, and selfhood. Simon and Dippo (1986) suggests that the postmodern offers passage from discovering the objective “out there” to discovering what has been constructed through the context of lived experiences within a shifting sociocultural landscape. Epistemologically, postmodernism opens spaces for critique and deconstruction of what have become reified and/or

essentialist notions of sociocultural and/or personal fact, calling the so-called objective into question while acknowledging the impact of perspective and interpretation and, in some cases even embracing perspective and interpretation as a ways of enhancing what is known and, perhaps more enticingly, opening possibilities about what can be known. The modern project of seeking truth through logical, rational, and reasonable understanding has contributed to the structuring of knowledge through and within elaborate systems of codification and categorization. Lather (1991) points out that postmodernism, “. . . foregrounds an awareness of our own structuring impulses and their relation to the social order” (p. 89); thus, postmodernism opens spaces for deconstruction and examination of what is believed to be known. One location taken up by modernism was and remains the concept of the self as expressed through what has been termed “personality.”

Human identity has been a sort of “pet project” of modernism with schools of psychology emerging from the medical field in the late nineteenth century and progressing rapidly as the twentieth century unfolded. In an apparent quest to understand personality, psychology took up and continues to work within the intersection of biology, agency/action, cognitions, emotions, and perhaps to a lesser degree, spiritual and interpretive dimensions of the human experience. Interestingly, one can trace the apparent shift toward so-called postmodernism through the evolution of psychological theory from Freudian notions of common developmental phenomena that are purported to exist for all individuals, through cognitive and behavioral theories which herald the impact of human agency vis-à-vis thoughts relative to emotions and behaviors, to existential ideas about the impact of individual experiences, perspectives, and

interpretations framed against a sociocultural backdrop on human agency and psychological functioning (Greenwood, 2008; Hogan, Johnson, & Briggs, 1997) . While psychology's quest for answers has been, according to some, a worthy and revealing pursuit, what forms the self is elusive and continues to beg questions about the complex relationship between the *biopsychosocioculturalspiritual* . . . aspects of human beings.

Indeed, recent social and cultural theorizing seem to focus on what has been conceived as fluid modernity—a modernity that is in transit (Bauman, 2000), flowing as Lather (1991) suggest from the no longer to the not yet. Consequently, research methods that are steeped in “. . . order, structure and stasis . . . [must shift to a] . . . focus on movement, mobility, and contingency . . .” (Adkins, 2002, p.86). In considering how to do this research, I gravitated toward a more qualitative approach; yet, I wanted to disrupt the more traditional use of qualitative (taken as subjective) as a means to support the empirical (objective). Qualitative approaches have long been dominated by methods that emphasize the surfacing of commonalities within the data, often at the expense of the detail and nuance of the thick, rich descriptions contained within the narratives collected by the researcher. Careful methods of coding and inter-rater reliability are grounded in a positivist approach to the discovery of a truth. Thus, as I considered my methodology, I began to adopt a less structured conceptualization of how I would know in this dissertative process. I especially wanted to maintain an awareness of my gaze in the process and this goal helped to shape and drive my methodology and methods. Thus, as I considered identity, I did not intend to explain how identity is formed or shaped; rather,

my point is to examine identities without the confines of structured analysis, allowing the reader to become a participant in what is known and knowable.

From a post structural perspective, the self is shaped within the context of history, psychology, and embodiment and is constantly being challenged and (re)invented as a result of the interplay between and among events/happenings, psychological interpretation/perception, and the presence or absence of the body, noting that sociocultural concepts of the body as gendered and sexed must be considered in examining the self. Bourdieu coined the concept of *habitus* and Maynes et al. (2008) assert that his concept reflects “. . . internalized predispositions that mediate between largely invisible social structures and the everyday activities of individuals; habitus is simultaneously shaped by structures and regulated by practice” (p. 31). Thus, if we take up Bourdieu’s notion, a relationship between the sociocultural and the self seems to exist and it is within this relationship that the ever-changing self is imagined and reimagined as sociocultural structures are constructed and reconstructed. The subjective is not simply one’s perspective; rather, the subjective exists in a relationship with the so-called objects of society and culture or, more plainly, the objective.

When we consider the subjective, we must contextualize the term and the experience of being subjective within the historical frame of patriarchy and the privilege that its hierarchical construction of power gives to the masculine (traditionally defined), thus the dominance of reason and objectivity over emotion and subjectivity. To trouble this construction of the patriarchally framed subject/object split, I refer to Arthur Evans (1997), who suggests that pure subjectivity cannot exist because this would presuppose

that there was no previous interaction with anything “real” that had influenced one’s interpretation of the current phenomena. As pointed out earlier, Evans (1997) argues that “I” and the “World” are “strictly correlative, it is impossible to maintain that either of these is more real or more basic than the other or that one is the mere after-effect of the other” (p. 16). It is within the interaction of the world and an individual that so-called reality is constructed and, because of the fluidity of this ongoing interaction, reality is constantly being (re)invented. Interestingly, collective realities seem to form as common interpretations take shape and flourish; however, these too are subject to change as new “reality maps” are shaped and formed. Perhaps a good example of this would be the age-old story about the world being flat; a belief held by many in the centuries prior to ocean exploration. In fact, as new interpretations of how the world is shaped were introduced, common beliefs shifted. Most people at the time had not experienced the world as round, yet the influence of those who claimed that it was indeed not flat gained ground through explaining why this was the case. Reality is often based on what we are told by others or what we believe; thus, when I situate myself as a researcher, I must consider that myself and the selves of those with whom I interact are linked to our evolving interpretations of the world, both current and historical. My own experiences and the experiences of those who became a part of this work are told within and through complex interaction with and interpretations of the worlds in which we live. Indeed, it is within these complex spaces and through these gazes that power is imagined and, as I assert in this work, can be re-imagined.

Using multiple lenses to examine the dynamics of power through careful deconstruction of language within patriarchal and heteronormatively based systems of dominance offers opportunities to disrupt codification and reification efforts which have been exclusive and oppressive, thus promoting emancipation not as freedom from; rather, as freedom within. For me, inquiry involves methods that un-name in order to liberate the knower so that boundaries set up by what is known can be blurred, pushing us to know newly and differently. Of course, I did not arrive at this current location in my epistemology by accident. My own position as interpreter places me as a subject within the web of discourse and as Gannon and Davies (2006) point out, we are not active agents separated from the world; rather, we are, “. . . constructed through particular discourses in particular historical moments . . .” (p. 80). Echoing Evans’ (1997) position on the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, it is the ever-changing web of discourse that subjugates us and (re)shapes our interpretations.

Early in my life, I learned that the world was to be explained in what I now know to be a pre-modern frame, where God is in control of the unfolding of events and, frighteningly, is privy to our thoughts. There was no private space because God was omnipotent and it was the will of God that explained the events that formed my life and the lives of others. In many ways, this epistemology was safe because I had very little control. I could rely on a higher power to take care of me and those I loved. My frame of thought was grounded in cause and effect, which would later become the basis for my questions about the power God was ascribed. Looking back, I can clearly see the dominance of the binarial approach with good and bad at the heart of my own agency. If I

was “good,” God would reward me with positive things in my life; however, if I was “bad,” something negative would happen. Inquiry was limited to what I was doing to please God. Questioning the existence of His power was out of the question and, most definitely, God’s gender was unequivocally male. I was not alone in my interpretation of the world around me.

Being raised in the southern United States, most of the people I knew were situated within this epistemological frame and to deviate from it was considered tempting one’s fate, as God would become angry when He was questioned. Similarly, one did not question the authority of men, particularly your father, thus the patriarchal system of power is grounded deeply in the foundations of traditional religious structures where an omnipotent being gendered as male dominates those lesser creatures. For me and many of my peers, higher education was not promoted because of the dangers it posed to disrupting the existing way of life. College may lead to questions and questions may lead to abandoning one’s beliefs. Indeed, education beyond learning the basics of math, science, English, and spelling was quite threatening to the social structure of the working class south and I never planned on venturing beyond what I had come to know as the accepted way of life. My destiny seemed to be grounded in becoming a hard worker in the factory where my father was employed, finding a wife, raising a family, and perpetuating what had come to be the norm in the working class south. All was well until my sexual desires clashed with those that were acceptable and I discovered that I had to face an incredible internal struggle filled with shame that forced me to question the good/bad binary. Early on, my struggles were kept quietly in my own mind and I began

to amass many questions and (mis)conceptions about who I was and who I would become. I suffered silently and, as I dialogued with the people who participated in this study, I found that they too experienced an internal struggle which became a location for shame.

It is through a lens that reflects transformation with regard to both epistemological position and personal situation of myself in a more fluid and plural location that I approach and conduct this work. I chose methods that would allow me to move between, within, and beyond the notion of identity as a gay male. My position as researcher, knower, fellow southerner, gay brother, and friend to those who participated in this work remained in my sight as I interfaced with the people and, later, with the transcripts of what we said to each other as we talked about gayness, identity, gender, degradation and shame.

### **Methods**

For this work, following my goal to work toward being unbound by structure, I choose dialogue rather than a more traditional interview format because I hoped to create opportunities for mutual discovery as I conversed with the participants about constructing, maintaining, and disrupting gender and sexual identity and the effects of hegemony in *being* a gay man. More traditional approaches to research both quantitative and qualitative emphasize the role of the researcher as being keenly aware of introducing bias; thus, the researcher is encouraged to minimize interaction with the subjects, or at least to be very consistent with interactions. Often, the dynamic of power that exists between the researcher and the researched is minimized or ignored and, as a result, the

interaction tends to replicate a rather hierarchal structure with the researcher being “in charge” and the researched being subjugated (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Feminist approaches to research seek to disrupt hierarchal power and the patriarchal dynamic that often accompanies it. Following a feminist model, Lather (1991) suggests that dialogue opens spaces for reflexivity and engagement that blurs the boundaries between knower and known, where knowledge is generated through reciprocation. Thus, sharing our stories and engaging in reciprocal interpretative processes allows for the construction of new meanings and new knowledge. Annette Simmons (2007) asserts that story, through dialogue, helps us to reframe our experiences, which allows us to alter what we have accepted as objective fact. Simmons (2007) defines story as a process of (re)imagining experiences by drawing on details and emotions that allow the listener to engage in imagining the story as real. The power of story is its ability to enable a shift in meaning.

I used my stories and the stories of others to create the opportunity for dialogue, with the goal of surfacing knowledge through identifying and reframing meaning with regard to identity. While more traditional interviewing would reveal stories that may impact meaning, dialogue enables an engagement between me and others that will surface commonalities, differences, and potential shifts in meaning related to how identity is constructed, negotiated, maintained, and disrupted. Additionally, the impact of internalized shame is explored with particular attention given to the long term effects of social institutions that facilitate acts of harassment, persecution, and violence built upon actual or perceived sexuality and gender identity. The knowledge gained in the process described above contributes to the base and ongoing flow of understanding how gender

and sexual identity impacts individuals and groups psychologically, cognitively, politically, spiritually, and culturally. One of the most profound findings in this work was the fact that most of those who participated told me that they had never been asked to talk about their struggles with identity. It seems that silence may be the most oppressive aspect of identity formation and the act of opening spaces to dialogue about how one becomes and is one's self offers significant liberatory opportunities.

Indeed, if one considers current social and cultural discourse, the presence of dialogue about heretofore silent topics is quite liberating, transcending to the political. For example, the so-called transgender and trans-sexual communities are finding and exercising their voices along with those who do not fit into the biological male/female binary. As Maynes et al. (2008) point out, personal narratives are told within the context of historical discourse and the addition of voices from silent spaces shapes and reshapes history, society, politics and sociocultural structures. This work represents a continuing effort to deeply understand identity and the complex interaction of the self with the world as a location for identity formation, particularly regarding sexuality and gender as sites for internalized shame. Further, it is hoped that this work creates opportunities for the reader to engage with personal identity questions and identity concerns that reach into sociocultural and political spaces. Following Freire's (1998) notion of *praxis*, this work calls for understanding and action so that a more just and kind sociocultural environment might be enjoyed.

### **Process**

In order to engage in this project, I completed some preliminary reflexive work focused on my own experiences with identity dynamics. This deeply introspective effort surfaced areas of interest that became the basis for questions I posed to the participants in order to begin our dialogue. I also completed some preliminary research on the history of gay liberation and theoretical literature regarding sexual and gender identities. I decided to use a convenience and purposive sampling strategy as this seemed to fit with my desire to speak with males who, like me, were in their 30s or 40s; thus, their childhood or adolescent years occurred during or shortly after major historical incidents associated with gay liberation. I wanted to keep the sample small for this effort in order to efficiently manage the material, though I hope to expand the sample size as I continue this work beyond this dissertation.

Following university protocol, I completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application that included a consent form to be signed by participants. After receiving approval from the IRB, I began to identify potential participants and, rather quickly, found that several people were willing to become involved. I set up times to meet with people who were willing to participate and, after they consented according to the IRB plan, engaged in a dialogue with them which was audio recorded. As we spoke, I minimized note-taking; however, shortly after we completed our time together, I made several notes about content, process, and reflexive dynamics. I transcribed each interview and read the transcriptions as least two times, identifying commonalities, details, nuances, and differences. Several common themes emerged from the data and they

became the subheadings listed below which are used to organize the interactions I experienced. A discussion of the content and process of the work is woven into the presentation of quotes from the interactions I had with the participants. In the transcript note that the letter “J” represents comments and questions I made/asked and the other letters refer to the person with whom I was interacting.

### **Identifying As and Being Gay**

As Kendall and Martino (2006) point out, gay males and society at large have/has been and continue to be engaged in a discourse about what it means to be so-called gay. The people with whom I engaged in this project are illustrative of this discourse and, while there is some common ground, there are differences. Certainly, none of the participants came to claim or define gay in a manner that reflects supportive, loving, and accepting social environments and, as shall be explored, many of them experienced degradation from external and internal locations. The following excerpts are illustrative of how the participants remember claiming a gay identity.

M: My identity . . . I think I identified as gay back when I was about 14 or 15 in kind of that old adage that, Oh, I knew I was always different really applies, but my story, my identity, I perceive it as being different than a lot of my gay peers in that there were several gay members of my family, one of whom was my uncle D, my mom’s brother who died from AIDS at the age of 31—he was one of the first victims of the epidemic—and so “gay” was part of my vocabulary really from about the age of 9 or 10 when he first got sick . . .

M addresses his emotional and psychological response to identifying as gay. Note that despite having a supportive family M was very affected by his recognition of himself as gay, which he associated with being “different.”

M: . . . really I suffered from an immense depression at the age of 14 and wanted to drop out of school, my parents brought me to a psychologist and by the second session . . . he just looked at me and said, “Are you dealing with issues about sexuality?” and I burst into tears, and so I knew up until that point that I was “different” . . . different from my peers in that I never “fit in” but I never thought of myself as being gay, you know I knew that I was attracted to guys and certainly fantasized about some of my male friends but umm, but that was the first time that ever really said, oh my God, this is who I really am.

Below, M discusses his labiality of emotion ranging from relief to pain from claiming his sexuality and how it created tension and anxiety as he “came out” to his parents. Note the connection M makes between his current career path [social work] and his sense of despair.

M: . . . and it was like a weight was lifted from my shoulders and within a week or two my parents said ok if you want to drop out of school we will support you in that, going to an alternative school, so they came to my psychologist’s office and I really don’t think that the idea . . . certainly the idea wasn’t mine to tell my parents and it’s kind of like a dream now but it . . . it just came out and my parents said that they just wanted to know why I was so unhappy and I just looked at them and said, “I’m gay” and (pause) just cried . . . and cried and cried. So that’s when my identity started, when I started to identify as being gay.

M: . . . [reflecting on the time right after he “came out”] . . . I remember laying in my bed crying and looking at the ceiling and thinking that all I want is for somebody to tell me that everything is going to be ok and that is the majority of why I chose my profession. . . . even now when a gay client is referred to me those are the people I really want to help because that is all I ever wanted . . . to have somebody tell me it is going to be ok.

Similar to M, K makes a connection between his current career path as a human service professional and his coming out experience. K addresses how important it is to embrace difference through education but note that he is resistant to taking on personal responsibility to educate.

K: My struggle with accepting myself as gay was really about feeling that I was so different from everyone else. I think it is why it took me so long to come to terms with who I am. On a personal level I think that [accepting peoples' differences] is what helps . . . when we look at other people and can't accept their being different, that is one of the reasons we have wars . . . our inability to accept people's differences.

J: So what can "we" do to get to that place to embrace differences?

K: I think we have to do a better job . . . of educating but I don't mean formal . . . well actually I mean formal and informal . . . educating in the home and the school . . . but when so many people would interpret the message of "it's ok to be different" as "it's ok to be gay" . . . and I am talking about conservative circles . . . that would be connected . . . and that would be a barrier. I think we are closer as a society to saying it is ok to be gay . . . but we have a long way to go.

J: Do you have a personal responsibility to educate?

K: Well . . . I want to say no, but I know I do. (chuckles)

J: What would that mean for you if you did act on that responsibility?

K: I think being more open . . . at work . . . I mean people know I am gay, it is just not something that I do in . . . my work life and personal life are very separate.

Unlike M, who "came out" at a fairly young age, K and D's stories reflect a graduated process that may be more reflective of a common experience for males in this generation. Note that acts of degradation and harassment were a part of D's recognition that he was being identified as "different" and that he was also read as effeminate by peers. D gives some insight to a sense of abandonment and isolation that is often reported in coming out narratives (Sears, 1991).

K: Umm . . . I would say it [claiming gay as an identity] was a very gradual, actually a very long process for me, because it is not something that I accepted until probably I was in my late 20s before I did . . . I knew but I did not claim it.

D: Well, it has been a process over many years (laughs). I guess I first realized I was different and people didn't like me or accept me when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in Phys Ed. . . . and we left the safety of our little elementary school. See, there was this one person who started picking on my because I guess I was effeminate . . . he was relentless and when I saw him, I would go the other way. That didn't happen in elementary school or up until 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It is interesting that I was having a conversation recently with a guy whose son is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and is being picked on . . . for totally different reasons . . . and he told me that his son's friends

from elementary school were not standing up for him and I realized that happened to me . . . my friends from elementary were not there for me in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when all that [harassment] started. They pulled away and would not come to my defense.

Sexual desire at an early age appears to be significant with regard to identifying as gay even before there is a label for that desire (Sears, 1991). Below and congruent with my own narrative, participants address knowing their same-sex attraction before they knew what to call it. Additionally, K sheds light on the word “queer” as a derogatory label that was to be avoided.

D: Well, from a little boy on up I was fascinated with men (laughs). I mean I knew early in my life that I liked men . . . sexually.

J [to D]: Did you call that “gay?”

D: No . . . I didn’t know that word.

F: . . . I have always liked men [sexually] . . . probably when I was with my first “old man” [a reference used by many working class rural southern women to refer to their husbands] and my family wanted to know what was going on.

K: Well I knew when I was 6 or 7 that I liked boys . . . I didn’t know what that meant. . . . I was 12 or 13 when it finally clicked that I was looking at other boys and had feelings that I (he uses finger quotes) “should” have had about girls. Then as I went to school and got older, I knew that . . . I did start to know that it was “queer.”

M: When I remember having my first sexual feelings for guys . . . I was about 8 or 9 years old . . .

Clearly, the process of identifying as gay is unique to each person who struggles with sexual identity; however, the participants give insight to some commonness as they reveal emotional and social struggles that are similar, involving feelings of fear about being abandoned, isolation, and a sense of difference early on. A part of the coming out process seems to involve resistance to *being* gay and the participants illustrate this notion in the following passages (Kleinberg, 1980).

### **Resistance**

As the participants negotiate identifying as gay, they also seem to encounter internal resistance to fully claiming or participating in what is perceived to be gay. Note the references to internalized homophobia as addressed by Kendall and Martino (2006) and Bergling (2001). Also note that M addresses how acting sexually became a location for connecting to others and how he now resists that means of connection.

M: . . . that is what I have been trying to fight is that perception of gayness [flamboyant] because I think when we are that different it makes it easier for people to dislike us . . .

K: Well . . . there are still times that I am not open . . . let's put it that way. There are still certainly situations that I am not going in to be the person carrying the banner.

J: [to D] You still were not embracing gay even though you were identifying as gay?

D: Right . . . even though I was doing the things that gay people do I still wasn't . . . I had not fully immersed myself in it . . . I was not really gay . . .

M: . . . I spent a good part of my adolescence and my young adulthood trying to separate myself from gay people like my uncle [very open and flamboyant].

M: For me . . . I always felt so dejected . . . I couldn't relate to people . . . and what I found in young adulthood is that I could connect with people through sex, that I was desirable, guys craved my company and that is why so many of my friendships turned sexual . . . and I felt like that independent of sex I would not be as attractive so I used sex to for a connection to people . . . and I still fight that now . . . and the only reason I fight that is that I feel like it would destroy my relationship.

Homophobia, interpreted as a fear of homosexuals has emerged as one explanation for heterosexual resistance to the acceptance of those who engage in same-sex sexual behaviors and expression of sexual desires (Bergling, 2001). Here, M addresses so-called internalized homophobia which occurs as those who do not follow sexual norms grow up in a culture dominated by heterosexuality (Sears & Williams, 1977).

M: . . . what I am dealing with is my own homophobia, and my desire to separate myself from being gay or at least the stereotypes of gay and what I didn't realize was that by having so much homophobia directed inward that I did fit the stereotypes (laughing) and that seems so common . . .

M: . . . I always said that I didn't really like gay people . . . and now I see that as my own homophobia . . . even now I really don't have any "gay" friends. I don't like that. I wish I had more . . . but when I reach out . . . but I feel like it often gets reinterpreted as being sexually interested or if it is not reciprocated as soon as I think it should be, it feels like rejection and I am scared to death of rejection and those feelings are exactly the same as when I was 8 and people were calling me a fag because I didn't want to participate in field day in the school yard . . . so those feelings take me back to those days.

It becomes apparent that a central focus of resistance to gay identity involves particular perceptions of the so-called gay lifestyle. The participants address how they perceive the gay lifestyle to be defined both historically and currently.

### **Gay Lifestyle**

Butler (1996) suggests that as one "comes out" one may indeed be coming in to ongoing dominant structures that persist in naming what may be unnamable. For example, if one claims the identity of "gay," there is myriad of expectations about how one behaves (depending on the aspect of the particular community with whom one is identified) and how one engages with others who claim identities that are not congruent with one's own identity. As one attempts to express desires or actions that are not congruent with the chosen identity group, one may experience a loss of the interpersonal and/or political power that was gained by claiming that group's essential qualities. As stated earlier, Durkman coined what he called the gay gaze, asserting that when one identifies as gay, one begins to "see" through a particular lens that is influenced by the "gay" identity. Following Durkman's assertion, when one comes out as gay, one is

expected to see the world in particular ways according to how gayness is defined. Gay as an identity thus creates its own hegemony. The participants voice their perceptions of what it meant/means to be gay socially, sexually, and physically as they struggle to define “normal” in the gay community and point out that normal gayness opens spaces for more exclusion.

J [to M]: Is the gay life supposed to be exciting and stimulating?

M: Yea . . . and I am sad to say that . . . but when I reconnected on line with my first boyfriend he has this new adorable boyfriend and there all these pictures of them going to the club . . . still the drug, sex, rock and roll thing and that just never seemed to work for me.

M: . . . it [the gay lifestyle] is supposed to be free, fun, promiscuous . . .

K: [addressing the gay lifestyle] . . . you are supposed to be very into gay . . . and I am stereotyping . . . into gay rights . . . not that I oppose gay rights I am just not out there marching . . . very sociable . . . umm . . . you are supposed to party/socialize . . . have lots of “get togethers” . . .

K: Well, typically the “normal” gay person is very “fit” at least that is the norm . . . pretty . . . masculine depending on which gay community you are in . . . queen cliques . . . jock cliques

D: . . . so I thought, is this what this is all about [being gay]? I didn’t want that. You realize that it [short sexual encounters] is a part of the gay culture.

D: . . . no one was partnered . . . it was all about that . . . just dating or hooking-up . . . very sexual . . . so that was in college . . . .

D: . . . I guess I thought gays were abnormal and over the top . . . .

M: . . . I think that there is so much secrecy [associated with the gay lifestyle]. I mean I think we grow up feeling like we have to lie about who we are. I mean there are so many messages you get that you can’t turn off, I mean even now it is so nauseating.

Note that F defines “acceptable” gayness as being “normal.” For F, normal centers on how people engage in relationships. Note the “acceptable” heteronormative model he holds in esteem.

J [to F]: So for you, gay really means finding a life-partner and staying with that person in a very traditional sense of being married?

F: Oh yea . . . It is hard to understand why people can't be accepting—if you are in a relationship it is more acceptable because it looks more normal. It is the drag queens and the flamboyant part of being gay that is so negative and this makes society reject gays—this [flamboyance and feminized behavior] is abnormal while I don't condemn them it is just not normal.

F: . . . Most people think that gay people are all sissy and when gay people speak you expect to hear a high pitched voice with lots of hand gestures (wrists), eye contact (your eyes meet with a stranger's and you know are both gay), you walk girly (swinging hips), and you try to change your speech to sound "proper." For example, I met a guy at pottery and I knew he was gay because he "sounded" gay . . . I was confused when I found out he was married and had kids.

M addresses how the so-called gay community has distanced itself from other groups that are marginalized. Note his own distancing from sexual acts as part of defining gay and his identification with gender as integral to the discourse of what is "normal" with regard to *being* gay.

M: . . . what I grew up believing is that when people talk about gay they jump automatically to two guys having sex instead of the person, the feelings, the emotions, and that is what I feel like I have to shove down people's throats. I try to distance myself from sex being involved in the conversation but it is like the more you try to push it away the more it becomes involved.

M: . . . you know the gay community has essentially ostracized itself from other groups like transgender people . . .

M . . . there is so much stratification within the gay community. You know gays like me can be offended by those that are more stereotypical because they hurt our cause to prove to everybody that we [straight acting gays] are normal. And to them we are conformists . . . we are trying to be something that we are not and then we all separate ourselves from the transgender community because they are definitely hurting our cause, which is despicable, because it is all about issues of sexuality and gender and I think that is a fundamental issues with homophobia . . . breaking these perceived gender norms . . . when it really comes down to it is about what it means to be a man or a woman . . .

As Bergling (2001) asserts, gender norms and expectations are linked with sexuality and this creates a very complex dynamic with regard to how sexualities are defined and

represented. The participants discuss the connection between sexuality and gender and confirm that there is indeed an inextricable relationship between and among them.

### Gender

Gender roles and behaviors as defined within a traditional context seem to be closely intertwined with what is does and does not mean to *be* gay. Gender, having been separated from so-called biological sex in the early twentieth century is a very complex concept that fuels much discourse (Tarrant, 2006). Traditional gender roles usually follow a very binarial construction that is defined as “masculine” and “feminine” with particular emotions and behaviors associated with each. Generally, traditional gender roles define the masculine as rational and strong, with the feminine being defined as emotional and vulnerable. The participants address their experiences with gender expectations and identify locations for shame as a result of being in the borderlands of traditional gender roles.

J [to D]: Did you equate that [feeling bad about being gay] with being feminine? “Girly?” Was [the gender issue] the bad thing or was it the sex piece?

D: yes [the gender issue—being effeminate was the bad piece] . . . and . . . I felt a lot of guilt with the sex piece . . .

D: . . . I guess the effeminate part comes to mind . . . “sissiness” . . . I would stay away from that . . . even when I was a new teacher I would veer away from a student or anyone who seemed effeminate . . . It was so I would not be suspected . . . I have always had a problem with that . . .

F: . . . I tried to be more masculine and knew no one that was effeminate—my partner [first male/male relationship] was very masculine. I knew that “gay” was associated with being feminine. He wanted a “buddy” not a wife—we were supposed to be bachelors living together.

F: . . . My second relationship was very straight [I functioned as his wife] and he did not want a “sissy” partner—he avoided sissy at all costs so I could not be sissy. He told people that I was his son. In fact, we raised his grandson and told him [the grandson] that I was his father when, in fact, I was acting in the role of being his mother.

K: When I was a kid, I would . . . I tried to be aware if I was doing anything that was considered “girly.” I tried to be good at sports . . . although I was only adequate . . . I tried to not walk a certain way . . . I can remember one time going bowling with a family member . . . and I can remember bowling the ball and when I turned around, the people I was with were laughing and talking about how I looked like a girl when I threw the ball . . . and I can remember the rest of that night being aware of that and trying to be as masculine as I could be, not knowing if it was working.

D: [reflecting on how he is “sissy”] Well . . . the way I walked and talked . . . my mannerisms . . . my hand movements . . . I could be athletic [D played basketball] . . . I didn’t realize I was effeminate . . . that was just me and I didn’t realize why people were picking on me.

D: . . . It was really about the behavior of being sissy that I was ashamed of . . . how I acted.

The participants address how they learned about gender expectations. Note that they had referenced being “real” men in the conversations, which echoes Kendall and Martino (2006) as they assert clear definitions of “real” masculinity as being a location both for inclusion and exclusion in the gay community.

J [to D]: So, how did you learn what a real man was or is?

D: Well, probably from 1 year old . . . eat it all . . . be a big boy . . . eat those beans so you will be strong . . . I guess from that . . . and I don’t even know that you realize that is going on . . . it is just there . . . I guess I tried to comply with that version of masculinity and I still do . . . being strong, having muscles . . .

J [to D]: So name what is masculine to you.

D: Well, not feminine . . . rugged . . . not measly, withdrawn, timid, shy . . . you know you have to be the Marlboro man . . . robust and independent. And they don’t sound like me (laughs) . . . they aren’t girly.

J: So how do men sound?

D: Deep voices, rugged. You know I didn’t realize until I heard myself on tape and I was shocked to hear that I sounded effeminate.

J: Do you feel ashamed of that?

D: Yes, I was ashamed of the way I talked and looked . . . how I walked and acted [implying effeminate behavior] because I was not living up to what I was supposed to be . . . how I was supposed to be. That is a realization . . . maybe I am a prissy acting man . . . I was not who I thought I was . . . I thought I was a man . . . but I realized I am sissy acting.

F: . . . Real men do not sound or act gay (effeminate). Sometimes, when two men are seen together if one or both have any effeminate qualities, they are read as gay . . .

J [to K]: Well you said earlier that you were afraid of being “sissy.” Is that still a part of what gay is . . . effeminate men?

K: I don’t think as much for me or society as it used to be . . . I have had the opportunity to meet very masculine gay men and I have seen very masculine gay men on TV and in movies, but I have not seen a lot of feminine “straight” men.

M addresses influences on his definitions of masculinity. Note that he constructed masculinity within the context of knowing his uncle who he describes as flamboyant and “over-the-top.”

M: . . . I never questioned my gender . . . but I also found myself as feeling that I had to prove my manliness and even now I am ridiculously competitive but only with other guys . . . it is like I have to prove to them that I am just as much of a man or more so than they are . . . but it has always been one of those parts of me . . . other than the fact that I have to try harder to be a man.

J [to M]: Your image of your uncle, was he a man?

M: No (shaking his head).

J [to M]: So he was not a man?

M: (smiling) No . . . it is not until today that I have ever really thought about how much he influenced . . . when you asked that question that is the first thing that popped in my mind that he was not a man . . . and he was of course . . .

J[to M]: He was a man in a different way from you . . . you are much more . . .

M: Straight (he chuckles)

J[to M]: Yes . . . he was much more “gay” . . . and that scared you?

M: yes . . . and he died so that was even more frightening . . . you know one of my few gay friends now who reminds me of uncle D [referring to flamboyance] . . . I respect him but I wouldn’t have 10 years ago . . . I respect him for being who he is/was . . . which is a change for me . . .

Within the context of claiming sexuality and negotiating its link to gender, there are many opportunities to experience degradation and, as a result, shame. Not being masculine enough seems to resonate with the participants as a location for degradation

and there are certainly others. Next, I will address degradation and its link to shame and will then offer examples of how actions and emotions affect the lived experience.

### **Degradation and Shame**

Acts of degradation can be and are rather ambiguous and, if considered from an existential perspective, are relative to the person's experience with them. Sears (1991), Blount and Anahita (2004), and others have pointed out the presence of acts that may be defined as harassing and/or persecutory with regard to the lives of people who are perceived to be or claim to be gay. Indeed, my own life represents experiences with acts that I perceive to be degrading and relative to my experiences with internalized shame. If one examines the word degradation, it is evident that there is some reference to a system that reflects particular grades or levels of functioning. How one functions is often measured with regard to particular standards and practices as is evident in schooling and other situations where one is held to levels or grades that usually range from extremely poor to extremely superior. If one "makes the grade" rewards of some sort typically follow. Thus, to be degraded implies that one has either not met the expectation or that one has fallen below standard. I contend that it is the sense of being substandard that is often a location for external and internal shame; so, for the male who identifies as gay, experiences that connote a "substandard" performance are read as shameful and, as the participants in this work illustrate, become arduous and, in some cases, a source of interpersonal strength in the negotiation and maintenance of identities. Following are excerpts from conversations that point toward experiences with degradation and shame.

### *Engaging in Same-Sex Sex Acts*

K: I had my first adult sexual experience with another man at 22-23 and even then I felt really ashamed afterwards.

D [reflecting on having sex with men]: . . . I let my parents down because I did not do the “normal” thing.

D: . . . I guess that the quick [sexual] encounter gives you a way to be secret. If you have a relationship with another man then people will know . . . and that is the ultimate thing you want to avoid . . . so I guess there is shame that keeps you from seeking out long-term relationships. It is important to keep it [gayness] secret. If people know then you are a bad person. Wow, this is a lot of insight (laughs).

J [to K]: So you had sexual experiences before that [adulthood]?

K: yea . . . as a kid playing around . . . with a neighbor who was probably 16 when I was 7 or 8.

J: Was there shame with those experiences?

K: Yea . . . they were private . . . secret . . . I did not want anyone else to know but it was something that I enjoyed.

J: Was it “abnormal?”

K: Yea . . . it was, in my mind [it was] abnormal . . . something that I should not be doing.

J: So how did liking it affect you?

K: Well, that really screws with your head . . . to like something that you are not supposed to be doing . . . so, oh god . . . there was so much shame.

### *Coming Out as Degrading and Shameful*

D . . . I was 28 years old and I admitted it [that I was gay] to myself . . . I knew several other men who were married and living a double life and I thought I am not going to do that to someone . . . that is when my mom asked the first time did I really like women . . . Shortly after that I met a guy who ended up being my lover/sex partner. Still then, we lived separately and I did not tell anyone about “us” because I was ashamed of really being gay.

J [to D]: You know it is interesting to hear you talk about the “double life” because when I was in college, I dated a girl on a fairly regular basis but also had boyfriends whom I saw on weekends. I knew I was gay and thought that it was “ok” but like you, I found some safety in having the girlfriend.

D: Yea . . . there was definitely a sense of safety in having the girlfriend . . . I guess I could at least seem to be normal.

M: . . . when my psychologist said, “Are you having questions about your sexuality?” That was the first time I really felt shame like until . . . until that point

I was very sad and it was like this weight was sitting on my chest, and it didn't feel like shame or anger or anything except smothering . . .

M: . . . I was embarrassed that I was so ashamed [when a co-worker saw Facebook and discovered M was married to a man], that I am ashamed of my shame you know with all the things I am doing with my personal life, you know . . . why didn't I just tell him, Yea I am married to a guy named C, but sometimes the shame, the secrecy just comes so naturally that it happens and I stop and think, why do I feel so ashamed of this, why am I so secretive? It is so engrained and that bothers me.

D: When I finally came out, I guess I did think it [same sex sexual desires and being "effeminate"] was bad . . . I got that message from friends at school and church I guess.

D: There is shame in not doing the normal thing by having a wife and children, there is shame in being with another man sexually, there is shame about thinking that I have let my parents down . . . that I did not turn out to be what they wanted me to be . . . now my mama has asked twice about whether or not I liked women and I could not tell her the truth . . . daddy never mentioned it at all . . . and I wonder if he was ashamed and embarrassed at times . . . maybe he got over that . . . I never mentioned it because I was ashamed of it. I have only told one of my sisters but I know my family knows it but I am too ashamed to talk about it . . . I guess you get to a point of why even say it . . . will it cause problems? It might embarrass them or make them feel a certain way . . . I think I am really protecting myself . . .

D: [because I was/am gay] . . . I didn't deserve a relationship . . . I was not worthy . . . maybe that is why it took me so long to find one . . . I was less than everybody else.

K: Well . . . I won't say that I am healed of shame . . . when you grow up with all that shame things still pop up and sometimes I find myself saying, "Damn! Was I a big woman when I said that?" So all those years of that being "wrong" are still there . . .

There are other spaces that become locations for degradation including the social institutions of church/religion, and schools. Below, the participants address their experiences in these arenas. I have divided their discussion into two areas; church and religion, and schools and education. As reflected in this work, the literature identifies these social institutions as primary sites for bullying, harassment, and persecution of those who are deemed sexually and gender non-conformists (Rofes, 2004).

### *Church and Religion*

D: . . . I knew I was different and I knew from church that I was not supposed to like boys . . . but then, there was a comfort in that because I was not having sex with girls so I was not committing a sin . . . that would have been worse . . . but I was ashamed of liking boys sexually so I kept it a secret.

K: Because of my being raised in a very religious family . . . it [being gay] was something that I fought and denied . . . I can remember actually praying that when I laid down at night that I would not wake up feeling the same way. It was a fear thing for me because of my religious upbringing . . . I was fearful of eternal damnation . . . that was . . . fear for eternal damnation, it was fear of rejection . . . if people know this about me they won't like me . . .

D: But you know I guess the church has an influence on my thoughts about this [marriage] because it was drilled in me that it was a man and a woman . . . marriage that is . . . .

J: [to K] Do you think that at that time shame was a part of your reaction to this [religious pressure]? Was it there at all?

K: Oh yea . . . it [church] was a major part . . . and there are still moments of shame . . . when you are raised in a fundamentalist environment . . . there are still moments.

J: And is that shame about . . . what?

K: I guess shame about not being so-called "normal."

J: So being "abnormal" then . . . would you use that word?

K: Yea.

M, who identifies as Jewish, reflects on his experience with religion, degradation, and shame within what some may perceive to be a more "accepting" faith tradition.

J: [to M] You alluded to religion and its role, can you speak to that a bit and, are there locations for shame there?

M: Yea . . . well I'm Jewish, and my family was very secular and we started out living in New York and we moved here when I was about 4 . . . I mean I remember having a Christmas tree when I was young and it was very Americanized and it is, I mean it's come to be commercial unfortunately and then, I don't remember exactly when but something changed within my family and we stopped having a Christmas tree and we only had a Menorah . . . and we started going to Synagogue. I have always felt very connected to my religion . . . I mean I had my Bar Mitzvah at 13 and I was confirmed at 15 and I had close friends who were Jewish who were my best friends and we saw each other at Sunday school. I called it my "Sunday depression" because I knew that it would be a week before I

saw my Jewish friends again because we were so close and it was this total like Breakfast Club type misfit group of us with nothing in common except being Jewish and we were the best of friends. But really my kind of distaste did not come until more in my 20s when I started to let go of some of my own homophobia and I started to see just how much homophobia was ingrained in our society . . . and I started to pick out things that we very heterocentric . . . so much of what we read [as Jews] talks about how important it is to be fruitful and multiply and to have lots of little Jewish babies and you know . . . picking out all these heterosexual relationships and I felt very rejected and left out. The last time I went to synagogue was in my mid 20s and I was home from college and my mom wanted the family to be there . . . so we went and the passage from the Torah was the one from Leviticus about man lying with man and I remember sitting there and thinking that I don't ever want to come back here. I had a conversation with the Rabbi about how I felt so rejected and I get a response about how this is an old religion and it [some of the commands] were very functional . . . but I felt so ostracized and degraded and nobody could seem to understand . . . I mean they rationalized . . . but nobody said that they were ashamed of this piece of our liturgy and that it was hurtful. I never got that from anybody and even now I feel very conflicted about raising my child in that atmosphere . . . I mean I feel very connected to my family around traditions but I never want to explain to my child that our family [meaning 2 gay dads] is wrong. J: [to M] So, if you have to choose, you are probably going to choose not to participate in your religion in order to avoid tension about your family [2 gay dads]?

M: I think there are going to be plenty of opportunities where we [my family] will have to face it . . . we want our type of family to be part of our child's vocabulary and not feel like they are in a family that is so different. I can't see choosing to do something where you have to fight a battle. Some of that my just be my conflict . . .

Negotiating how to *be* gay with religion is a challenge for participants as noted below.

M: . . . but religiously, all I want to do is run away. When you are gay, even your inner most circle is different from you . . . being Jewish, not only do I have to fight the homophobia but also the anti-Semitism and it is almost like I don't have the energy to battle on so many fronts.

K: Well literally I tried to pray them away [feelings of attraction to males]. I remember playing head games with my self . . . I can remember masturbating thinking of other boys and being so ashamed of what I had done and saying to myself . . . I will never do that again . . . never again. So I would play these mind games to try to convince myself that that was not who I was.

K identifies a link between religion and gender expectations that reflects what Jennings (2006), Sessums (2007), and Sears (1991) all point out; that religion, southern culture, gender, and sexuality are intertwined.

J: [to K] Do you think that the culture you grew up in taught you about masculinity?

K: Do you mean religion?

J: [to K] Well yes, and the values and beliefs of the “small town” in the South.

K: Well yea . . . sure . . . especially the church piece . . .

J: [to K] Would you say that the preacher preached about how to be a man or was it more modeling . . . unspoken?

K: Yes . . . unspoken . . . and now that you say that I remember . . . I was probably 13 or 14 years old and one day, you know when you walked out of church you shook hands with the preacher and I shook his hand and he said, “Wait a minute. This is how you need to shake hands. Put some firmness in it.” Because obviously my shake was too weak so he was demonstrating how to shake like a man.

J; [to K] Was there shame?

K: Yes . . . because he was indirectly saying to me, “You are shaking hands like a girl.” And although he did not say that directly, that is what it felt like.

### ***Schooling and Education***

In 2007, because of rising public concern and focus about school bullying and hate crimes, the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* dedicated an entire issue to scholarly enquiry regarding harassment and persecution at school of those who are perceived to be or who claim to be sexually different. While school bullying is nothing new, particular concerns that include life-threatening situations exist for those students who are targeted because of actual or perceived sexual or gender difference. Reiterating my own experiences, the participants in this work confirm that an early location for receiving the message, “shame on you!” was within the confines of school. Note the psychological turmoil, isolation, sense of exclusion, and anxiety that is voiced here.

D: [recalling his encounter with being perceived as gay] . . . What I heard in 9<sup>th</sup> grade was “sissy” or “prissy.” I knew that this was not something good.

M: . . . I remember in about 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I remember just being made fun of a lot by the other kids . . . I never felt like I connected with the other kids and from a very young age I remember being called “fag” and “queer” at school, which was so hurtful . . .

J [to M]: When the kids called you names in school, what emotionally happened?

M: I shut off . . . totally shut off . . . at school, socially, interacting with other kids I felt friendless . . . I felt utterly undesirable, I mean it was a struggle every single day, I mean starting in probably first or second grade I have these memories of being made fun of and my reaction was to just shut it out, I mean I was just miserable and I mean . . . it came out in a lot of other ways . . . I had stomach problems, I would not go to the bathroom at school because I was afraid of being beaten up, though it never happened that still has never happened, getting beaten up, but that fear was there . . . I was so afraid of that . . . I had a horrible school phobia, once in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and again in 5<sup>th</sup> grade . . . it was . . . I would try to jump from my parent’s moving car on the way to school and the principal would have to restrain me to keep me from bolting from school and, as an adult talking about it with my parents, my parents were always afraid that I was being abused or something like that . . .

J [to K]: The school experience . . . did you get picked on in school?

K: I went to a very small elementary and middle school and I don’t remember getting picked on there . . . I always tried to be the class clown . . . the one people liked . . . you know, get people to like you . . . get people to like you . . . but yea, in high school I remember being called a sissy and being picked on. That is when I really knew that I had to be invisible. I was afraid.

K: Yea . . . I remember another instance in 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I threw a softball to this guy who was a “jock” and he said, “You don’t need to throw it like that, you need to throw it like this.” And he demonstrated for me and he said because when you throw it the way you just did you look like a girl. But as I look back on that he seemed to say it not in a mean way, but almost in a protective way . . . because he did not want me to look like that [a girl].

### ***Gym Class as a Location for Knowing Sexual Desire and Feeling Shame***

J [to K]: A lot of times gym class is a location for that kind of stuff [harassment] . . . that was true for me and I wonder, is that true for you?

K: Umm . . . I don’t remember getting picked on during gym but I remember going into the locker room and being ashamed of what I was liking . . . I remember carefully looking around at the other guys and going, “damn!” but at the same time being ashamed of what I was liking. I knew that I had to be very straight, especially in gym.

K: [referring to his presence in the locker room at school] Oh god . . . I tried to be a Knat! Even though my eyes wanted to look around and they did, god forbid that anyone catch me so yes . . . I wanted to be invisible in there.

D: Well . . . I dreaded showers in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I guess all boys who are not (laughs) well endowed do. You know, if you have it to show off I guess you want to but if you don't, there is a lot of shame there. There was a lot of looking . . . from all the guys. I dreaded that part [being exposed to other males] but I did it. I sort of compartmentalized my sexual desire and would not allow myself to think sexually.

M recounts an incident in school shortly after “coming out” where he seems to have had enough with regard to thinking he was being degraded by a teacher. The participants in Downs’ (2007) work share similar experiences of finding within themselves resistance toward oppression.

M: You know in 10<sup>th</sup> grade I told a teacher to “go fuck herself” and got suspended, which was not like me. You know I get so worked up anytime anybody challenges any idea that I have about being gay or how ok it is to be gay. M: You know it is not good to cuss out your teacher but it was liberating and it felt like that for the first time I was saying it is not ok to treat me badly and, to this day, I am proud that I cussed her out (laughing) it was one of the few times in my life that I really stood up for myself . . . I mean it was not like a random “fuck you” . . . in that period I mean it was only about a week or two between when I realized I was gay until I came out to my parents . . .

Interestingly, F said that he did not think he was picked on in school about being gay. I asked him how he managed to avoid that and he responded. His comments suggest that if one can “pass” as straight, then harassment may be avoided. Apparently, the key to passing is to avoid being effeminate. Note that F is clear about particular precautions he takes to avoid being read as gay.

F: I seemed to always adapt . . . especially to my “redneck” surroundings. Even now at work, I just act like all the other guys and no one seems to ever think that I

am gay. I mean, it would not bother me if they knew. I am just “normal” I guess. Not sissy. I avoid wearing my “gay” glasses at work [referring to his eye glasses] in order to not be read as gay, jewelry brings attention to me and I avoid it [wearing jewelry]. I would not wear a pinky ring because a pinky ring is definitely read as gay.

The participants confirm what the literature suggests; school is a key location for harassment and persecution for those who claim to be or are perceived to be sexually non-conformist. The literature and many of the comments suggests that how one presents socially is vital to how one is perceived; thus, one may have some agency in being read in particular ways. It seems that the pressure to conform to dominant expectations is great as illustrated in the excerpts that follow. Rasmussen et al. (2004) assert that “Normative frameworks, including heteronormative frameworks, are the scaffolding that holds in place an entire system of power and privilege that endeavors to regulate young people, people of color, queers, and women to the symbolic fringes of society” (p. 3). Note how the participants struggle with negotiating “normal.” I believe that it is within the dialectic of normal that opportunity for internalizing shame finds a foothold.

### ***Social Presence and Presentation***

F: . . . I think it is ok to push the limits [referring to flamboyant people] but it should be done in moderation—you have to do it slowly—I think most of America is more accepting of gay than they used to be because people are not as afraid to be gay like they used to be.

F: . . . It is just like my redneck, Harley rider neighbor, who seems to be accepting of me and my partner even though we have not said anything to him about gayness. I am not sure how he would react if my partner and I were to kiss in front of him. I guess that society in general is more accepting and I think that my partner and I are more “normal” acting (F pauses here and seems to be thinking about what he just said)—I hate to say that because I guess you can have bigots in your own group—but I think that it is because we act “normal” that we are not judged.

F: . . . I would like to think that [my normalcy] has changed people's perceptions of how gay people are [meaning that people mostly think of gays as flamboyant and sissy]. If people could just see that I have a "normal" relationship, they would not be so judgmental.

M: . . . I think it is so important to be out because it is difficult for people to hate us when they know us and I feel like my silence feeds that homophobia. I am now very open about my sexuality and I used to say that being gay is not the most important thing about who I am and being gay influences almost every single aspect of my life and it plays a role in shaping who I am, but when people talk about their feelings about gay adoption or gay marriage . . . that when they see me it makes it more difficult for them to be bigoted. So being opened has impacted the shame I felt.

J: [to K] So "straightness" is very much associated with masculinity. So a gay man who is very masculine appears "straight?"

K: Yes.

J: So for you, has there been pressure to aspire to "straightness?"

K: There was at a certain time but I realized at a certain time . . . but I realized (laughing) that there was only so far I could stretch it . . . and while I may not be the biggest flaming queen, I promise that I could back up that recorder and listen to my voice and say, "oh my god, listen to that queer!" (laughing again).

J: [to K] Even now, even though you have abandoned your attempt to be "masculine" are there times when you feel the pressure to be more masculine?

K: Yes . . . typically work related . . . not that I feel that I have to be a different person . . . but I just can't go in a "girl" it up . . . that is not, in my mind, something that I can do.

J: So you still find that it is important to be a "man" in certain spaces?

K: Yes, as masculine as one can be.

Shame is present when in the company of a male who is read as flamboyantly effeminate—a so-called flaming queen. Note that shame associated with this experience is multifaceted and includes homophobia or, as Bergling (2001) would say, "sissyphobia."

J: [to K] So let me ask you, sometimes when I am around someone in a public space who is being real "fem" I have a sense of shame or embarrassment and I want to distance myself from them . . . and I know that is a shame based thing . . . does that happen to you?

K: Yes . . . and when I do that, then, I feel ashamed of being ashamed of them.

J: So it is a double whammy then?

K: Yes. I am ashamed because I want to get away from them and I am ashamed that I am ashamed of them . . . so it is the old and the new clashing.

J: yep . . . that is when I am really aware of what I call my own homophobia . . .

K: Oh yea . . . especially when it is a real public space and it is obvious that the person knows you . . . I have wanted to crawl under a rock or hid and then, again, feeling ashamed for feeling that way.

M is currently married to another male and is planning to adopt. He admits that this is a very heteronormatively based life choice and, despite his sense of being socially perceived as “normal,” he recently encountered an opportunity for shame.

M: . . . but my aunt, my mom’s sister, uncle D’s sister has also been so cool even though she has lived a very Southern life . . . she said to me the other day, “Do you think it is fair to bring a child into a gay relationship where it is going to be hard on that child?” I mean, I didn’t even know what to say, I mean I was so hurt . . . like I felt ashamed about what we were trying to do and, for the first time ever did I feel ashamed about that . . . and it really damaged our relationship and that saddens me . . .

During the conversations, M and K brought up their sense of how gayness has played a role in how they have lived their lives in terms of being perceived as socially and financially successful and motivated for achievement . . . in other words, they addressed the question, “have you had to make up for gayness in your life?” Note that career goals and caretaking are factors in “making up” for being gay. There are also parallels to concerns expressed by those who are considered racial minorities in terms of having to work twice as hard to be “successful.”

K: I would say . . . maybe that [compensating for being gay] is a natural thing [for gay guys] . . . I always wanted to be liked so you have to . . . early in my life I made people laugh to get them to like me . . . that was what I did . . . and, as I got older, it became more career related . . . if I can achieve a certain career goal I can deflect . . . or make up for “gayness.” I think that part of what drives me is being a

male too. You know, men have to be successful so gay men have to be doubly successful.

M: I have this overwhelming sense of responsibility to prove myself to my family and to others . . . I have to try harder . . . I feel like my role is to take care of my immediate family . . . when they get sick they come to me . . . they come to me for financial help . . . and I feel like especially with my parents, that on some level that I have to make up for the fact that I am gay.

In addition to social stature, a central social means of being perceived as “normal” relates to how one engages in relationships with others, particularly intimate relationships.

Currently in America, there is a heated debate about legalizing gay marriage (Eskridge & Spedale, 2006). The participants and I addressed gay marriage in our dialogue and what follows illustrates how partnerships and marriage are perceived and, I assert, influenced by dominant heteronormative models of relationships.

### ***Marriage/Partnerships***

Traditional heteronormative models of relationships seem to be very central in gay identity according to the participants and the tension this creates personally becomes evident as they discuss where relationships fit with individual identity. Note the thread of shame that weaves itself through this area of so-called gay life.

D: [speaking about his current relationship with F] . . . we are not, could not be husband and wife . . . we were men . . . we were a couple but, I don't think I have ever thought of it as a woman and man . . . gay relationships had less value than straight relationships . . . because of my shame and guilt about it . . . that would explain why I kept going to church and singing in the choir . . . nobody knew about this other side . . . I would not tell anyone I was seeing a man . . . I was still testing the gay waters as I met friends who were gay [through theater] . . . I was only petting the duck . . . I was not a duck (laughs).

D: I felt good about it [my first gay relationship] but you know, we were still two men . . . not as good as a man and woman but I loved him and this what counted . . . I think even today that the legality of marriage is what makes it different for me today . . . you know you can get married now in some states and I am for that .

. . . You know, F [D's partner who is in the room during this conversation] looks at our relationship as more like a straight relationship and I don't see it that way . . . he is not my wife . . . he is another man and we share our lives . . . .

F: [responding to D] . . . he is not willing to become one like you should in a relationship . . .

J: [to F] So your view of a relationship is that two people come together as one with one being more dominant over the other?

F: Yes . . . that is what a marriage is . . . you become one and work together to make a life and a family . . . that is what I have always wanted . . . a man to take care of me and I would take care of him.

J: So F you see relationships, even gay ones, in a very traditional manner . . . very traditional and "straight?"

F: Well, I guess so . . . and I am not sure that D's view will ever change . . . he will see it as separate . . . two separate men living together . . . .

D: Well, I have always thought that men should have the legal rights of regular marriage but should we call it "marriage?"

F: . . . I still think, at its core, being gay means that two men have a relationship and build a life together and grow old together.

F elaborates on how important relationship is to being fulfilled as a gay male. Note that F expresses concern about people who are not partnered and believes that they are not happy. Also pay attention to how central being partnered is to F's perception of gay identity.

F: . . . I wish that all gay men could find somebody and be "happily married" because I don't think you are happy until you are partnered. I have never lived by myself. I think you need to live in the same household and sleep together . . . people should be with each other—sit with each other—go to bed at the same time—eat together . . . . A gay lifestyle is being with other men—living with a partner—I know people are "gay" without being partnered but I am not sure how that are content by themselves. People who don't fit into the gay lifestyle are searching for their identities and they are kind of lost—not really free—they can't be truly happy.

F: . . . It seems that it is almost "exciting" in a way for them [people who claim a gay identity] to say they are gay even though they may not be—they just want to be different. You can say you are gay and it doesn't mean anything but when you can acknowledge that you have a partner . . . that is a bigger step—being with a partner is what makes you gay.

Eskridge and Spedale (2006) point out that the movement toward so-called gay marriage is fueled by the liberal equality principle and there are radical voices on the rise that call into question the replication of the heteronormatively based model of traditional marriage. I propose that many gay males have become subjugated to dominant relationship paradigms, which acts as oppressive and promotes locations for shame if one does not or cannot conform to those models. As mentioned above, M is now married to another male and they are taking the necessary steps to adopt a child. My dialogue with M illustrates how heteronormative marriage paradigms permeate his efforts to be “normal.”

J: [to M regarding his recent marriage] So you are doing what you are supposed to do in our society . . . so I wonder what your thoughts are about your . . . I will use these words to spark your reaction “heteronormative gay lifestyle.”

M: Yea . . . I have always pictured myself . . . before I came out . . . as getting married to a woman and having the white picket fence and the 2.5 children and when I came out, the only thing that changes was that the bride was plucked off the wedding cake and replaced by another groom (J laughs) so it feels perfectly normal to me and I think most of it is driven by my desire to have a child . . . that I want a child . . . that I want my child to be raised by two loving parents.

M: . . . sometimes I feel like I am living these norms that I don't have to live . . . .I mean our wedding ceremony could have been very traditional but we chose something that did not feel so “icky” and weird . . . so we decided to go to Cape Cod and take advantage of the out-of-state couple allowance for same-sex couples to get married. I felt like we were not emulating anyone else . . . it was our thing . . . that felt like we were trailblazers because we were one of the first out-of-state couples to take advantage of that law and it felt like we were doing our part for the civil rights movement and that was very meaningful to us.

D addresses his thoughts about marriage and relationships as related to gay identity. Note that D does not believe that legalizing gay marriage is the answer to ending his sense of shame. Much of the argument for gay marriage is to continue to move gays into

mainstream society; yet, D makes the point that just because something or someone is brought out of the margins, there are no guarantees that those who have been marginalized will simply feel better.

J: [to D] So what is gay for you now? What is the gay identity and is there anything beyond it?

D: For me it might be the legality of the gay marriage . . . because that really does stifle a gay couple.

J: If marriage was legalized, would that take away any of the shame?

D: No . . . my shame is from way back and I don't even realize where it has all come from . . . it has been there my whole life . . . ashamed that I let someone down . . . you know mama and daddy were prominent figures in the church and how would that [a gay son] look? There is a seed growing there and I can't seem to kill that seed . . . that is why I can't come out and tell everybody . . .

Currently, marriage seems to be the defining issue for gay liberation and, as we have seen in the past, having an issue that creates unity becomes necessary in the push and pull of power. Addressing aspects of power and its presence in sexual and gender identity, Fuss (1989), Foucault (1978), and Butler (1990) all point out that when a particular act or desire is named and/or categorized not only is it marginal, it is also made powerful as it takes on an essence that is used politically by those who claim it. Certainly marriage has become central in current politics and will likely continue to occupy its position. Of course a consequence of essence is exclusivity. An example of how exclusiveness follows essence is the current expectation that all gays and anyone who claims liberal politics are supportive of gay marriage when, as Eskridge and Spedale (2006) point out, there are other voices in the discourse. Prior to gay marriage, another issue claimed the gay liberation spotlight.

### **Impact of HIV/AIDS**

Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) came upon the scene in the 1980s uniting the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/etc. community. Post-Stonewall, the AIDS epidemic was central in renewed efforts to press for sexual liberation. The life and death nature of the disease and the accusations from the right about AIDS being a natural consequence in the gay community once again galvanized the sexually oppressed community with lesbians, gay men, transgendered people, bisexuals, and others working to bring attention to the plight of the victims of AIDS and those who were sexually oppressed. The conservatism of the Regan administration was just what the sexually oppressed community needed to propel itself into action, and 1987 saw over 500,000 people converge on Washington, D. C. in protest. Additionally, ACT UP was founded in the same year, bringing a new militancy to the liberation movement with direct confrontations toward politically conservative individuals and groups. Three of the participants in this work addressed the impact of AIDS on their lives. Note the incredible fear associated with HIV/AIDS and how it operated/operates in the lived experience of the participants.

M: . . . so much of my identity was wrapped up in fear that I was going to die of AIDS because as I was coming into my identity, so much of it was shaped by my uncle and even, well I'm 33 now and when I turned 31, it was a horrible, horrible birthday because that was how old uncle D was when he died, and, growing up, from the time that I came out, through that year, it was almost inconceivable to me that I would live past the age of 31. I just never, it was the most bizarre thing and I didn't really appreciate that until I turned 32 and that birthday, it was a year and a half ago, I just stopped and said, "oh my god! (laughing) . . . I passed him, I outlived him and it was never a conscious thing, you know it was never like I am going to die, but once I outlived how long he lived, it was like a whole new world was opened.

M: . . . you know I came into being gay at the very height of the AIDS epidemic and you know, even now, I mean, I am scared to death of getting HIV and I mean the kids that I work with . . . I still see it [gay] as meaning that I am going to die and I think that now it is seem more as a chronic illness, but, you know so much of my identity is intertwined in that fear of getting AIDS and (pause) that fear of being my uncle.

M: When we first found out he [uncle] was sick [with AIDS] it was still in the era when nurses and doctors would not touch you, I mean they would drop your food off and slide the try to you to avoid touching you and I remember my mom telling people that he had cancer instead of AIDS . . . this was very scary for me.

. . . when he really got sick—he had moved in with my grandparents in Charlotte—a local TV station documented the end of his life as a series and he did all of this public service stuff to educate the public, he and my grandfather [his father] appeared on the Oprah Winfery show back when it was first on the air about gay men and their relationships with their fathers and then the diagnosis of AIDS, and so he really was a trailblazer and, at the same time, I really sort of resented gay people who went against my cause . . . my cause being that I wanted gay people to be seen as “normal” and respected . . .

K: . . . when I was 18 and afraid to go out and have sex with men because of the shame I felt, that was the era when the AIDS epidemic was starting so I am not sure I would be here today if I were raised in an accepting environment. I am not saying that people who were raised in more accepting homes necessarily got AIDS but chances are, those who were having sex . . . a lot of those guys are not around. So that is why I say not necessarily for the better.

D: AIDS still scares me to death. I think that one of the reasons I did not come out with more of a “bang” is because of my fear about it [AIDS]. You know so many people died and I still associate AIDS with dying.

Clearly, those who lived during the height of the AIDS epidemic experienced fear at levels that created lasting effects. I was struck by K’s comment that he may have not been alive had he not been so “closeted” and ashamed of being gay. My conversations with the participants turned to coping with coming out and the shame associated with identity as a gay male. Not surprisingly, the arts emerged as a theme in our dialogue.

### **Media and Arts**

Stereotypically, gay men are associated with the arts and, as with most stereotypes, there is lived experience that forms the foundation for what often become

negatively (or positively) generalized characteristics or traits. In the case of media and the arts, gay men are portrayed in particular ways or are deemed to serve particular purposes, usually associated with creativity and design. My conversation with the participants reveals that media played an important role in making gayness visible early in their lives and the arts became a location for support and solace. Note that media also plays a role in messages about gayness and gay identity.

M: . . . I remember having my first sexual feelings for guys was actually watching TV . . . what was it . . . *Dynasty* . . . when Alexis' step-son almost kissed his boyfriend, and I was about 8 or 9 and that was the first time that I was like wow!

K: . . . when I got older and became involved in theater and started hanging around other gay guys . . . and I shouldn't say just other gay guys but straight people who were ok with gay people . . . I remember a show where this one straight girl was so open . . . and even in my 20s I thought, this is a good feeling . . . that here is a person that is so accepting . . . and I had never experienced that before . . . you know I grew up around people that if you knew someone who was "queer" everyone talked about it a laughed about it . . . so being around people who were actually accepting of me . . . that is what started me down the road of claiming my identity . . . theater is what helped me claim being "gay." I had not put a lot of thought in that but it is . . . every show had people who were very accepting. . . . I think that if it had not been for theater, my life would have been so miserable.

K: Well, I think . . . umm . . . you see things . . . news clips of people saying well we don't dislike the person we just don't like their actions . . . we just don't like what they do . . . that is what I perceived in a general way what society thought about being gay . . . it was wrong . . . but I do think that in the last several years there has been some progress . . . a better understanding of what gay is . . . now there are still a lot of people who hate "queers" and think they will burn in hell but because of the media attention and the AIDS epidemic there are lot of people who are better educated . . . and because of those early pioneers, unlike me, who were willing to get out there and say this is who I am and "fuck you!" if you don't like it.

D . . . I remember going to see the movie *Making Love* and I loved it . . . there was hope for me . . . who knew it would take 30 years [to really accept myself].

. . .

F: . . . TV told me that "gay" was two men being together and so I claimed the gay identity because I was with another man who had a girlfriend as well and was

much older than me. The people on TV were more effeminate and I was not that way so I felt different. I thought something was wrong with me to some extent because I was not like them. I had no one to talk to about it. I felt abnormal because I was attracted to men and wanted to be with them but I did not act the way they did on TV so it was very weird for me.

F: . . . like the musicals - I had never been to see one before I met my current partner. I did not know anything about Barbra Streisand or Liza Minnelli so I have a different point of view about what gay is. I wonder if I had known this before, would I have lived the way I lived with my other partner [very traditionally “straight” and controlled].

M: . . . You turn on the TV and you hear about Proposition 8 [recent legislation in California prohibiting gay marriage] and there are people with picket signs that say “God Hates Fags!” . . . I just can’t imagine that people feel that way. I mean can you imagine if people said that about women our about African-Americans? I mean it is ok to hate gay people . . . and Latinos . . . it is ok . . . ok . . . in our culture and it is despicable but it is there and everywhere you turn around kids are calling each other “queer” and “fag.”

M: . . . You know, I was recently watching a movie in the theater and there was a scene where two guys kissed, which was very normal to me and the whole audience just gasped, and it was just shocking . . . it is shocking that people think that way . . . that something that was so normal to me was so wrong.

D: . . . even the *Milk* film . . . it was profound . . . all he did . . . but I think that the “heterosexuals” would say oh, it is just another gay movie . . . you know that comes a lot from the fundamentalist . . . how I grew up . . . very strict . . .

D: You know when I was growing up there were hardly any gay people on television or anywhere . . . I mean it was something when *Family* and *Dynasty* had gay characters. Now, there are gay characters everywhere and that is helpful to the younger people . . .

Media certainly affects all of our lives and, as gay characters emerge with more variety and depth, America becomes more exposed to what it has meant and what it may mean to *be* gay (Kendall & Martino, 2006). The internet plays an incredible role in how people socialize including sexually and research indicates that more and more people are engaged in expressing their sexualities in various ways in cyberspace (Ross, 2005). Given the participants comments about media and how, in some cases, it fostered a sense of

connection and hope, the notion of resiliency emerged as important in exploring how identity as a gay male was negotiated and maintained in the face of such social disdain.

### **Resilience**

Finding opportunities to survive and thrive in the face of oppression are certainly not easy and usually involve some depth of personal strength. I was moved by the participants as they talked about how oppression has been navigated. In the spirit of Foucault, being oppressed can become empowering as noted by M and K.

M: yea . . . you know America is not an incredibly friendly place for gay people but there is something about America that makes me want to change things . . . I guess that it why I am so committed to this marriage and adoption.

M: You know, I suppose that you could say that it [gayness] has been oppressive but I never saw it as being oppressive. It was always my motivator. I felt that society and my peers were oppressive and I felt that I couldn't have the happy childhood I wanted . . . it [my experience] caused me to choose the career I have [social work] and I am proud of that. I guess it caused me to prove myself and in a way I guess that could be oppressive that I didn't feel the freedom to do what I wanted.

M: . . . but I never have felt beaten down by my sexuality . . . there were times I felt beaten down by other kids but I have never felt that I had to overcome my sexuality . . . I would love to prove people wrong and have my cute little perfectly dressed "gayby" to show people that this is normal . . . on the one hand I feel like I am conforming by having the kind of life I have . . .

J: [to M] So your way of challenging what gay is supposed to be has been to be as normal, "straight" as you can . . . you are married, wanting to have a baby, become a "PTA mom" and for you that is a challenge to the expectation that gay people are the partying, promiscuous, people they are perceived to be. You want to be as normal as possible to prove that gay people are not what they are believed to be. And for you that fits with your uncle who was not as normal as possible, he was "abnormal" because he was way out there as a trailblazer in a public way . . .

M: Yea . . . I mean this guy [uncle] was so out there . . . he would dress like the Dali fricking Lama and there are pictures of him . . . I mean he was, wow! You know I never really thought about that . . . that so much of my struggle has been to separate myself from him while being scared to death that I was him.

K talks about self-acceptance and the discovery of worth and D discusses the lingering effects of oppression and internalized shame.

K: Getting to the point that I was ok with me . . . that I liked me . . . I accepted my flaws . . . I accepted my achievements which has been difficult for me because I was raised not to be “boastful” so to speak, so when I got to the point that I was ok with me then I didn’t have to worry about do they like me because I like me. Does that make sense?

J: [to K] So it was an internal sense of being happy with yourself?

K: It was an internal trigger that finally clicked that said “I am ok” and when that clicked I could say “I don’t give a damn about what you think about me.”

J: So if you have grown up in a situation or environment where your feelings about same-sex sex were ok and acceptable would that be a different existence?

K: I am sure it would but I can’t imagine it . . . I can’t even fathom it . . . and I am not sure that it would be for the better . . . and the reason I say that is the time frame that I grew up in . . .

K: Well, I think that in the end . . . it [oppression] has made me a stronger person . . . I would not have said that 25 years ago . . . but . . . we learn from our experiences . . . at least we should, and when we feel ashamed for an extended period of time, which I did, but work through that . . . at least for me I feel like I have grown. So the guy who was calling me a sissy in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade . . . while at the moment was horrible . . . I think that is what got me to the point where I could say, “I don’t give a shit!” So in the end it has helped me to grow and be stronger. That may be weird for some folks to grasp but that is how I feel.

D: You know I still am not totally comfortable with being gay. I am very cautious, especially at school [D is a teacher]. Even though my family has been very accepting of me bringing F to gatherings, I don’t talk about it with them. But, I have been able to live my life the way I want to for the most part.

The impact of ostracism, degradation, and shame is life-long and lingers in the day to day experiences as lives are lived. While most of my discussion with the participants was unstructured, I asked them to comment specifically on the word “queer” and the concept that queer was a potentially liberating space.

## Queer

Recently, “queer” has been co-opted by those who call into question the hegemony and rigidity of codification and labeling that marks structuralism. I was curious about the participants’ thoughts regarding this very loaded word, particularly since they are from the generation that recalls “queer” as derogatory and degrading. Note how imbedded the meaning associated with this word is as participants wrestle with new ways to imagine queerness and identity.

K: That [queer] was the word you heard in school . . . not necessarily toward me but that was the word you heard.

J: [to K] So when did you know what that really meant?

K: Pretty young . . . probably about second or third grade . . . I knew what it meant.

J: You said it was not toward you . . . did it ever become toward you . . . when did you feel like queer was not a good thing and that that is what you might be?

K: (long pause) Well I know that . . . (pause) those are two different answers. “Queer” was not a good thing . . . I knew that when I was 7 or 8. I was 12 or 13 when it finally clicked that I was looking at other boys and had feelings that I (he uses finger quotes) “should” have had about girls.

M: . . . In grad school I took a class on heterosexism and social work with gay and lesbian clients, which was great, but all the young people, even the professors, used the word “queer” which referred to the LGBTQ . . . you know it’s “queer” . . . I mean it’s great that we reclaim that word but when I hear it is such a hurtful word . . . I mean I just shudder . . . there is so much hate and hurt around that word . . . queer . . . and fag . . .

J: [to M] The idea of queer, which you mentioned earlier, is being a location in cultural spaces for people to be in different sexual locations, but it has also become a part of academics where queer theories refer to looking at something very differently or looking in between or among particular boxes. Any thoughts as to how queer might challenge some of the boundaries of gayness?

M: You know, one thing I like about it . . . once I got over the use of the word itself . . . or when I started to . . . I still don’t think I am over it totally . . . one thing I like is that it is not separatist . . . it is breaking down boundaries . . . you know it [queer] is a term that encompasses . . . it is inclusive . . . it encompasses people who struggle with societies norms and how society views them . . . and that is nice . . .

J: So that is where you are saying queer can start to challenge what it means to be a man or woman . . .

M: yes and that you don't have to label something. You know the other day someone used the word "gender queer" and I didn't know what the hell they meant . . . I had to look it up (laughing) . . . but I think it is important to know you don't have to fit into a box.

J: It is interesting that the use of such a historically derogatory word is now taken up as a space of liberation.

M: Yes . . . but if someone asked me to identify myself I would not use the word queer . . .

J: What would you say?

M: That I am gay . . .

J: Even with all that goes along with that?

M: yes.

K addresses the word and notion of queer and his thoughts are similar to M.

J: [to K] I know you have heard the word "queer" which you talked about as being very derogatory, being used now in a different way. Would you claim that word for yourself?

K: I don't know that I would in a public proclamation . . . I would claim it as far as being different . . . yea I wouldn't have a problem with that.

J: Would you identify yourself as queer?

K: Yea . . . I would . . . but I am not going to go up a tell people I am queer.

J: Would you substitute "queer" for "gay" for your own self?

K: Yea.

J: Is that a more liberating identity then, as opposed to the "gay" identity?

K: No, not necessarily . . . and it is because I do . . . I still have a hard time even where I have gone . . . and having an understanding of queer theory . . . I have a hard time separating those two . . . the negative and more positive forms of the word . . . depending on who uses it. Even though I hear "queer theory" and I hear . . . and when I say I would identify myself as being different . . .

J: And that is pretty liberating . . . you don't feel the pressure of being this particular way or that particular way?

K: Correct.

F elaborates on what "queer" means to him. Note media's role in his definition. I am struck by F's ideas about doing away with "titles" completely, which is at the heart of queerness.

F: I heard “queer” for the first time from my brother-in-law—he was looking at a picture of “Meatloaf” [rock star in the 1970s] kissing another guy in a magazine and even though Meatloaf was not “gay” he said, “look at that, look at those queers. Ain’t that ashamed!” It was hearing him say that . . . I had my first idea that two men together was queer. I even thought that all queers lived in California because I remember seeing something on the news about marches there—I did not know exactly what this was but I knew it was associated with gay and queer. I knew Meatloaf was there and so I thought all of “them” live in California or when you found out you were, you moved there.

J: [to F] So queer was not used in a positive way at all?

F: On no . . . queer was very negative—I guess it is alright that people identify now as queer but it is just negative to me. I am not sure why people have to have titles on what they are because it would be nice to not have titles on anybody—it would be great to say I am just who I am—who I am with is just who I am with—maybe people have to take it in steps—maybe people can gradually just be themselves and not have to be whatever.

D and F have some dialogue about “queer” and they reiterate how hurtful the word has been and, for them continues to be, though they seem open to imagining it as having a different meaning.

J: [to D] What is your reaction to the word “queer?”

D: Queer would be worse than gay . . . the same as the N word . . .

F: I heard that word too [queer] . . . before I heard gay . . . I knew it was derogatory . . .

D: Gay came out after that [queer] and it was less abrasive . . . more politically correct

F: Queer was like the N word and it is hard to know why some people want to call themselves queer . . . it is like black people calling themselves the N word . . .

J: Well I think that sometimes people feel empowered when they use some hurtful term . . . it takes the power out of it somehow . . .

D: I can see that.

F: I can too but it is just such a hurtful word . . .

Clearly, for those who participated here, “queer” remains a very loaded term and, while there are possibilities for it to represent liberation, it is not readily viewed in that manner.

Perhaps liberation does not need any label and as F suggests, we can just be ourselves and let others be themselves.

### **Reflexive Analysis**

Above all, the voices here, including my own voice, represent survival and the ability to thrive within circumstances that are less than conducive to nurturing and acceptance. For me, this process was validating in many ways as I had never talked extensively with other males who identified as gay with the depth in which I spoke with the participants. I asked my participants to comment on their experiences with engaging in this work and excerpts follow:

J: How was this experience for you?

K: I think it is always good to have moments when you can have open discussion . . . there was that point when I was talking about the preacher . . . that connection was good to put together after 30 years . . . I had never really thought of that . . . that was a good feeling even though it wasn't a good feeling back then.

J: Is doing this kind of thing would be helpful if it became a more regular part of interaction with other gay people or people in general?

K: Well sure . . . I think it would be . . . it promotes communication and I think whatever we can do to get people to talk and share their feelings, it gives us an opportunity to learn and grow.

J: [to D] . . . how was it to be able to talk about all this . . .

D: Well, it was really good to be able to sit and discuss it . . . you know I don't think about it on a daily basis so it is good to take some time to think about how things have impacted my life. When I signed your paper [consent form] it said I might learn some things and I did . . . that is good.

J: Great. Thanks for doing this . . . I am learning too . . .

M: I think it is good what you are doing . . . we don't talk about this as a society or as gay men . . . it is not part of our dialogue . . . my guess is that if we did talk about it we would find very similar experiences in facing the world . . . in how we relate . . .

J: And I agree with you . . . I had not thought about how we do not really include this as part of our dialogue as gay men . . .

M: It would be interested as part of your research to do a group so that people could talk about this with each other.

J: Yes, I would like to work into that . . . well . . . thank you for your participation!

M: I really enjoyed having the opportunity to talk about my identity and to reflect on my sense of how I came to claim my sexuality.

I agree with the participants that this opportunity was liberating in the sense that we could openly engage in a dialogue about how we came to be gay males and about what possibilities exist beyond gayness. I think that I was struck most profoundly by something that I believe that I knew and that is the struggle for “normal” requires so much energy and creates incredible angst. Messages about “abnormal” as being shameful permeate our society and sexuality is no exception. The power of so-called heteronormativity is consummate and creates hegemony that permeates marginalized groups and individuals with regard to how sexuality and gender is constructed and lived in the margins.

It is within this heteronormative frame that the message, “shame on you!” is reiterated over and over again, creating opportunities for people to internalize the message and transform it to, “shame on me!” The participants articulated the personal struggle faced by those people who internalize shame and they also spoke to the strength it takes to negotiate identities when one is faced with not “making the grade.” Feelings of aloneness, isolation, abandonment, and despair are given voice in this work as are fears about being rejected and despised by friends and family as well as community. The impact of gender expectations is tremendous with all participants and I being keenly aware of traditionally defined masculinity and femininity as related to sexual identity. The lengths to which we go to avoid being feminine are notable and speak to what

Bergling (2001) calls “sissyphobia.” My own awareness of guarding against being too “fem” increased in this process and I realized how oppressive gender norms truly can be. Another area of validation for me surrounds religion and its impact on identity.

All the participants addressed the presence of religion and most spoke to the exclusion they felt and experienced with regard to particular religious organizations. My own experience with religion colors my view of how others experience religion and I attempted to maintain an awareness of this during the dialogue process. What I and the participants discovered was that we all shared similar experiences though our responses were not all the same. For instance, D and F currently attend church regularly despite feeling excluded by the church in the past. It is important to recognize that they now go to a church where gay people and others who are “different” are celebrated. M, who identifies as Jewish, has avoided his religious organization much like me; however, he maintains his identity as a Jew, unlike me who has abandoned my faith tradition. K has also left his faith tradition behind though he is able to nostalgically engage in some of the musical elements of his religion. Perhaps most importantly, all of us recognized that we had and could use the experiences in our lives to grow and strengthen who we are and who we can become. Like religious entities, schools are also noted as locations for shame.

All participants mentioned that school was part of the struggle with identity and, in particular, gym class seems to be an important element in being aware of one’s body, sexual desires and shame about them. School is undoubtedly a major factor in the socialization of all children who find themselves caught up in the structure of schooling

regardless of how it is contextualized. Spring (2005), Purpel and McLaurin (2004), and Shapiro (2006), among others, point out that schools are tremendously influential in how children shape ideas about self, others, morality, and social justice. Indeed, the stories told here reflect the impact of schooling beyond reading, writing and arithmetic as identities are explored and shaped within patriarchal and heteronormative contexts fraught with competition, gender expectations, racism, and lack of social justice. Arguably, school is a central location for distinguishing what is “normal” and “abnormal” at least from a social perspective. As Spring (2005) asserts, the American school is built upon the principles of productivity and conformity, which do not create spaces for diversity and difference. As we march rapidly toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, schools continue to be charged with shaping “productive” pupils who are willing to do whatever it takes to be “successful.” I assert that productivity and success are contextualized within a capitalistic society that privileges those who “work” and those willing to follow particular routes to what has been defined as “successful” including seeking higher education, securing a socially desirable job, and, ultimately, enjoying ownership and wealth at nearly any expense. All this accomplished while becoming monogamously partnered with children, either biological or adopted, who in turn become “successful” in much the same way. I think that it is important to note here that desirable, “normal” paths to success are also constructed against a background of heteronormative whiteness, traditionally defined, which excludes cultural, social, racial, gender, and sexual differences. The voices represented here reflect an ongoing struggle to emulate what is “normal” despite the cost of self-worth and I assert that we as a society

must interrogate notions of normal if we are to become more inclusive, nurturing, and supportive.

Despite our struggles with internalized shame, all of us represented in this work have been able to live our lives in a manner which created meaning. Whether it involved finding safety in a group of “girl friends” or through self acceptance after years of battered self-esteems, we seem to have found a way to live albeit in some cases to strive for “normal.” There are glimmers of hope in the increased presence of so-called sexually different characters in media and on film, which reflects how important those images were to myself and the participants as we were discovering our sexualities. Certainly, there is much to critique with regard to how gayness, sexuality, and gender differences are represented; yet, the mere fact that they are represented at all is important. Our struggle with the language of sexual and gender differences and, in particular, “queer” and all that the word has, does, and can represent is evident as we negotiate its use as oppressive and derogatory with its use as liberatory and hopeful.

“Queer” for me and the participants has held such a negative place in the vernacular that using it to describe identities that push the boundaries of what is known becomes difficult. The word is such a loaded term and reeks historically of shame and disgust. Here again the message of “shame on you!” is condensed to one syllable and the potential to internalize this message is great. Perhaps co-opting the word represents as Foucault (1978) suggests, a push-back against the system that perpetuates using it and other hurtful language to describe those who dare to be different; yet, for the participants, its use continues to hold very negative meanings. Interestingly, it may be through what

the new queer represents that liberation can and will occur as boundaries created by codification are disrupted and, perhaps even discarded. Later chapters will begin to explore possibilities for (re)imagining identities.

Given the current chapter's focus on the lived experience, Chapter IV will address some of the theoretical perspectives at the intersection of identity, sexuality, and gender. Bearing in mind the narratives of lived experience addressed in Chapter III, the reader is asked to consider theoretical positions and, perhaps, to imagine new theories with regard to sexual and gender identities. One important notion to consider is the reification of gender as masculine and feminine and the impact of the hegemony resulting from traditional gender and sexual expectations on those who do not or cannot conform to what is held as the standard for gender and sexual performance. As theories are examined, the reader is asked to also keep possibilities for creating/imagining liberatory spaces in mind.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**INTERROGATING NORMAL: REVISITING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY**

**Introduction**

Having explored my own narrative with regard to gender and sexual identity in Chapter I of this dissertation, historical contexts of so-called gay liberation in Chapter II, and the stories of others' experiences with identities in Chapter III, I (re)turn now to an exploration of some of the theoretical perspectives that attempt to examine gender and sexuality in order to more closely examine how "normal," and "natural" are linked to experiences of degradation and shame and ultimately how deconstructing "normal" and "natural" offers opportunities for healing and (re)imagining identities. While I have already discussed theories in relation to the narratives of gay liberation and personal experiences, I center this discussion on the notions of "normal" and "natural" as they seem to be locations for motivating acts of degradation and the values, attitudes, and beliefs that they are built upon, and much anxiety and shame, not only for me but those people who participated in this work. I believe that it will be helpful to engage in a focused examination of some of the theoretical frameworks to which I have alluded in other chapters so that link between constructions of normal and natural and their impact on lived experiences, shame, and healing are more poignant. I recognize that I have already introduced many of the theoretical ideas presented here; yet, their relativity to understanding how normal and natural have been constructed and how they relate to

(re)imaging identities may not have been clear. Thus, reexamining theories at this point offers opportunities to (re)engage with concepts that address what I deem to be central links between “normal” and “natural,” degradation, shame, and (re)imaging identities.

“Normal” and “natural” imply that there is some standard or commonness associated with behavior, action, or phenomena and, taken literally normal and natural describes congruousness and/or what is expected. Normal and natural become disconcerting as a result of exclusivity; when normal and natural are defined, thoughts, behavior, actions, characteristics, etc. that do not fall within the parameters of the definitions are excluded and become subject to scrutiny. It is within that scrutiny that I assert a sociocultural message of “shame on you!” can be constructed and, consequently, the message of “shame on me!” can be internalized, creating emotional and psychological pain. Further, deconstructing normal and natural offers possibilities for understanding identities in ways that may not have yet been imagined or experienced; thus, shame that may be associated with what has been deemed “abnormal” or “unnatural” may be dispelled, which could be healing or it could prevent others from being ashamed of their identities. I begin this discussion with an experience that resonated with me.

On a recent trip to the coast I became a participant in a fleeting event that seems to exemplify what lies at the intersection of masculinity studies and queer theories, particularly with regard to the construction of “normal” and its manifestation in pedagogical efforts to shape, particularly among young people, actions that are acceptable within how “normal” is defined. While out riding the golf cart around the campground where I was staying, I passed by a young boy who appeared to be five or six

years old, he waved at me and smiled; his small hand moving up and down bending at the wrist. His beaming face conveyed his pride as he sat in his father's lap and attempted to steer the cart in which they were riding. I smiled back and threw my hand up to wave at him. At that moment, his father slapped his hand and said sternly, "You don't wave like that, you wave like this!" demonstrating a wave where the hand is simply raised and kept still so that there is no movement in the wrist. Clearly, the boy's father was keenly aware that his young son's wave could be read in a manner that was not congruent with what has been codified as masculine, and the boy's attempt to be friendly was subordinate to his father's concern about how his son embodied his desire to gesture to a passer-by. Similar to K's story in Chapter III about an experience with his minister, this young person, in his state of ignorance with regard to the fine points of how to wave "like a man," was exploring queer possibilities in gesturing a greeting to others and in his exploration, he encountered a lesson about what masculinity means and how it should be acted out through the body.

Obviously, what the boy attempted—his effort to be socially involved, his effort to connect to another person, his gesture of greeting—was lost as he was scolded for waving with a limp wrist and then taught how to wave "correctly." From a queer perspective, the heart of the father's concern for his son lies not in the production of the masculine; rather, in suppressing what has been defined and naturalized as feminine, because, in western cultures, it is unacceptable for males to engage in so-called feminine actions. Was this father acting with malice and were his behaviors abusive? Perhaps, yet I believe that the boy's father wanted his son to simply wave "normally" and, in his care

for him, he seized the moment to teach him how to wave. In the same moment, I witnessed the incredible power that resides in what has been constructed as normal, particularly around gender and sexuality, and I recognized the need to interrogate normalcy and the structures and systems that support it. Additionally, it is important to note that the boy's wave and his father's reaction is illustrative of how concepts of normal and natural are embodied and read through expressions of the body.

Rasmussen et al. (2004) point out that "Normative frameworks, including heteronormative frameworks, are the scaffolding that holds in place an entire system of power and privilege that endeavors to regulate young people, people of color, queers, and women to the symbolic fringes of society" (p. 3). Indeed, it is so-called normal that allows the creation of so-called abnormal, which sets in motion an incredible system of oppression contextualized in hierarchy and binarial paradigms with gender and sexuality being prominent in the discourse of what is and is not normal. Masculinity and gender theories offer spaces to explore what has been and continues to be codified as masculine and/or feminine as well as other so-called gendered identities, and queer theories offer spaces to critique, deconstruct, and re-imagine possibilities for what exist beyond and between what has been defined through a process of codification, which reflects the beliefs and practices of particular societal groups. Both are linked through their ties with sexuality and through their efforts to deconstruct complex social codes.

### **Establishing "Natural" and "Normal"**

It is important to examine notions of "normal" and "natural" in a discussion about gender and sexuality as locations for difference, prejudice, and oppression. Indeed, the

modern project of scientific inquiry has fueled much of the discourse about what is natural particularly with regard to sex. Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon (2002) point out that biology has extensively researched the notion of sex with conclusions that point toward the embodied male/female binary as “natural,” with the penis, testicles, vagina, and ovaries becoming the named organs which draw a clear distinction between the so-called sexes. Those whose bodies exist outside the boundaries of so-called natural are considered an anomaly—a “mistake of nature,” giving rise to opportunities for distinguishing what is normal from what is abnormal. In order to unpack the links between natural, normal, and abnormal, I turn to what many consider the origin of empiricism and so-called modern epistemologies.

In his 1690 essay, John Locke asserts that we can classify the world in basically two ways; naturally and nominally. The idea that there are particular essential elements that are found in all forms of a particular entity defined what Locke considered natural and the notion that we assign names and labels to entities based on how we want or need to use them, regardless of their “essential” qualities, defines the nominal. Perhaps what is most important in the discussion here is Locke’s assertion that humans have the ability to and engage in the action of codifying via observation, which asserts that knowing through seeing is privileged. According to Locke and other empiricists, it is the observation of phenomena that enables us to assess commonalities and, as the scientific method would demonstrate, truths. Thus, as we experience congruence, we begin to assume normality, and if common elements appear to be present in all forms of an entity, we consider them natural. The quest to define natural was taken up as modern biology emerged, examining

what appeared to be common in all living forms of particular creatures including humans. As commonalities or essential elements were discovered, they were named; thus, the link between what is natural and normal began to be established.

It seems that the act of naming becomes a location for power as one can name what is natural and/or normal implying the one can also name what is unnatural or abnormal. Even in Locke's act of naming the natural he, perhaps unknowingly, engaged in creating a label in an attempt to explain and ultimately manage what appeared to be common elements to particular entities. Thus, the power of language is extensive with regard to "natural," "normal," "unnatural," and "abnormal," and as Corson (1993) suggests, has a significant impact on politics, education, and socialization because of its inextricable link with the sociocultural experiences of the person or persons who is/are engaging in nominal actions. It is through language that the sexes came to be defined as "male" and "female" and biology's quest for the essential further codified what it means to *be* a particular sex. Not only was sex defined in terms of body parts, there were particular physical, behavioral, and emotional characteristics associated with the presence or absence of the penis and testicles versus the vagina, ovaries, and uterus.

Males and females have been the subject of scientific exploration and classification for many years and, as technology has developed, the essence of the sexes has become murky. For example, the discovery of human hormones became a site for understanding and defining "natural" sexual difference until scientists realized that both "male" and "female" hormones existed in both the male and female bodies, which disrupted the notion that hormones defined sex (Alsop et al., 2002). In addition to

hormones and genetics, scientists have identified the brain as a location that defines human differences.

Work that focused on the brain as a location for sexual difference emerged from the work that examined the “differences” in the brains of those with different skin pigmentation and, after years of what was claimed as empirical evidence that brains reflected racial and sexual distinctions, most scientists now agree that human brains are by-in-large similar regardless of so-called race or sex (Alsop et al., 2002). Despite the apparent dismissal of brain difference in defining race and sex, efforts continue that allege distinctions between the brains of males and females with regard to brain size between the sexes (assuming “male” and “female” as the definition of sex), brain size differences regarding level of intelligence regardless of sex, differences in the region that connects the hemispheres of the brain, and the impact of the hypothalamus on sexuality (Alsop et al., 2002; LeVay, 1996). While critical examination of claims about brain difference reveal that there is in fact little difference between human brains, it appears that pursuit of biological grounds for difference will continue.

Perhaps the presumption is that a “natural” explanation of controversial issues such as sexuality would help to foster social acceptance, particularly given that many people believe that sexuality is a negotiable choice. Indeed, as a person who identifies as gay, the ability to defer to biology as the foundation for my sexual desires and behavior is appealing as I struggle with social ostracism and, as a result, internalized shame. However, despite the efforts of science, biology has yet to come to a definitive defense of those who are deemed different with regard to sexuality and gender. Indeed, in the

twentieth century, biology and other sciences separated sex from gender as so-called femininity and masculinity were discovered to be much more fluid than so-called male and female.

The notion that gender represents particular traits and behaviors can be traced to work conducted by anthropologists and sociologists in the 1930s and post war 1940s (Tarrant, 2006). Evidence that males and females could engage in behaviors, actions, and emotions that represented what had been defined as masculine and feminine began to trouble the assumption that males and females naturally behaved in particular ways. Psychodynamic theory offered explanations about gender and sexuality (locating sexuality in human psychological development as opposed to biological determinism) with Freud's notion of the Oedipal and Electra complexes at the center of identity with the "proper" sex (Laqueur, 1992). Social constructionists, working within two basic schools of thought, insisted that gender was built upon characteristics which are commonly associated with males and females and perpetuated through sociocultural structures, and/or that gender is produced by being subjugated to particular discourses that reiterate particular gender norms. Pushing the boundaries of social constructionism, Butler (1990) asserts that gender can be deconstructed because it is performance rooted in particular reified notions of what is masculine and feminine. Relying on the post-structuralist notion of *iterability*, notably that repeatability does not always produce stability (Norris, 2002), Butler asserts that as we perform gender, we are repeating its norms; however, as we repeat them, we also can and do change how they are (en)acted. Butler's work and work that followed ushered in what some have deemed a "queer"

approach to epistemology, particularly regarding how we know sex and gender, including sexuality and gender identity. It is within a postmodern frame that disruption of “natural,” “normal,” “unnatural,” and “abnormal” is taken up, and possibilities for imagining sex and gender differently emerge.

### **Disrupting Normal**

Tamsin Spargo (1999), in *Foucault and Queer Theory*, says that queer theories “. . . expose and explore naturalized models of gender [and sexualities]” (p. 56). Indeed, as de Lauretis (1994) points out, queer is not the site of re-defining; rather, it is a space for examination of the so-called normal. It is important to note that, in theory, both spaces suppose an element of fluidity, which accounts for the ever-changing practices that embody what it means to *be* particular identities. It is this fluid element that offers opportunities for examining possibilities that could promote the deconstruction of dominant and oppressive structures which have been reinforced by notions of what is normal even within spaces that are imagined as abnormal. For example, Warner (1999) points out that the mainstream gay and lesbian liberation movement, in its liberally based attempts to gain acceptance into “normal” society, has carefully defined what it means to be a “normal” person who is gay or lesbian. This exclusionary practice reflects dominant structures and promotes the marginalization of those in the so-called gay community that do not subscribe to what has been defined as acceptable; therefore, one who does not perform gay or lesbian in a manner that is congruent with what has come to be defined as gay or lesbian is excluded and oppressed by those who are often railing against oppression. The voices of the participants ring with evidence of the struggle to be

“normal” both within the gay community and the community at large. It is within the promise of deconstruction and what some have termed “queering” identities that one discovers possibilities for knowing gender and sexuality in ways that may have been unknown, avoided, or oppressed. What remains clear is that particular norms associated with gender and sexuality remain dominant and intertwined with biologically defined sex, and are themselves reiterated through sociocultural structures and institutions such as schools. As the participants noted, school is a key site for knowing what and what is not “normal” and “natural.” Further, if one does not quickly learn to emulate normal in school, one is subject to acts of degradation, harassment, persecution, even violence.

Youdell (2004) points out that schools can be understood as locations for the proliferation of dominantly defined masculinity and femininity contextualized within heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality that subjugate and disavow what has been defined as homosexual. Indeed, school is one of the locations where young people learn how to become acceptable males or females even within marginalized groups; however, school does not exist apart from other social institutions that also perpetuate what has come to be defined as normal. Religious institutions and family systems are also locations for defining and reinforcing such notions as normal, natural, acceptable, abnormal, and perverse, and these spaces work in tandem with schools to provide information and critique (or lack thereof) regarding social customs, practices, and morals. As normal and natural are constructed a question is raised; what drives the quest to define what is normal and natural?

Working through an existential lens, I contend that efforts to construct parameters with regard to how and what one can *be* are related to efforts to control what we know is beyond our control. Such efforts are grounded in modernity and its projects of reductionism and structuralism, which are aimed at defining in order to reduce fears. Such fears are grounded in knowing that the future is constantly coming at us, leaving us with our ability to define what we know in an effort to negotiate our fears about the unknown. As Bauman (1995) asserts, “The specter of uncertainty is thus exercised through regimentation” (p. 108). Indeed, codification seems to serve the function of reducing the unknown to the knowable thus dispelling some of our fears. Additionally, the effort to define natural and normal is influenced by attempts to understand and negotiate morality; thus, our social institutions function not only to perpetuate social existence but to regulate how society is structured with regard to acceptable moral and ethical conduct. Normal and natural become fluid reflections of social customs and morays that are framed by social institutions in current moral and ethical ideology. It is within these social institutions that its members learn how to *be* particular identities and, unfortunately, they often suffer the consequences when they do not conform to rules and expectations.

The atmosphere of what is and is not acceptable regarding identity and behavior fosters the actions of those who may fear what is different, or who experience internal conflict regarding their own identities. Bergling (2001) says that, “The casual cruelty of children is a frightening thing . . . but children really aren’t doing anything more than expressing an all too common adult idea: that anyone who’s different should be regarded

with suspicion, if not outright hostility” (p. 39). The school bully who targets a boy who is exhibiting so-called effeminate behaviors simply reflects what is present in the larger society; a disdain for and fear of those who blur the boundaries that divide what society has conceptualized as gender. When one person calls another a “fag” or “gay,” or, as in my case, someone is spat upon, the message is clear; shame on you for acting in a manner that is incongruent with what has come to be defined by dominant sociocultural structures as normal and/or natural!

Since the participants and I were in school, efforts have emerged which are nobly aimed at not only acknowledging the presence of those who are sexually and gender non-conformists, but trying to protect them from potential psychological and physical harm. A case in point is the recent flurry in the policy arena involving hate crimes law. Hate crimes legislation, while not as rousing as gay marriage, has emerged as an issue that brings together the so-called gay community in a rather essentialist fashion. Certainly, efforts to protect those who are vulnerable to harm are important and needed; however, it is also important to recognize how efforts to protect also reinforce division. Rasmussen et al. (2004) assert that the defining of one group versus another is at the heart of what perpetuates the struggles of young people to negotiate identity, particularly within schools which in the current more liberal environment are trying to “. . . ‘protect’ queer youth, create ‘safe’ school cultures, and effectively divide ‘queer youth’ from ‘straight youth’” (p. 1). Rather than interrogating the notion that there are so-called straight and so-called queer people, the movement to provide support for those who are different is itself perpetuating the structures that assign privilege to one category over another.

Taking up a current example of this concern I return to recent efforts to address so-called hate crimes.

While legislation aimed at reducing and preventing acts of violence toward those deemed “different” are important and, I believe, necessary in the interest of safety, it is vital to not allow conversations about sexual and gender identities to drop with the passage of hate crimes laws. Indeed, the reason for hate crimes lies in the (mis)understanding of race, gender, sexuality, and other attributes that are believed by the perpetrator of the crime to warrant acts of violence (Cowan, Heiple, Marquez, Khatchadourian, & McNevin, 2005). Hate crimes laws allows the perpetrator to be punished but do they address ideologies at the foundation of hate crimes? I do not believe that simple hate crimes legislation truly addresses the values, attitudes, and beliefs that underlie the behavior; therefore, efforts to “protect” those who are vulnerable must go beyond legislation and into the interrogation of the values, attitudes, and beliefs that support hate, which are often based in notions of hierarchal power.

Hierarchy begets actions of discrimination that are borne in cognitive spaces which harbor prejudice based on cultural and social experiences. Violence against those who are deemed different and perhaps, more covertly, abnormal is the product of social and cultural efforts to define and privilege those differences against the backdrop of what has been identified as normal and abnormal; thus, the actions of the “bully” and the “sissy” must be contextualized within the larger cultural structures that work to carefully perpetuate a system that degrades and oppresses those who are not within currently defined acceptable boundaries.

### **Origins of Degradation**

Currently, studies reveal that in schools, the most commonly used derogatory slur continues to be naming someone “gay” or “fag” with some young people hearing anti-gay slurs as much as 26 times per day or once every 14 minutes. Additionally, a recent study revealed that 31% of youth who identified as gay had been threatened or injured at school due to their claimed or perceived sexuality (Mental Health America, 2009). The notion that society has become a more accepting and safe space for those who express their genders and sexualities differently is somewhat tarnished by the fact that people continue to engage in discriminatory and violent practices against those who identify as other than heterosexual and those who perform outside the bounds of reified gender norms. The origin of such discriminatory practices does not lie in the hallways and classrooms of schools, though it is perpetuated there. Constructions of gender and sexuality have their beginnings far back in human existence and some suggest that our early ancestors may have contributed to how we define masculine and feminine.

Armstrong (2005) speculates that oppression existed in the Paleolithic era as hunter/gatherers began to deal with competition for survival, and experienced the realization that death was an eminent end to human life. Armstrong (2005) goes on to speculate about the anxiety that may have been experienced by the hunters (males) as they had to take the lives of the animals they needed to feed themselves and the others (females and children) in the group. As the hunters (males) came to recognize that females were the source of new life, females began to be held in iconic status and according to Armstrong (2005), the concept of a deified female emerged. In fact,

archeological evidence suggests that in several locations, a pregnant female goddess was held in high esteem by many Paleolithic peoples. Burkert (1983) suggests that Paleolithic males may have projected their guilt and anxiety onto the female who demanded endless hunting (and killing) in order to satisfy her need and the needs of her children for nourishment. Armstrong (2005) says, “The female thus became an awe-inspiring icon of life itself—a life that required the ceaseless sacrifice of men and animals” (p. 39). Perhaps the oppression of females can be traced back to the Paleolithic era if, in fact, early human males experienced anxiety and guilt over having to kill in order to feed the females and children. In any case, as one examines the annals of history, a dualistic perspective emerges around the characteristics that are ascribed to males and females, characteristics that have been constructed as masculine and feminine and that have been used to define what is regarded as natural, normal and desirable. Further, the characteristics that are described as masculine (strong, autonomous, rational, reasonable, and stoic) and feminine (compassionate, emotional, loving, hysterical, irrational, and concerned with community), to name a few, have become through hegemony the basis for discrimination and oppression not only for many females, but also for males who cross gender boundaries that have been so carefully constructed using the aforementioned characteristics and other behaviors that have been ascribed gendered status.

We can never know exactly how our human predecessors defined themselves, yet we are privy to the knowledge that clear differences between people have come to play a major role in how we treat each other and in who takes and is given privilege. Defining masculinity, femininity and other genders becomes a discourse which has historically

been and continues to be dominated by a patriarchal and hierarchal worldview contextualized within a binational approach, so that categories emerge which resonate in tension with each other, e.g. man/woman, straight/gay, butch/fem, etc., a project that has its beginnings in fifteenth century Europe.

According to Connell (2002), several social elements contributed to the defining of what is masculine and privileged; namely, the rise of modern capitalism as a location for mass production—a practice which required regulated physical labor, a shift toward heterosexual practices as opposed to monastic denial of sex as the most honored sexuality, individualism tied to an unmediated relationship with God, and imperialism and its emphasis on conquering and controlling territories. The industrial revolution and its association with males who could provide hard, physical labor in order to mass produce products sealed the association of strength and so-called maleness. Also, white males, based on systems that defined non-whites and non-males as biologically and socially inferior, were privileged to have ownership over property including domestic authority over women and their children, though women functioned to maintain the social alliances that perpetuated wealth and ownership in what would become the elite class of gentry masculinity (Connell, 2002). The gender order, defined through the modernist project of biological classification, became clear; those with a penis were called male and are equated with physical, material, and mental strength while those with a vagina are called female and are equated with servitude, physical weakness, and irrationality due to hyper-emotional states. Behaviorally, males were conceptualized within characteristics associated with “masculine” including displays of physical prowess (often through

aggression), exhibition of mental ability through rationing and reasoning (as opposed to becoming emotionally overwhelmed), actions that reflect power and control (exerting dominance over something or someone who becomes defined as “weak”), and actions that promote material success (hard work, a college degree, and/or ownership of property). Females were referred to as the “weaker sex” and indeed, became subjugated as a group within the rise of male privilege. Messner (1997) asserts that, “Men, as a group, enjoy institutionalized privileges at the expense of women, as a group” (p. 5), though he points out that in recent years, the bulwark known as male privilege has been challenged by those who have questioned its dominance. Stoltenberg (2004) defines what he calls the heterosexual model as a feature in our patriarchal society, where men are the arbiters of human identity. From the time they are born, males “. . . refer exclusively to other men for validation of their self-worth” (Stoltenberg, 2004, p. 41). Men learn how to be men from other men, thus the definitions of manhood are indeed controlled by men—a point which offers opportunities for questioning, interrogation, and changes in how manhood is defined.

As Messner (1997) asserts, the rise of modern industrialism closed the frontier, expanded cities, and placed children (including boys) into schools with female teachers, separating them from their fathers who had gone to work in factories. Life in the cities had become “easier” than life on the farm and many men in the rising middle-class were concerned about social feminization—the softening of society—and moved to form homosocial organizations to preserve all-male spaces where masculine activities (fighting and competition) could be enjoyed and promoted. While the World Wars in the early

twentieth century offered a space for men to “prove” their manhood, the growing voice of women’s movements, in the spirit of the postmodern, began to call into question the privilege of maleness.

Tensions about how masculine values are viewed are evident in feminist efforts with so-called first wave feminism focused on achieving equality, demanding that women should be treated equal to men, implying that men were/are the ideal and women should be allowed to “rise up” to their level. Second wave feminism introduced a discourse which created a more radical space with masculine ideals being challenged by calls to celebrate so-called feminine values. It was within second-wave feminism that sexualities became a focus as so-called lesbian constructs of relationships were celebrated by some “radical” feminists. The feminist discourse continued with third wave feminism pushing against the essentialist notion that all women were “sisters” in the struggle with patriarchy by giving voice to women who were/are marginalized when identified within the context of feminism as constructed by middle and upper class white women (MacLean, 2009). Indeed, the feminist movement’s struggle with defining feminism created spaces to examine masculinity.

Spaces began to open that allowed some men to re-think masculinity and, perhaps out of fear of losing power, others began to assert masculine ideals. In any case, as Messner (1997) points out, the politics of maleness and masculinity became more complex and continue to be central in the discourse of gender and sexualities. One of the voices that emerged in this discourse was that of queerness.

### **(Re)Imagining Queer**

By the 1990s, the so-called gay liberation movement had become recognized as more than a few urban gays and lesbians who were complaining about being harassed. In fact, “gay” had taken on a political voice fueled largely by the solidification of the gay movement with the lesbian movement by the AIDS crisis (D’Emilio, 2002). Gay and lesbian identities had been codified during the 1970s; identities that were reflected in the predominant stereotypes of the day that included “feminized” men and “masculinized” women, yet, within the men’s community, there was great emphasis on masculinity (traditionally defined in the dominant/subordinate binary) as enacted within sexuality and sexual activity. Martino (2006), Bergling (2001), and Harris (1997) all point to the historical and current sexual culture among so-called gay men as contextualized within a hyper-masculine space where muscles, tight jeans, rugged looks, and large cocks are dominant, not to mention dominant/subordinate sexual roles, which mirror traditional heterosexual practices. Connell (1992) asserts that gay men often seek so-called masculine men as a result of the hegemony of heterosexism, saying that, “Gay men are not free to invent new objects of desire any more than heterosexual men are—their choice of object is structured by the existing gender order” (p. 747). Additionally, there has been an emphasis on what Messner (1997) calls the “newly hegemonic hard and tough gay masculinity [that serves] to marginalize and subordinate effeminate gay men” (p. 83). “Sissy” men, while most closely associated with gayness, are actually marginalized within gay sexual culture and many men who desire other men sexually discover that, unless you “perform like a man,” sexual opportunities become limited, or you may

discover that you have been subjugated as playing a particular sexual role, e.g. a “bottom.” The participants in this work confirm the notion that particular definitions of masculinity are not only present but desirable in the so-called gay culture with embarrassment and shame being present when desirable gender boundaries are violated in public spaces, e.g. a male who identifies as gay “flames” too much. As the rules of gayness and gay sex became more solidified, questions from the margins began to arise that focused on how to define those who did not play by the rules.

Queerness, derived from the use of the term queer as a descriptor of that which does not quite fit particular spaces, began to open opportunities for those who drifted between, among, and outside known sexual and gender spaces. Queer called into question the sexual and gender codes that shape(d) identity and, interestingly, began to emerge in the academy as a space for calling into question all practices that reflected hegemony and dominant structures. Writers such as Teresa deLauretis, Dianna Fuss, and Judith Butler, to name a few, began to “trouble” what had become reified as “normal” within gender and sexual practices and politics. Coupled with feminist approaches, queer theories began to offer opportunities to (re)imagine possibilities. As stated above, Butler (1990) asserted that gender was rooted in the performance of particular characteristics and that such performances were reinforced through social structures. Her work pointed out that heterosexuality was central in the construction of gender around the binarial view of male/female (based in biological definitions) and that we are driven to reify the notion of particular gender roles by performing heteronormatively constructed gender. Butler also pointed out that agency was an integral part of how gender and sexuality is/are performed

with one being able to engage in fluid performances of gender and sexuality (Alsop et al., 2002). It is with the fluidity and plurality of gender [and sexual] performance that one begins to disrupt what has been deemed normal and/or natural; thus, queering how gender and sexuality is/becomes defined/identified.

Indeed, queer as an identity space has begun to emerge in popular culture as young people (and old) begin to explore gender and sexual practices and politics that work the margins of what has been defined as normal, not only within dominant cultural spaces but, also, in so-called normal spaces within marginalized groups. For example, the internet is filled with voices and practices that rail against what has become normalized (Ross, 2005). Certainly, the work of those who call dominant practices and politics into question has opened possibilities for deconstructing what we have come to know as “male,” “female,” “man,” “woman,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgendered,” yet our social order remains rather steadfast in its insistence on particular identities and practices associated with gender and sexual roles. Often it is in our schools that this discourse is played out, with students being the actors on a stage that can become perilous.

### **Schooling Oppression**

Because of recent media attention and concern among professionals about the ongoing predominance of bullying in schools targeted at those who blur gender and sexual boundaries, in 2007, the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* devoted an entire issue to the topic of school bullying centered on homophobia and James Sears writes in his introduction that,

Bullying is typically considered as relation of power of one or more individuals over another with attacks that are repetitive and intended to harm (Olweus, 1993). Heterosexual hegemony, however, has been ignored. Consequently, the important work of addressing bullying in schools in order to develop and administer prevention strategies is, unfortunately, undermined. (Sears, 2007, p. xiii)

Many have addressed the intersection of heterosexuality and gender and certainly the exploration of that space continues to produce much discourse. Ingraham (1994) asserts that heterosexuality should displace gender in feminist analysis as, according to her, gender is constructed from what she calls the “heterosexual imaginary,” which helps to promote the binaries of dominate/subordinate, male/female, hetero/homo sex, etc. Jackson (2005) takes up and continues this discussion suggesting that everyday social practices serve to further the naturalization of practices that may not be sexual at all, but they reflect a heterosexual paradigm, thus they are grounded in “naturalized” heterosexuality. While biological differences exist, what we know about how to be is taught and certainly school is a predominant social site for training young people in the complexities of *being* particular identities including those which are considered marginal. I assert that heteronormativity must be addressed in our social institutions in order to disrupt what we know about identities and, certainly, school is a space where this can be accomplished. Work within masculinity studies and queer theories has located an intersection where deconstructive and (re)imaginative approaches can flourish, bringing hope for change. Moreover, as Purpel and McLaurin (2004) assert, there is a moral responsibility for educators to unpack oppressive constructs in order to promote social justice. School can be a key in unlocking what has held social justice captive—oppression.

As Foucault, according to Sheridan (1980), asserts, school “was one of the most important sites for the play of power—knowledge; the sexuality of school children was of paramount interest to all those concerned with education, from the architects who designed the buildings to the teachers who taught in them” (p. 172). Indeed, the participants in this work located school as the site of much of their education about what was/is and was/is not acceptable, natural, or normal regarding sexuality. As Middleton (1998) points out in her extensive qualitative work, schools are indeed engaged in the business of disciplining sexuality through mechanisms of overt structuring physically and with regard to curriculum, and less overtly through social expectations that are not always named or acknowledged, concerns which I address further in Chapter V of this work. Michael Apple (1996) asserts that the bodies of students, bodies of those in the working class, the bodies of the poor, the bodies of those who are deemed racially different, the bodies of women, the bodies of those who are different with regard to gender, and the bodies of those who engage in non-conformist sexuality are all brought under control (or at least an attempt is made to bring them under control) by the dominant group (white, middle and upper class heterosexuals) largely through schooling and, I would add, organized religion. Thus school and church become central in efforts to interrogate what has been identified as normal and natural and, I assert, successful, including idealized binarial consciousness that reinforces notions of “right and wrong,” “good and bad,” “success and failure,” etc. Indeed, it is the reification of binaries and identity categories that perpetuate notions of what are “normal and abnormal” and “natural and unnatural,” notions that are reinforced not only in school but in families and in church. Much has

been written about the links between religious doctrine and homosexuality and it is no secret that in Western culture, the church became central in controlling education (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Gordis, 1983; Miller & Romanelli, 1991; Siker, 2007).

### **Preaching Oppression**

I recently participated in the Roundtable at Oxford University in Oxford, England where I was privileged to be a part of a week-long series of presentations and discussions about the separation of church and state. What I heard during the rich dialogue represented the long struggle to unlock the yoke that has linked the so-called church and the so-called secular state and, as the week came to a close, it was clearer to me that de-linking these entities is no easy task. Interestingly, and perhaps more importantly, it was my afternoon of touring the beautiful city of Oxford, which for all intents and purposes is the campus of the University, that illustrated to me how inextricably connected and powerful the church, education, and schooling have been and continue to be.

Oxford University, being the first English speaking institute of higher education founded some 800 years ago was, as were other early institutions of learning, a center of religious study (Lambert, n. d.). Given its roots in the church, it was not a surprise that there are numerous religious spaces ranging from chapels to the great cathedral at Christ Church College and my tour included several of them. What struck me most profoundly as I gazed at the wondrous arches, spires, altars, and stained glass was the importance and impact of religion in the roots of education. Here, in what remains one of the great institutions of higher learning in the world, religion and the church, is an integral part of

the landscape and one cannot escape the power that the church held and perhaps continues to hold in education and schooling.

Education taken as the seeking and dissemination of knowledge is about questioning, exploring, and understanding phenomena and many have divided approaches to knowing into three broad notions. Pre-modernist thought centers on beliefs in a higher or divine power/authority that ultimately helps to explain phenomena. Modern epistemologies seek explanation through deductive logic and reasoning, whose goal is to arrive at so-called truth. The scientific process with its minimization of bias is held as the standard method of acquiring knowledge in modernism. Emerging through critique, so-called postmodern thought supposes that multiple possibilities exist in knowing and/or explaining phenomena and that calling explanations into question serves to push us into what is not known. If one traces schooling, it becomes evident that the evolution of schools follows the supposed evolution of thought from pre-modern through postmodern with the understanding that all epistemologies continue to exist simultaneously, which is no exception when one considers how schooling is structured.

Religion, being framed in pre-modern epistemologies, consequently has not been separated and/or left behind in current models of schooling. Indeed, schooling in early America was motivated by, “. . . sincere religious convictions and a belief in the superiority of the English culture” (Spring, 2004, p. 9). Indeed, as Spring (2004) points out, “People were taught to read and write so they could obey the laws of God and the state” (p. 10). It was not until the early 1900s and the advent of the so-called progressive educators that schooling for the purpose of critical thought and analysis was introduced

and, even then, this was a rather short-lived burst. *Scopes v. State*, 154 Tenn. 105, 1927, the famous “Monkey Trial,” is evidence that pre-modern epistemologies had a firm hold in schooling as the judicial system became the site of heated debate about the role of teaching creationism versus Darwin’s “scientific” theory of evolution in explaining what is perhaps one of the most basic questions—how did humanity come to be? (Lienesch, 2007). Recently, the debate of whether to include the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance to the United States became further evidence that religion continues to reside in schools (Ellis, 2005). Since religion and the church form one of the greatest foundations for defining morality and, in most traditional Christian teachings, homosexuality is considered a grave moral affliction, it is no surprise that church and schooling have perpetuated the notion that those who are deemed sexually different are not only viewed as abhorrent, but are seen as morally corrupt.

As part of the so-called Moral Majority movement, the 1978 Briggs Initiative—known as proposition 6—in California sought to ban from teaching in the public school system all people known to be or to support homosexuals. Had it not been for the political work of Harvey Milk and those who supported the emerging gay liberation movement in San Francisco, the proposed legislation may well have been enacted into law, setting a national precedent for a “witch hunt” that targeted homosexuals and their supporters in the schools. The proposition, based in the notion that homosexuals are immoral according to the Bible, illustrates the link between religion and schooling; further, the tie to schooling as a site for moral instruction is evident with the dominant model of heteronormativity representing the moral standard.

Beginning with the biblical stories of creation, the male/female binary is established as “natural” and “normal” with the woman (Eve) being created not from the dust of the earth; rather, from the man’s rib—thus establishing the narrative that males were first on the scene and that females are literally a part of the male. While some point out varying versions of the creation of humanity, the story seems to offer a frame for viewing women as secondary to men and God or, more broadly, masculine coming before feminine. Whether or not one accepts the creation story literally, figuratively, or at all it is clear that its influence in Western culture is far-reaching with men holding power (in particular “white” men) and women and others deemed inferior to those in power struggling for recognition and voice. What is blatantly evident in the creation story is that the “natural” companion for Adam the male is the female Eve, not another male (or another female in the case of Eve). From its beginnings, quite literally, the narrative set up by the Bible privileges the “natural” existence of only two sexes and the coupling of so-called opposites (Pagels, 1988).

The Adam and Eve story became representative for partnerships between “men” and “women” and presently, the ideal of marriage has its roots in the imagined life partnership of the “first” couple, Adam and Eve. Traditional Christian marriage vows emphasize the role of the woman as a “helper” to the man as in “man and wife” and often remind the couple taking the vows of the story of Eve being taken from Adams rib to be a “suitable” partner for Adam making them the “same flesh,” with marriage being sanctified by God as the desirable state of partnership (Instone-Brewer, 2002). Following the biblical narrative, God did not make another man from Adams rib to become his

partner; thus, it is clear that the “natural” partner for a male is a female. Clinging to this notion, the Christian political right in the 1970s and 1980s coined the phrase “God didn’t make Adam and Steve” that was made popular by Jerry Falwell, which emphasized the unnatural and immoral aspects of same-sex partnerships (Balch, 2000). Indeed, the current debate over the legality of so-called gay marriage is focused on the morality of same-sex unions and, as illustrated by the recent passage of Proposition 8 in California, which supported a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, the American public seems to hold fast to the sanctity of marriage as defined between one man and one woman. While many couples currently structure their own wedding vows and have non-Christian understandings of marriage, the religious roots of partnership as desirable and normative continue to exist.

The biblical narrative of heteronormativity set the precedent for what has been defined as biological sex and sociological gender and, consequently, heterosexuality as the expected manifestation of sexual being. Since education is linked with religion, the prevalence of heteronormativity as “natural,” “normal,” and “moral,” is ongoing in what is expected and taught with regard to how one can *be* sexually. The participants in this work illustrate the curriculum of normalcy and morality that exists in church and school, demonstrating its impact on their lives and the presence of shame as a result of being students within the dominant moral framework supported by institutions that are indeed not separate.

### **Liberatory Spaces**

It is important at this point to be clear about my position that the dominance of heteronormative ideals regarding sexuality and gender roles acting as fuel to homophobia is oppressive and lies at the heart of much emotional, psychological, spiritual, and sometimes physical pain endured by those who are unwilling or unable to conform to “desirable” sexual practices and performances of gender; that being said, the question of how to address such oppression becomes integral to the discussion at hand. Postmodern epistemologies offer opportunities to (re)think sexuality and gender; yet, working between and beyond heteronormativity proves to be more complex than simply dismissing it as a product of patriarchy. Perhaps one of the first considerations should be the fact that humans are indeed reproduced through the process of a sperm uniting with an egg and, while science has taken this coupling away from the body and to a Petrie dish, the aspect of so-called hetero-sex is important to human reproduction. Neither I nor any of us, in most cases, would exist without the sexual actions of a so-called male and female, which seems to establish the role of reproduction as an explanation of why opposite-sex sex has been and remains dominant in most of the cultures on Earth. Yet, as Mori (2008) suggests, science has shifted the paradigm of reproduction and now the discourse centers on the role of human responsibility in questions regarding the ethics and practice of reproduction.

Historically, human life is contextualized in the sacred; thus, there are questions of morality associated with birth and death. As biology began to unravel the mystery of conception, human existence was placed in the secular. Sex, having been contextualized

spiritually and morally in the realm of reproduction, became a biological function that was conceived as recreational with the advent of contraception, in particular the introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s, enabling sex to move to the aesthetic while raising questions of responsibility with regard to reproduction. As the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s progressed and abortion was legalized, having a child became a choice. Opportunities to choose with whom and how one engaged in sex as leisure abounded for opposite-sex partners and part of the choice became whether or not to attempt pregnancy. Now, science can tell us how human life starts and even gives us the means to control the process, potentially taking away the “sacredness” of reproduction while normalizing sex as simply another “normal” human activity (Mori, 2008). The role of responsibility has risen as a key ethical issue in human reproduction as people now make choices about how and when to have a child. Indeed, even those without sexual partners are able to engage in having a child through surrogate parenting and, less biologically, through adoption; thus, the boundaries around hetero-sex as “natural” and/or “normal” with regard to reproduction are blurred. Science seems to have opened up a space for liberation in that one can now choose whether or not to be a parent regardless of one’s choice of sexual partner. The de-linking of sex and reproduction, while raising ethical questions, has become a site for new expressions of sexuality and parenthood.

Certainly as hetero-sex became/becomes more recreational without the threat of pregnancy, opportunities for sexual expression emerge as possibilities for new imaginings of how one can *be* sexually and while there is no doubt that humans have

always engaged in a variety of sexual activities in private, the proclamation of public sexualities emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond as sexualities were explored and claimed in more public spaces. Constructions of sexualities were fueled by the changing social tone of the era and what had been simmering under the surface now boiled as sexual identities disrupted the notion of the norm being a monogamous heterosexual (Hoffman, 2004). One's sexual desires were recognized and explored within the era of "free love" giving rise to the voices of those who were deemed sexually marginalized.

It was the sexual revolution that became one of the prompts for those who were in the sexual and gender margins to raise their voices and claim a place in the changing landscape of sexuality. According to Vance (2005) sexuality became a domain to be contested with social construction theories at the center of understanding how sexualities were formed and claimed. The participants in this work and I were growing up as new identities were being constructed and labeled and, as reflected in Chapter III, those identities began to impact the lived experience by opening spaces for those who were excluded to be included, albeit in a group that continued to work the margins of heterosexual privilege. The 1990s ushered in "queer" as a location for discourse about gender and sexuality and those who were so-called gender and/or sexual outlaws began to voice their experiences of exclusion from the gender and sexual identities that were/are dominant.

Conceiving gender and sexuality as constructed offered/offers emancipatory possibilities not only for those who were/are claiming other than dominant traditionally defined gender/sexual identities. Many point to the so-called trans community as the site

of *being* gender queer and indeed the “. . . advent of queer theory, with its goal of destabilizing sexual binaries, as the theoretical framework whereby their own histories can be made sense of” (Alsop et al., 2002). Yet, disruption of gender extends beyond the boundaries of trans communities and others who are gender non-compliant to those people who simply do not fit into traditionally constructed gender roles. For example, the people who participated in this work, despite their aversion to the use of the word “queer” are able to imagine queer as a liberatory space for themselves; not in being trans; rather, in being more personally authentic with regard to how gender is expressed in ways beyond and between the traditional. In their voices one hears the struggle with gender expectations in being a “real” man, implying that dominant heteronormative constructions of masculinity and femininity are present and powerful even in the margins. Perhaps as Halberstam (1994) has suggested, we are all transsexual in that trans identities are locations for fictionalizing all gender categories with “the referent of trans becoming less and less clear [and more and more queer]” (p. 212). If we are able to imagine gender and sexuality differently, we are creating spaces that are liberatory for those who are scolded, harassed, demeaned, persecuted, degraded, and/or assaulted because they do not or cannot conform to traditionally constructed gender roles and sexual identities that do not encompass the lived experiences of people who are anything more than monogamous heterosexuals functioning in traditionally defined masculine and feminine roles. (Re)theorizing heteronormative constructs, while destabilizing the status quo, becomes what some believe to be an important theoretical challenge as we examine concepts such as tolerance, acceptance, diversity, and inclusion.

Indeed, it is vital to address and redress the issue of heteronormativity that lies at the heart of what must happen before our society can move to spaces that are more understanding, accepting, and inclusive of those deemed different with regard to gender and sexuality (among other concerns). Until such time as the links between normal/natural, binarial concepts of gender, and heterosexism are pried apart, the struggle for safe spaces to express identities will ensue. Certainly, it is a worthwhile struggle and one that may create spaces where identities and how we express them can exist as a tapestry of interwoven thoughts, actions, and practices that continually evolves as people explore infinite possibilities of *how to be*. Consequently, schools continue to be a location where the discourse around sexuality and gender is played out with the “bully” personifying dominant social beliefs and practices and the “sissy” embodying that which seems to be feared most—the destruction/deconstruction of what we know as normal/natural. We must take responsibility for being educated and educating others about social structures that promote the actions of the bully against the sissy—regardless of where these actions occur, and be certain that bullies and sissies exist in every location occupied by people. The promise for change seems to lie at that place where questions about natural and normal can be raised and explored in efforts to disrupt the “reality” of the binary and, perhaps, little boys who wave with limp wrists can simply enjoy their efforts to connect with others rather than being scolded for not being normal.

Chapter IV has (re)visited and (re)explored theoretical concepts that serve to address sexual and gender identities and has begun a discussion of how theories may be taken up in considering the creation of liberatory spaces which address personal,

collective and political concerns with regard to sexual and gender identities. Imagining identities between and beyond the boundaries established through codification promises possibilities for enjoying one's body and self relative to one's desires. Following the notion of free and boundless identities raises questions that beg discussions about morality and ethics if and when expressions of identities affect others. Does the liberation of one imply the oppression of another? Chapter V will begin to take up ideas about creating emancipation in the context of sociocultural institutions and social norms while considering moral and ethical aspects of what may be imagined as boundless identity spaces. It seems reasonable to conclude that gender and sexual identities constructed within a heteronormative framework are and have been exclusive and oppressive; thus, imagining how they can be deconstructed is worthwhile if one has positioned one's self as seeking pluralistic understanding as a base for social justice. Chapter V assumes that pluralism is indeed important in conceiving a more just and inclusive society.

**CHAPTER V**  
**CONFRONTING DEGRADATION AND SHAME:**  
**(RE)IMAGINING IDENTITIES**

**Introduction: Why This Work Matters**

As I was working on this project, a friend of mine, who identifies as gay, was listening to me go on about one aspect or another and he finally said to me, in so many words, that he just did not understand why what I was doing really mattered. I must admit, I was stunned! Why does it matter? Then, I had to really think about his question, which became a very reflexive opportunity for me.

I contemplated why I had made the commitment to inquire about degradation and its relationship to shame concomitant to males who identify as gay and realized again that my own struggle with acts of degradation and the shame I continue to carry as a result makes this work important for me. This work is personal and, being partial to feminism, I am making the personal political by asserting that there must be some collective action to disrupt the oppressive results of homophobia and heterosexism. I also became more aware that many of my so-called gay friends had, like me, learned to navigate oppression and the shame that comes with claiming an identity which most people view as deviant, diseased, and/or immoral, and I was and am fascinated by our abilities to live with oppression and, more-so, the ability to thrive despite it. Research I was reading indicated that homophobia and heterosexism create oppression on many levels becoming destructive socially due to divisiveness (Pohan, 1999; Sears & Williams, 1997). Still, his

question about the relevance of the work lingered and, as I moved forward with my research, it haunted me.

A month or so after my friend asked me why this work matters, I was thumbing through a *People* magazine and came across an article that shook me to my core. In April 2009 two pre-adolescent boys, both eleven years old and from different parts of the country, hanged themselves at home after having endured months of bullying at school, which was apparently focused on their perceived sissiness. In school, each boy was making As and Bs and each was considered a “good” student; yet, the torment they faced each day was so great that the choice to end their lives apparently seemed like the only escape. I suspect that each had already internalized an incredible amount of shame about actual or perceived sexual and gender identities and I imagine that as they placed the nooses around their necks, they must have thought about the relief they believed they would have by taking their own lives. In this age of “acceptance,” these two boys apparently found only ostracism, harassment, persecution, shame, hopelessness, and pain; thus, I was left with no doubt that the work represented in this dissertation mattered. Indeed, this work speaks to living on many levels and its importance is to trouble those structures which supported the experiences of the boys mentioned above so that life can be hopeful and fulfilling. In fact, it is a matter of life and death (Tresniowski, 2009).

A 2005 survey conducted in North Carolina by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) as part of the work to pass anti-bullying laws that included language about gender and sexual orientation found that North Carolina public school students were one third more likely than other students nationwide to say that bullying was

a problem in school with seven out of ten students reporting that they were harassed due to the perception/appearance that they were not conforming to traditional gender and sex roles (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2009). McDermott, Roen, and Scourfield (2008) found in their study of young people who identified as gay a significant correlation between homophobia and self-destructive behaviors; significant shame-avoidance behaviors, e.g. constructing a “proud” identity; and an indication that the participants in their work managed homophobia and internalized shame associated with it without the expectation of support from others making them vulnerable to self-destructive thinking and behaviors. If nothing else, I hope this work will encourage someone to offer an empathic ear or a supportive word, keeping loneliness, despair, and isolation at bay.

As I began the work, I recognized that I had made some assumptions about myself and the people who participated in it; namely, that we would have all experienced shame in the same way, that we understood the gendered aspects of our identities, and that we could imagine possibilities beyond gay. I discovered that indeed there were some similarities but there were many variations and dynamics that composed our experiences with *being* gay. My findings confirmed that being human is complex and filled with possibilities. We are not simply this or that; rather, we are plural and we are always under construction. In the spirit of Greene (1988) and Freire (1998) I recognize that it is our unfinishedness that offers hope for renewal, potential for emancipation, and possibilities for change; thus, Chapter V of this work begins to explore (re)imaginings of identities through examination of theoretic and pragmatic approaches and models in confronting

heterosexism and homophobia, both of which bolster negative beliefs and attitudes about those who are deemed “different,” often resulting in acts of degradation which reinforce a “shame on you” message.

### **(Re)Imagining Identities**

Perhaps a beginning point in (re)imagining identities is a discussion about the concepts of homophobia and heterosexism as they tend to be at the center of the discourse about so-called homosexuality and its place in sociocultural spaces. I turn to Sears (1997) who points out that George Weinberg was the first to coin the notion of homophobia and he defined it as “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals . . . the revulsion toward homosexuals and often the desire to inflict punishment as retribution” (Weinberg, 1972, p. 129). Currently, Weinberg’s definition remains rather tenacious with notable importance given to the link between fear, loathing, and potential acts of degradation and/or violence as a result of *being* homophobic. Sociology points out that American culture is characterized by generalized homophobia that results in all of us growing up in a social environment that perpetuates negative beliefs, attitudes, and actions about and toward those who are perceived to be or who identify as other than heterosexual. Other descriptors have been utilized to identify the purported fear of sexual and gender difference to “biphobia” (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991) and “transphobia” (Denny, 1994). Hatheway (2003) asserts that American homophobia has its roots in the Gilded Age, particularly in the emerging medical and psychiatric communities who purported a negative view of the so-called “inverted” same-sex sexual attraction because it was socially unacceptable. McCann, Minichiello, and Plummer (2009) found in their

study of males who identified as heterosexual that the fear of being perceived as gay influenced what subjects to study in school, how to interact with other males, how to display emotion, and what sports to play. Additionally, the participants in McCann et al. (2009) indicated that mono-sexed environments, e.g. all-male schools and/or sports teams elevated homophobia, and moving beyond those environs helped to overcome some of the effects. As pointed out in this work, homophobia seems to be internalized by those who identify as homosexual or some other signifier of sexual non-conformity resulting in negative thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about one's self and/or others who identify as sexually and gender different from what is constructed as "normal/natural" (Sears & Williams, 1997). Thus, homophobia permeates sociocultural spaces in America and functions as a tap root of sorts in the ongoing struggle with negotiating identities. Working in tandem with homophobia is the concept of heterosexism.

Defined by Sears and Williams (1997) as "prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, evidenced in a deep seated fear or hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex" (p. 16), heterosexism joins the list of "isms" that emerge from what seems to be a very intolerant dominant group in America. Herek (1990) distinguishes two typologies of heterosexism: cultural and psychological, with the former signifying "stigmatization, denial, or degeneration of nonheterosexuality in cultural institutions . . ." and the latter being "a person's internalization of this worldview, which erupts into antigay prejudice" (p. 319). Others have expanded the notion of heterosexism to include personal and political aspects of omitting those who are deemed

sexually and gender different from practices and policies that may be inclusive if it were not for the presence of heterosexist beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Sears & Williams, 1997).

I believe that heterosexism and homophobia are products of sociocultural traditions and practices that are steeped in patriarchy and notions of sex and gender being “naturally” defined as heterosexual contextualized within masculinity and femininity based on traditional constructions. Thus, (re)imagining identities as other than heterosexual demands a critical examination and deconstruction of so-called natural and normal gender roles and sexuality. Such critical work does not seem to occur spontaneously and demands a very active role with regard to those engaged in deeply (re)considering sex, sexuality, and gender. Thus, those who wish to promote critical evaluation of sexual and gender identities may be well served to know what research tells us about who is homophobic and/or heterosexist and where they are.

Drawing extensively on Sears and Williams’ (1997) work in summarizing research to date, general findings indicated that more people who lived in the Midwest and South in rural areas are more likely to score high on scales that measure homophobia. Additionally, adult males seem to harbor more homophobia than females and are more concerned about other males being gay as opposed to women being lesbians. Vulnerability (increased anti-gay harassment and complexity in coming out) seems to intensify for those who identify as gay and a so-called person of color as compared to those who are considered Caucasian. Those who are conservatively religious have more negative attitudes toward sexual and gender difference. While Americans seem to be

more supportive of civil rights for gays and lesbians (Brewer, 2003), current research seems to support Sears' generalizations with positive correlations continuing to emerge between increased negative attitudes, homophobia and males, those in rural areas particularly in the South and Midwest, those who identify as conservative with regard to religion and politics, and those who have not known a person who identifies as gender or sexually non-conformist (Brown & Henriquez, 2008).

Indeed, work by Malcomson, Christopher, Franzen, and Keyes (2006) suggest a link between the so-called protestant work ethic (PWE), which is characterized as a belief in fundamental religious doctrine coupled with the notion that one makes his or her own way by working intensely (usually in a blue collar capacity) and negative attitudes toward homosexuality, with those who subscribe to the PWE being more likely to be homophobic. The links between what have been stereotypically ascribed to those in working class and rural areas including homophobia, traditional gender role stratification, and violence toward those who identify as or are perceived as sexually and gender non-conformist have long been speculated with Alden and Parker (2005) empirically validating the notions that those who support traditional gender role conformity tend to be more homophobic and, those who commit hate crimes toward sexual and gender non-conformists tend to be homophobic and supportive of traditional gender roles. Recent studies suggest that general attitudes about rights for gays and lesbians are becoming less negative yet Embrick, Walther, and Wickens (2007) suggest that this may not be true in the workplace where they contend so-called white working class men (and women) are likely to have anti-gay attitudes. It seems that the literature supports the conclusion that

those with more traditional values grounded in religious conservatism and traditional views and practices with regard to gender roles are more likely to be heterosexist and homophobic.

Following the knowledge we have from research, despite its limitations, it seems apparent that beliefs, values, and attitudes fueled by conservatism and traditional construction of sexuality and gender are the foundation of homophobia and heterosexism; thus, it is imperative that work aimed at disrupting dominant ideologies occur at a foundational level. While many have historically and currently turned to politics as a means for social change, social institutions must also become sites that must be taken up by those who seek to (re)imagine sexuality and gender identities and education becomes a method for accomplishing such (re)imaginings.

### **Values, Attitudes, Politics, and Religion**

The voices of the participants in this work and examination of theoretical perspectives suggest an intersection with religion, its role in shaping values and attitudes, and politics. Indeed, morality is often contextualized in terms of religious values and beliefs. The struggle for so-called gay liberation has been contextualized in primarily a political environment; yet, the impact of religion, values, and attitudes remains important as one (re)imagines possibilities for identities as they play out on the stage of so-called morality.

Gay liberation is often conceived as a political movement and indeed it was/is. However, political movements do not occur without activism and in the case of gay liberation as with other civil rights movements, personal action plays a central role. As

discussed in Chapter II of this work, the beginnings of modern American gay liberation can be traced to the 1920s with the efforts of people who dared to “come out” being the catalyst for organization around the issue of sexual identities by making the personal political. Because discrimination is prejudice in action, politics became an obvious location for attempts to seek protection from harassment, degradation and violence related to sexual and gender identities. It is no secret that in America, the political establishment has been and continues to be dominated by wealthy, presumably heterosexual white men whose interests do not lie in giving political voice and power to those who violate so-called biblically grounded moral codes; thus, from the beginning, gay liberation as a political movement has found incredible resistance to its mission. Additionally, despite political gains in gay liberation, research at the turn of the millennium supports the notion that a majority of the general American public maintains the attitude that homosexuals are disgusting and do not meet moral standards (Sherrill & Yang, 2000). Perhaps the focus on politics should be shifted or at least complimented by personal and collective work that seeks to change values, attitudes, and beliefs which fuel heterosexism and homophobia.

Sears and Williams (1997) make an argument supporting activism not at the level of politics; rather, they argue for work at a personal level involving attempts to address affect, cognition, and behavior. Williams says, “A political, approach cannot be effective without addressing prejudicial attitudes and institutionalized discrimination in the general population” (Sears & Williams, 1997, p. 3). Since politics is a product of experiences, beliefs, values, and attitudes, it is vital to consider and undertake work that begins to

interrupt long standing traditions and reified norms that exclude those defined as marginal. Of course much work has been done politically with regard to so-called gay rights and it is from that work that those who identify as sexually and gender non-conformist enjoy more visibility and tolerance thirty years post Stonewall; yet, “. . . it behooves activists to seriously consider focusing on strategies for changing attitudes, socioeconomic institutions and the media. At the beginning of the new millennium our biggest impact on society may well be made outside politics” (Sears & Williams, 1997, p. 6). More than ten years later, Williams’ call to consider activism outside the political arena seems to have been partially answered and perhaps there is more to do. An example that illustrates possibilities for addressing the personal in conjunction with the political may be found in so-called gay marriage.

Some have voiced concern about the impact of gay marriage as “the” current political issue for gay liberation and it is easy to surmise that the American public is not ready to make an ethical shift equalizing the union of same-sex couples albeit in the image of hetero-sex couples. A CNN opinion poll conducted in May 2009 demonstrates that attitudes about gay marriage are not favorable with 54% of respondents answering “no” to the question “Do you think gays and lesbians have a constitutional right to get married and have their marriage recognized by law as valid?” A similar poll conducted in May of 2009 by USA Today had a 57% “no” response which compared similarly to a 2006 poll where 56% responded “no” to the question “Do you think marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?” (Polling Reports, Inc., 2009). In general, the American

public continues to view same-sex marriage unfavorably. Obviously, there have been some areas of the country where people are willing to support marriage rights; yet, the recent passage of Proposition 8 in California, which constitutionally bans same-sex marriage, demonstrates that even a so-called liberal state is not ready to embrace same-sex couples as being “equal” in the eyes of the law with regard to marriage. It is not difficult to imagine that values, beliefs, and attitudes that are less than favorable to sexual diversity lie at the heart of the gay marriage debate.

A 2007 study that examined abstract and judgmental value expression found that respondents’ perceptions about gay marriage included beliefs that same-sex couples seeking marriage violated specific values, which “played a more important role in predicting political attitudes than abstract value expressions, general negative affect directed toward the group, and political ideology” (Henry & Reyna, 2007, p. 273). Additionally, Craig, Martinez, Kane, and Gainous (2005) describe simultaneous positive and negative positions on gay rights including gay marriage with a conclusion that ambivalence is correlated with a person’s core values. Brewer (2008) points out that American values are steeped in traditional vantage points that originate in Judeo-Christian beliefs, which tend to be framed as politically conservative. Indeed, the participants in this work seem to reiterate the notion that conservative values and religious fundamentalism are keys in the location of sexual and gender difference on the moral compass, with “deviant” sexualities perceived as immoral. Traditional values and beliefs seem to be a location for work in disrupting negative attitudes toward those who identify as sexually and gender non-conformist. As discussed in Chapter IV of this work,

biology has also contributed to the discourse about homosexuality and its position with regard to values and attitudes.

Lewis (2007) in his paper examining the impact of the biological basis for homosexuality on one's perceptions of morality and its link to gay rights makes some general points that include the following:

Within the general gay community, men almost universally believe their own homosexuality is biologically based and the women generally agree, but they have greater sympathy for the social construction and fluidity of sexuality hypotheses (Herek, 1996). Gay and lesbian political activists typically argue that homosexuality is biologically determined and immutable, partly because heterosexuals who believe this are much more likely to support gay rights. Those who believe homosexuality is a choice typically think it is a bad or sinful one, which can be overcome with prayer or counseling; they are also more likely to worry that children who are exposed to gay men and lesbians, or even are taught that homosexuality is an acceptable alternative lifestyle, will be more likely to choose (or be recruited into) homosexuality. (p. 2)

Lewis' (2007) research supports consistent findings that a belief in a biological "cause" of homosexuality correlates with the support of gay rights. Additionally, Wood and Bartkowski (2004) found evidence that supports the notion that a belief in a biological basis for homosexuality is linked to greater support for gay rights. If an attribute is biologically based the implication is that it is immutable, removing it from the realm of choice. It appears that if one has no choice in matters of sexuality or other aspects of identity, then sociocultural spaces have to struggle with how to accommodate what cannot be changed. Mucciaroni and Killian (2004) found that indeed, those who believe sexuality is biologically based, thus immutable, were more likely to support gay rights personally and politically. Of course, a biological cause for sexuality also creates

opportunities to classify the “condition” as a disease consequently launching a “cure” for the anomaly, a path that was followed for three quarters of the twentieth century by psychology with regard to homosexuality being classified as a mental illness. Despite the inability of biology to definitively support a “cause” for homosexuality, many who advocate for so-called gay rights hail a biological cause because of its power to affect the attitudes of lawmakers and the general public. Indeed, even if biology were to offer an explanation for homosexuality, moral questions would undoubtedly continue to be raised.

The link between morality, contextualized traditionally, and politics has not been quite as evident as it was during the administration of President George W. Bush when so-called moral politics dominated much of the discourse around American life. In fact, the 2004 Presidential election was deduced to moral questions about gay marriage with conservatism prevailing as Bush was re-elected to office prompting many on the so-called political right to claim victory with regard to re-claiming morality in America, as though there were a moral war (Ashbee, 2007; Patterson, 2005). It is well established that the so-called base of the American Republican political party is intrinsically connected to the so-called religious right (Seat, 2007). Thus, politics and religion co-mingle extensively on the political stage.

The relationship between religious fundamentalism and homophobia illuminates the impact of traditional religious doctrine and practice on one’s ideas about what is moral and this connects to values and attitudes with regard to those who are sexually and gender non-conformists. Schwartz and Lindley (2005) found that religious fundamentalism in one’s personal belief system was a strong predictor of homophobia

and that males were significantly more homophobic than females; thus, when attempting to affect change to a more accepting position with regard to plural sexualities and genders, it is important to be aware of the link between the personal and political, particularly with regard to the presence of conservative values and attitudes.

As the Bush administration proclaimed its moral agenda, the gay community, working from an essentialist position much like it did during the Regan era, seemed to push back, but the inertia of conservative attitudes made it difficult to make political inroads. Attempts to keep morality out of the discussion did not pay off as activists worked to affect policy. Ball (2003) argues that the liberal approach of minimizing moral dynamics in matters of government served the gay liberation movement well in confronting state oppression; yet, in order to truly impact the lives of those who are sexually diverse, explicit moral arguments must take a place on the public stage with emphasis on the moral principle that everyone has a right to seek “. . . opportunities to meet basic needs and exercise basic capabilities associated with sexual intimacy” (p. 9). If and when advocates and activists in the area of sexual and gender inclusion take up work in a moral vein, there must be consideration of the connection between religion and morality as linked to attitudes toward sexuality and gender non-conformity. Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) found that personal religious beliefs effected attitudes about homosexuality in America and point out that cultures that emphasize strong self-expression follow suit. Thus, religion must be carefully considered as one engages in models for (re)imagining sexual and gender identities.

## **Oppressive Spaces: Emancipatory Possibilities**

### ***Religion***

As discussed above, religion tends to be an unfavorable location for those who are sexually and gender non-conformist; yet, religious entities have demonstrated an ability to push past boundaries created by tradition. Several mainstream denominations in America have entertained and even celebrated gender and sexual diversity including the ordination of women and, recently, the ordination of the first openly gay Episcopal bishop in the United States, Gene Robinson (Robinson, 2008). Crew (1997) points out that that Episcopal Church has been at the forefront of mainstream American Christian denominations in confronting racism, institutionalized heterosexism, patriarchy, and homophobia asserting that it was the willingness of many of its members to dialogue about issues that created an environment conducive to discussing social justice. Perhaps it was the continued raising of supportive voices that finally pushed through barricades and opened the opportunity for Bishop Robinson to be elected; nevertheless and despite much controversy, he took his position in 2004 wearing a bullet proof vest at his consecration because of numerous death threats (Karlsruhe & Karlsruhe, 2007). One of the lessons to be learned by the rise of Gene Robinson to his position as Bishop is that willingness to dialogue individually and collectively becomes a key in any effort to unlock closed minds in order to shift paradigms. Of course, the Episcopal Church is not the only religious entity that has struggled with or addressed homosexuality.

Writing about attempts to address homophobia and heterosexism in the Catholic Church, Nugent (1997) points out that efforts have been and must continue to be made to

transcend simple approaches focused on education in addressing long-standing attitudes about sexuality and gender non-conformity with regard to Catholic priests and makes the case for using affective and interpersonal methods at the individual level in work to disrupt homophobia and heterosexism. Indeed it is the personal that seems to emerge in the discourse surrounding gay activism not only with regard to religious entities but other spaces as well.

While many Christian denominations and other faith traditions continue to struggle with embracing those who are deemed sexually and gender non-conformists, there is promise in the fact that discussion about identity issues is occurring in the first place. Since moral beliefs, values, and attitudes are often grounded in religion, it is important to become aware of religions positions with regard to sexuality and gender and, according to those who have been doing the work, one must be willing to engage on a personal level in order to affect change. For example, one may “come out” to individuals in the religious entity who seem to be supportive and, after building a sense of alliance, discussions with the entity’s leaders may be helpful. In any case, it seems that personalizing one’s efforts to affect change with regard to beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with sexuality and gender is important. In addition to institutions of religion, other social institutions can become emancipatory spaces for sexual and gender non-conformity and among them are schools.

### ***Schooling***

When considering liberatory possibilities in schools, one must understand that much more is happening in school than learning reading, writing, and arithmetic; indeed,

the hidden curriculum in schools may be more powerful than the one prescribed by those who design what one is to learn. Modern public schooling, a product of the industrial revolution, was/is designed to produce the American workforce, which demands a range of skills and abilities. Additionally, the public and private schools are a key space for learning social and interpersonal skills, which often include how to *be* with people (Purpel & McLaurin, 2004; Shapiro, 2006; Spring, 2005). While students are not particularly instructed on such things as competition in the workplace and social status, they are non-the-less immersed in learning about who is “in” and who is “out” with regard to identity (Giroux & Penna, 1983). As I have pointed out, school is a location for degradation, harassment, persecution, and violence for those who are unable or unwilling to conform to acceptable social morays.

The participants in this work illustrate the impact of the hidden curriculum with regard to sexuality and gender identities. When considering how one may engage with schools to educate people about sexual and gender plurality, one must understand that school is a reflection of the broader society while simultaneously teaching/perpetuating the values and attitudes of dominant sociocultural norms; thus, the promise of advocacy and activism in schools lies in being able to affect personal values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs through transformative education. Evidence of why this is important and necessary may be found in recent violent acts that have taken place in American schools.

Unfortunately and alarmingly, school shootings have occurred at increasing rates in the last 25 years. There have been more than thirty cases of random school shootings since 1982 with one of the most recent and deadly being at Virginia Tech. In a 2003

study Kimmel and Mahler (2003) assert that school shootings are local problems that are concentrated in the so-called “red” or Republican voting states; most of the perpetrators who did the shooting were bullied about perceived sexual and gender identities; their actions appear to be retaliatory toward the bullying; white males seem to be much more likely than others to engage in random shootings; the bullying that seemed to promote acts of violence was specifically homophobic in nature. Alarming, it seems that the link that Kimmel and Mahler (2003) propose between masculinity, homophobia, and violence is indeed evidence of an enormous problem in many American schools, particularly in rural areas where traditional value systems are strongest. While school shootings are extreme examples of the presence of bullying and homophobia, they represent the proverbial tip of the iceberg with regard to the ostracization and exclusion of those who are or are perceived to be sexually and gender non-conformist. Thus, if acts of bullying, harassment, degradation and violence are to be prevented, the work of the educator becomes located in disrupting values, attitudes, and behaviors that perpetuate and promote homophobia and heterosexism.

The literature is plentiful with models and case studies regarding homophobia, heterosexism and how one may attempt to teach and learn about what lies at the foundation of hurtful beliefs and practices that support them. Some of the common threads that emerge do not emphasize change in policy as much as personal transformative efforts. As mentioned above with regard to religion, work at the personal level is imperative if one hopes to affect change; however, one must consider the collective and community when engaging in redressing values, attitudes, beliefs, and

behaviors that are homophobia and heterosexist. Goodman (2005a) offers an example of how the “model” school principal must take personal and collective responsibility for demonstrating through personal behavior and policy making a humanitarian and inclusive school environment, asserting that educational leaders must deal with personal values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are not conducive to justice and fairness. Goldstein, Collins, and Halder (2007), calling for more research in the area of anti-homophobic education, find that teachers who make an attempt to engage in addressing homophobia believe themselves to be ill equipped to negotiate questions and conflicts that emerge which lie at the intersection of religion and culture, illustrating the need for more teacher development with regard to the complexities of homophobia including an understanding of community values at the religious and secular levels. Indeed, it appears that one must consider the community within and beyond the school walls as efforts to address homophobia and heterosexism are launched.

Many of the models aimed at addressing heterosexism and homophobia in schools call for the use of multiplicity with regard to using reading materials, visual images, films, guest speakers, panels, experiential techniques and personal narratives to expose students to positive messages about sexual and gender identities (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Goldfarb, 2006; Little & Marx, 2002). Additionally, the involvement of stakeholders and the community becomes important in work to address heterosexism and homophobia (Wehbi, 2004; Garber, 2002). One of the challenges is addressing the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of teachers and administrators.

Historically, teacher education has focused on pedagogical methods in an effort to produce teachers who can follow and implement curriculum plans. It seems that notions of moral and spiritual dimensions of the classroom are not routinely a part of teacher education courses and Purpel and McLaurin (2004), and Shapiro (2006), among others, call for schooling and education to take up moral and spiritual dimensions and aspects when engaging with students not only in the classroom but in all spaces where education can and does occur. The so-called progressive educators have long been associated with the disruption of bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination by exploring and promoting tolerance, empathy, acceptance, and celebration of so-called difference. Recognizing that tolerance simply asks us to deal with difference, the progressives moved toward an emphasis on empathy or identification with the “other.” Taylor (2002) describes this effort:

Having long recognized that information alone is not enough to produce empathy (Steward & Borgers, 1986), attitudinal changes from bigotry to compassion are sought through such devices as exposing students to positive representations of marginalized groups, providing access to the voices of silenced populations, facilitating role-playing experiences that let students of dominant culture simulate marginalized people’s oppressive experiences, and providing students with corrective information about the oppressive experiences of the members of such groups. The goal of such lessons is for students to project themselves into the difficult social situations of others unlike themselves, recognize their common humanity, and move in the process from disrespect to solidarity. (p. 223)

Of course, it would be utopian to assume that simply awakening empathy is the answer to dispelling homophobia and heterosexism; indeed, deep foundational beliefs and values whose roots are often embedded in religious doctrine and practice are many times in conflict with embracing empathy for those who are considered immoral, particularly

when foundational beliefs are conservative or fundamental. Taylor (2002) proposes that in the case of resisting an empathic lens based on personal foundational beliefs that reinforce “otherizing” those who are sexually and gender non-conformists the educator may employ a deconstructive model that addresses aspects of sociocultural phenomena that serve to marginalize particular groups. Using the prophetic voice, the educator calls into question systems and elements of systems, including those grounded in religion, in an attempt to promote a critical reading; however it is clear that deconstructive experiences are not always transformational. As Taylor (2002) points out:

. . . even deconstructive classrooms often maintain the bifurcated tradition of Western scholarship which shoos matters of religious faith offstage into the personal arena, leaving them unscrutinized. In practical terms, the academic avoidance of discussing personal religious beliefs lets homophobic Christians complete Education degrees and arrive in classrooms with their prejudices intact, never having experienced the conflict between their faith and a commitment to just teaching practices. It also lets passive anti-homophobes grossly underestimate the continuing prevalence of homophobia in their future teaching colleagues, confirming our likeliest allies in a complacent attitude that homophobia is extinct when, for the sake of lesbian and gay students and the children of lesbian and gay parents, we need teachers to be alarmed at the damage homophobes continue to do. (p. 228)

Petrovic (1999) asserts that many teachers and administrators who claim conservative positions want to act on them in the classroom. Delineating moral democratic and moralistic positions, Petrovic concludes that schooling is constructed on moral democratic principles, which imply that egalitarian approaches should be used in education. Despite shortcomings with enacting the moral democratic principle, and because of the virtue of recognition he concludes that a positive portrayal of same-sex identities is required in the classroom; however, convincing teachers, administrators, and

school board members of the need to equally represent the diversity in identities is no easy matter, particularly in areas where traditionalism and conservatism are prevalent. Sometimes invoking empathy is sometimes helpful in prying apart the links between religion, homophobia, and heterosexism.

Some psychologists claim that there are two types of empathy; one based in cognitive processes and one in affective processes (Davis, 1994; Stephan, 1999). It is within these two concepts of empathy that Little and Marx (2002) and Yep (2002) suggests strategies that address homophobia and heterosexism which emphasize methods that titillate students' thoughts and emotions. Yep (2002) purports that rather than framing lessons in information about homophobia, the instructor frame homophobia and heterosexism in heteronormativity as a foundational component of exclusive structures. Using Rubin's (1993) notion of the "charmed circle," being defined as the experience of living within the bounds of heteronormativity, Yep suggests that the instructor use particular scenarios to engage the students at the cognitive and emotional levels.

The examples above are among others found in pedagogical literature and what appears to be common is the demand for work on several levels that provokes empathy and critical thought with regard to heterosexism and homophobia. It is clear that education, particularly as it is conducted in schools, is an important location for the examination of the dynamics of homophobia and heterosexism in an effort to create emancipatory spaces so that identities can be (re)imagined. Another location that merits consideration is the media.

## ***Media***

We live in the era of technology and it is interesting to examine how media as part of the technological society offers opportunities to address heteronormativity, homophobia, and heterosexism. Indeed, it appears that media can and does influence attitudes about homosexuality as evidenced by the work of Levina, Waldo, and Fitzgerald (2000) who utilized presentations of video to three groups of self-identified heterosexuals in order to measure the effects of viewing anti-gay, pro-gay, and neutral texts. The findings indicated that even after the passage of time, viewing the anti-gay video increased negative attitudes toward homosexuality and, conversely, viewing the pro-gay video resulted in increased positive attitudes toward homosexuality. Historically, media has not portrayed homosexuality in a positive light.

Images of the homosexual in twentieth century America were, for the most part portrayed negatively with same-sex desire depicted as “perverted” resulting in psychological and emotional pain and self-destruction (Russo, 1987; Streitmatter, 2009). It was not until the 1990s when more positive images of gay characters in film, in print, and on television enjoyed a more supportive portrayal by the with many pointing to MTV’s *The Real World* as a key location for America’s first look into the life of a young male who identified as gay and who was HIV positive (Strauss, 2009). Rather quickly, gay characters began to emerge as less pathological and more “normal,” with representations tending to either follow stereotypes or contextualize gay characters as heteronormative, sometimes to the point of blending into the “normal” straight world (Whelan, 2006).

Current mainstream media reflects what have become “normal” gay couples who, presumably, are just like any ordinary couple as they compete in reality shows or redecorate their houses on the design channels. Media spaces for gay males who engage in sexualities that queer the boundaries of monogamy and binarial constructions of relationships are limited or non-existent except for spaces in the world of pornography or independent films. If a male character is portrayed as queering sexual spaces in mainstream media, he usually meets an end that is tragic, unfulfilled, and/or filled with unhappiness, a recent example being the blockbuster film *Brokeback Mountain* (Ossana & Schammas, 2006), where two men portrayed as the mythologized American cowboy fall in love and engage in a long-term relationship that ends with the death of one of the men and the broken heart of the other. It is this ongoing portrayal of gays as either acting straight or ending tragically that Nardi (1997) suggest must be disrupted.

Pointing out that there are four basic images of gay people in the media: overt homophobic and negative stereotypic; heterosexist (straight acting); invisible or omitted; accurate, fair, and balanced, Nardi (1997) called for activism that addressed those who controlled medial production and media images. Taking up Nardi’s position, current activist efforts should not only point out negative portrayals, e. g. pathological gays, but must also confront “normality” in the media emphasizing that portrayals of those who are sexually and gender non-conformist must include other than heteronormative images. Indeed, mainstream media, though it has progressed, continues to be challenged by the dominance of heteronormativity and heterosexism and this is also true of pornography.

Certainly, when one engages with images of male same-sex pornography, one is bombarded with a smorgasbord of bodies engaged in a plethora of sexual acts that, by-in-large replicate the heteronormative dominant/subordinate binary. In most cases, the images are commanded by males who embody either the dominant masculine “ideal” with ripped, muscular bodies or the “feminized” man who is thin, young, hairless, subordinate, and ready to serve the “real” man. The message is clear, “gay” sex mimics “straight” sex with the subordinate partner being sexually satisfied by the power and control that is exerted through the actions of the dominate partner. Given such images of sexual activity, it is no wonder that Kendall (2006) argues that male same-sex pornography as a media source promotes “. . . violence, and aggressive, nonegalitarian behavior . . . [and] hypermasculinity found at the expense of someone else’s liberty and self-worth” (p. 106). Additionally, gay pornography as pedagogy brings to its pupils messages about masculinity and femininity that are deeply rooted in the hegemony of heterosexism and patriarchy, with one of its lessons being crystal clear; “real” men have great bodies, big muscles, large dicks, and virility, while “non-real” men are simply there to receive the favors of the person they are serving. Currently, the internet provides the central medial location for imaging sexuality and sexual acts.

The sexual marketplace that exists on the internet enhances the objectification of others for the sake of sexual pleasure and Ross (2005) refers to Bauman (2003) who suggests that objectifying and consuming others for the sake of personal pleasure impacts the moral economy while enhancing the fiscal economy related to the sex industry. No doubt, the internet is a location for the exploration of multiple sexual fantasies and

sexualities and it serves as a public space to document sexual practices as it concurrently influences them. The negative aspects of sexual images on the internet and the social structures they reinforce are countered with possibilities that exist for experiencing sexualities in plural ways. What is important to recognize is that the internet can provide a private, disembodied opportunity for anyone with access to it to experience an endless array of sexual acts as one engages in self-satisfying sexual activity either alone or with a partner or partners.

Ross (2005) suggests that the internet allows for a, “. . . surrogate body to experiment and to be experimented upon [sexually]” (p. 344). It is within this personal engagement with internet beings and images that one begins to open opportunities to “queer” sexuality as one bends and, sometimes, breaks the rules that are prescribed by one’s chosen sexual identity. Ross, Mansson, Daneback, and Tikkanen (2005) discovered that 11% of their sample of 244 men who engaged in sexual activity on the internet identified as heterosexual, yet they also admitted to engaging in cyber-sexual relationships with other men—an interesting discovery given the strict rules of male-male contact in face-to-face encounters. What is important to recognize is that the queer spaces that exist in cyber-space must be carefully examined not only for their connection to the heteronormative, patriarchal structures that serve to oppress the so-called feminine and those people who embody it, but also for the opportunities they offer in experiencing sexual identities between and beyond the boundaries of particular sexual categories. Perhaps the internet could be used not only to for exploration of so-called queer sexualities, it could also serve as a location for educating people about the broad diversity

of sexualities and gender identities. Indeed, many people are quite experimental on the internet.

Using cyber-space, young people are creating interesting identity spaces with such labels as “Emo” or “Goth,” where there is some propensity to engage in sexual acts or sexual identities that confront the status quo; however, these young people are on the fringes and are often targeted by media and their peers as “disturbed” or “delinquent.” Thus, the price for pushing boundaries seems to be exclusion as identities are scrutinized, labeled, and adjudicated by peers, those in authority, and the media; yet, there are those willing to continue to engage in challenging dominant identities. It must be noted that as media participates in exclusion, it can become a space for inclusion as evidenced by efforts to accommodate marginalized groups.

In 2005, Viacom’s MTV cable network launched the *Logo* channel, which represents the first television entity that is devoted to programming directed toward those who are sexually and gender non-conformists (Viacom International, Inc., 2008). While *Logo* is not available in all areas of the country, it does represent an effort to play to the market that seems to be emerging in the media industry, and as Russo (1987) pointed out, profitability is a factor in media’s embrace of the diversity of the public. However, as Stanley (2005) pointed out, *Logo* is very much like “straight” cable in its structure of programming and advertising, calling into question its impact on a discourse about queer identities. Never-the-less, the presence of *Logo* marks a space for visibility that has not existed in the past.

Certainly, the presence of those who have been/are marginalized due to sexuality and gender identities has increased in American media yet, for the male who is engaged in the complex task of negotiating identity, there is no space that supports adopting traditional feminine gender attributes and he does so at the risk of experiencing humiliation by his family and peers, degradation, deflated self-esteem, and internalized shame related to his “femininity.” Sissyphobia and homophobia are perhaps fueled by the increased presence of those who are sexually and gender non-conformist and as Nardi (1997) quoting Russo (1987) points out, media’s confrontation of sissyphobia and homophobia “will change only when it becomes financially profitable, and reality will never be profitable until society overcomes its fears and hatred of difference and begins to see that we are all in this together” (p. 441). Sears and Williams (1997) urge activists to contact media representatives and producers to voice concerns about the perpetuation of homo-negativity and heterosexists images and representations. Until inclusivity is embraced by society and the media, the struggle with degradation and shame will continue and those who live with it suffer emotionally and psychology, often turning to human services for assistance.

### ***Human Services***

Throughout time people have made efforts to help others in need and, despite deep divisions about what helping should be and, in some cases, covert benefits to the helper at the expense of the helped, altruistic efforts have been contextualized as noble and heroic. The advent of psychology launched efforts to engage in helping through professionalizing particular skills aimed at alleviating mental and emotional pain. Of

course, as has been pointed out, psychology pathologized cognitions, emotions, desires, and behaviors that did not conform to normalized parameters with sexuality and gender becoming locations for deviance and disease. Thus, the foundation of counseling lies in helping the abnormal to *become* “normal.” Obviously, as society has (re)defined normal and natural, counselors have refined their efforts and the guidelines they follow in addressing so-called pathologies. The pertinent case-in-point is the elimination of homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973. With that action, human services had to re-vamp its approach to the sexually deviant and professional codes of ethics reflected the necessity for supporting diversity at least in terms of sexuality; however, personal values, attitudes, and beliefs are not simply left at the door of the therapy room. Indeed, human service providers, like all of us, are products of their experiences and this becomes a location of concern when considering how so-called differences are or are not embraced.

The discipline of social work, the largest provider of professional mental health services in the United States, is often hailed for its attention to diversity and the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics specifically addresses competence and practice issues with regard to diversity, emphasizing respect and appreciation (National Association of Social Workers, 2009). Indeed, social work and social workers has/have often led the struggle for equity and social justice; yet, according to McPhail (2004) and Snell (2007), social work continues to struggle with moving beyond oppressive binarial thinking (male/female, homo/heterosexual, etc.) as evidenced by the absence of postmodern and queer theories and the presence of queer and trans voices in social work literature and fears about reporting incidents of discrimination. Snively, Kreuger, Stretch,

Watt, and Chadha (2004) assert that social work students from rural environments, where more traditional and/or fundamental values seem to be present, have higher levels of homophobia than those students from more urban environments with increased homophobia related to gender (males more homophobic), religiosity (fundamental religious values correlated with increased homophobia), and social interaction with gays (less interaction related to increased homophobia). Calling for efforts to increase exposure to people who are open about their identities, Snively et al. (2004) argue that personal contact with those who are sexually and gender non-conformist through panel discussion or guest speaker venues reduces homophobia and heterosexism. Again, the thread of experiential learning emerges as a means of disrupting homo-negativity.

Reflecting the need to engage at the cognitive and emotional levels, Messinger (2002) suggests using a more holistic approach in addressing homophobia and heterosexism including experiential learning, didactic exposure to structures that support heteronormativity, readings, visual presentations that promote positive images of those who are sexually and gender non-conformist, and analysis of social policies and mission statements that promote non-discrimination. Models for professional practice exist in the literature and include Crisp's (2005) references to *Gay Affirmative Practice*, which draws on six fundamental principles outlined by Appleby and Anastas (1998).

Gay Affirmative Practice includes the following charge to human service professionals:

1. Do not assume that a client is heterosexual.
2. Believe that homophobia in the client and society is the problem, rather than sexual orientation.

3. Accept an identity as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person as a positive outcome of the helping process.
4. Work with clients to decrease internalized homophobia to achieve a positive identity as a gay or lesbian person.
5. Be knowledgeable about different theories of the coming out process for gays and lesbians.
6. Deal with one's own homophobia and heterosexual bias. (Crisp, 2005, pp. 54-55)

Additionally, clients should be referred to resources that support sexual and gender non-conformity, use positive language and terminology, and view identity as a complex and dynamic experience that is fluid. Practitioners should also be knowledgeable about social policies that affect those whose identities are non-conformist (Crisp & DiNitto, 2004; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). Education must not end with students in human service undergraduate or graduate programs; learning should extend into the professional community.

In his dissertation work, Romeo (2007) demonstrated that specific training for human service professionals regarding changing homophobic and heterosexually biased practice was successful. Interestingly, most professional licenses in human services require continuing education; however, it is usually left to the professional to decide which workshops to attend. Perhaps consideration should be given to requiring continuing education with regard to those deemed marginal with regard to race, gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality.

Having been a clinical social worker for over twenty years, I can attest to the presence of homophobia and heterosexism in the human services profession; however, it is worth noting that not all human services professionals are homophobic or heterosexist

and it is the activism of many of these individuals that calls attention to policies and practices that are negative toward those who are sexually and gender non-conformist. I urge those who are professional helpers to continue to engage in deep introspection with regard to prejudice and to engage in continually learning about the rich diversity that is present in human beings. Human service offers what I believe to be one of the most valuable aspects of human existence; knowing someone else. Being exposed to those who are often known only through hearsay and stereotypes can be and is transforming and vital to confronting negative values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

### ***Visibility***

As Harvey Milk stood on the steps of City Hall in San Francisco in 1978 speaking to a crowd of thousands about the injustice of prejudice and discrimination toward gay people, he issued a charge to “come out” and be visible so that the world could know gay people rather than a stereotyped image of gayness (Shilts, 1982). Indeed, the call to come out resounded as the early gay liberation movement gained momentum and many people answered the call by telling friends, family, co-workers, fellow congregates and others that they were gay. Gay visibility became the mission of the so-called gay pride movement as people took to the streets in parade fashion celebrating their identities, which led to the development of essentialized gayness.

Of course, as mentioned above, for many people the only “gays” they knew/know were/are those represented in the media and often those images are less than positive. One needs only to view footage past and present of gay pride parades to understand how someone watching the evening news would be confused and fearful about what gayness

was/is as drag queens, dykes on bikes, “clone” boys, leather daddies, and other representations of gayness were beamed into the homes of the American public, creating opportunities for people to pay attention to conservatives who touted the perversity of homosexuality. Indeed, in Chapter III of this work, images of gay in the 1970s and early 1980s were perceived as negative by the participants, some of whom continue to hope for “normal” representations of gayness. The public was not privy to the diversity of identities that found themselves codified as “gay” and it was not until personal connections emerged that people had the opportunity to truly know so-called gay people.

Inspired by the activism of the pioneers of modern gay liberation, sons and daughters informed their parents about their identities, often creating a firestorm at home. As noted above and in Chapter II of this work, gay visibility fueled the conservative movement to reclaim “family values,” which, in true Foucauldian fashion, intensified gay liberation efforts. Thus, visibility became central in the attempt to gain equality and acceptance in mainstream America and continues to hold much power personally and politically in so-called gay liberation. While home was not supportive for many of those coming out, there was a movement that called for the parents and friends of those who were claiming gay, lesbian, and transgender identities to embrace those they loved.

Launched unknowingly and because of the visibility created by “coming out,” the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) organization began in 1972 when Jeanne Manford marched in New York’s gay pride parade in support of her son who had been recently beaten at a protest event (<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=267>). After forming a support group, PFLAG opened opportunities for other supportive

organizations such as the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLADD) among others. Indeed, visibility opened opportunities for support that may have remained hidden if the proverbial closet door had not been opened.

As noted by the participants in this work, the coming out process is often not celebratory even when one's family is "accepting." I contend that the message of "shame on you!" plays out through internalized shame and becomes one of the factors that is preventive in being able to take pride in visibility as a queer person. As one considers how visibility may be liberatory, it is important to recognize that often being "out" also asserts that one may indeed be, as Butler (1996) suggests, coming in to ongoing dominant structures that persist in naming what may be unnamable; however, evidence supports that having knowledge of and relationships with a person who identifies as gay influences transformative processes for those who were previously fearful and/or unsupportive of gay people and gay rights.

Lewis (2006) found that knowing a so-called LGB person (note that he did not include Transgender) was influential in increasing one's positive view on the morality of gay relationships, the injustice of discrimination in employment, the unfairness of "don't ask, don't tell" policies in the military, the importance of repealing sodomy laws, and support for same-sex marriage. Similarly, in her work, Howard-Hassmann (2001) asserts that,

The process of accepting gays was further eased when respondents became aware that gays were not the Other; that they were, in fact, their relatives, neighbors, students, coworkers or clients. If the Other was not themselves, it was often those

quite close to them. The new concern and respect that they were teaching themselves to feel was not, then, a concern and respect for abstract strangers, but concern and respect for members of their own reference groups, their own families and communities. (p. 147)

Personally, my coming out to family members who as you may recall from Chapter I of this work, held significantly conservative beliefs, was transformative not only for me but for them in that they *knew* a son who also identified as gay; thus, gayness was no longer “out there,” it was *in* their world, eating at their table and sleeping under their roof.

Taking my case and the cases of some of the participants in this work as an example, one can understand the potential liberatory possibilities that visibility offers not only to those who become visible to themselves, but to those who know them; thus, Milk’s call to come out extends beyond the closet into the world as those who struggle with homophobia and heterosexism met/meet gay people and began/begin to interrogate beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that heretofore bound them in fear and negativity with regard to those who are sexually and gender non-conformist. Of course, it is important to consider the impact of how one communicates with others as one is being known as a person who identifies as gay.

Gust Yep (1997) advocates the use of persuasive communication in an effort to offer possibilities for how one may consider communicating with another in a manner that calls values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors into question. Yep outlines four approaches that he asserts may change negative attitudes toward those who are sexually and gender non-conformist including: functional, consistency, social judgment, and elaboration likelihood (Sears & Williams, 1997, pp. 51-60). The focus of the approaches

is to shape your discussion based on the positions of those with whom you are communicating. For example, if you are speaking with a person whose value systems are conservatively based, it may be beneficial to use Yep's functional approach in talking with that person about what purpose conservatism holds. The idea is that one may be able to shift one's perspective if there is an understanding of why particular beliefs are important.

Conversations about sexualities and gender identities that push the boundaries constructed by traditional gender labels are just beginning to occur and they raise difficult questions related to how and what people can be. As evidenced by the participants in this study, using "queer" as a means of describing liberatory identities may open old wounds; yet, some are *being* queer by exploring seemingly boundless spaces with regard to gender and sexual identities, which troubles codification by calling boundaries into question. If "queer" describes boundlessness, what is to be done when identities clash and create potentially hurtful or harmful interactions with others?

### **Boundaries in Boundless Spaces**

I have argued that homophobia and heterosexism as constructed within Western societies and reinforced through ongoing dominant patriarchal ideologies lies at the heart of external messages of shame directed toward those who do not conform to the boundaries set forth by what have become reified, traditional identity labels. Further, using evidence collected from the participants in this work, I assert that the receipt of shame messages through acts of degradation support, through psychological processes, internalized shame, which results in concerns about self-esteem, self-worth, and value as

a human being. The use of codified identities becomes a means of negotiating who one is and where one belongs; yet, as we label, we not only exclude, we begin to construct boundaries associated with particular identities that are influenced by dominant structures despite their existence in marginalized spaces. Thus, deconstruction of codified identities implies that the boundaries surrounding them must be raised, creating opportunities for boundlessness in order to satisfy the plurality of lived experiences. As one of the participants in this work voiced, “I am not sure why people have to have titles on what they are because it would be nice to not have titles on anybody . . . it would be great to say ‘I am who I am’ . . .” Indeed, the freedom to be what and who one wants to be without a label is exactly what “queer” seemed to intend though we know that “queer” has also become a label (Jagose, 1996). Perhaps it is within freedom that one may discover the ability to be fluid and plural, though simply creating free spaces where people can be and do what they want does not seem to answer all the questions about identities.

Plato, in Book VIII of *Republic* (Grube, 1992), discusses democracy and its central tenant; freedom. In his discussion, Plato warns that a state of complete and unbridled freedom, while theoretically utopic, is ultimately un-ordered. Conflict arises when desires and efforts to fulfill them clash and/or create harmful situations where others are concerned. If there is to be complete freedom then, “. . . all pleasures [good and evil] are equal and must be valued equally” (Grube, 1992, p. 231). Plato’s points about freedom are interesting when considering plurality in sexualities and gender identities,

particularly when one entertains sexual and gender expressions that involve contact or interaction with others.

As I have previously discussed, queer theories critique codification and clearly there are exclusive and oppressive elements in naming and identities. As one considers the colorful variety of sexual and gender expressions, concern begins to arise when those ways of being sexual or gendered impact the lives of others. For example, recent media attention has focused on those people who seemingly enjoy sexual contact with adolescents; a practice which has been controversial through the ages. Polarized arguments are made with regard to pederasty as some believe that sexual acts with adolescents are not harmful as long as there is mutual consent and others believe that having sex with a teenager causes psychological harm even if the relationship is consensual. Ultimately, arguments about sexual and gender expressions and the boundaries that surround them seem to be framed in morality and, as I have discussed, morality and moral behaviors are often a matter of values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Adams and Pigg (2005) assert that there are many definitions and expressions of sex and sexuality globally; yet, there is a tendency to privilege traditional Western values when issues of morality are considered. When considering sexual expressions, the so-called far right or reactionary camp seems to believe that acts of sex should occur only between opposite-sex adults who are married and who want to reproduce. Conversely, the so-called far left, or the radicals give value to alternative ways of being sexually and may condone acts of sex that are grounded in recreation and pleasure including group sex and polyandry. The space between these poles holds many possibilities and judgments about

what is acceptable or not fall along this continuum; yet, there is a liberally based principle that seems to permeate moral decision-making when it comes to sexuality and gender; the principle of mutual consent.

Steutel and Spiecker (2004) point out that the principle of mutual consent is grounded in Western culture and may be considered in two ways; that one can arrange one's sexual and/or gendered life in a manner that is conducive to one's desires (personal) or that consent is the key factor in having morally unobjectionable sexual contact or gender expression (public). Socioculturally, mutual consent between those engaged in sexual activities is becoming the principle by which the public determines the tolerance of particular sexual partnerships or gender expressions. Of course, current American culture also places great value on the ages of those engaged in sexual contact and, as pointed out above, this remains controversial. The movement toward the principle of mutual consent is in contrast to fundamental religiously based principles that emphasize traditional gender roles and sexual activity only within marriage. It is important to consider that "consent" implies some level of development that ensures a level of maturity or rationality on the part of one who consents; otherwise, concerns about one's abilities to comprehend the consequences of actions arise. Thus, the morality of sexual and gender identities is shifting, calling into question the definition of boundaries with regard to queered sexualities and genders.

When considering so-called queer sexualities, I believe it is important to take up the principle of mutual consent as there seems to be harm associated with sexual contact that is not consensual. A study conducted by Arreola, Neilands, Pollack, Paul, and

Catania (2008) revealed that males who had non-consensual or forced sex with other males as pre-adolescents had higher rates of psychological distress, drug use, unprotected sexual behaviors, and higher rates of HIV infection as adults. Similar results were found in a study by Ratner et al. (2003) who focused on males who self-identified as gay or bisexual. Indeed, if one's sexuality or gender identity involves non-consensual or forced sex on another, the likelihood of harm supports the notion of ethics being considered in the form of policy to prevent or curtail harmful actions. Thus, the ethical principle to do no harm comes into play as one considers how to *be* sexually and so-called moral policies are directed at legislating ethics that curtail harm to others though they are not without controversy.

The public policy arena has long entertained the legislation of identity and morality plays a central role in the debate over the legality of particular ways of being. Mooney and Schuldt (2006) suggest that so-called morality policies do exist and that a defining characteristic of them is that they generate conflict when it comes to basic values on the conservative to liberal spectrum. Miceli (2005) suggests that the polarization of arguments between the Christian right and Gay rights groups regarding the morality of homosexuality illustrates how such opposition creates mutual constraints, limiting the ability of either group to develop new and creative ways to approach the topic of morals and identities. Indeed, the challenge of morality politics in the twenty first century seems to lie at the intersection of two basic value approaches: egalitarianism as contextualized within notions of freedom and traditionalism based on ideas that people need to be constrained.

As we approach the close of the first decade of the twenty first century, egalitarianism seems to have found more of a voice, though the example of same-sex marriage is illustrative of the continued presence of traditionalism in the debate over moral sexual and gender identities. It is also important to interrogate the application of egalitarianism due to the tendency for those who are considered marginal to be framed as transcending boundaries by coming up to the level of those who are dominant, a practice which privileges the status quo and minimizes discourses that could create opportunities to (re)imagine ways of being. Same-sex marriage is a good example of an egalitarian approach as same-sex couples demand and are expected to rise up to the level of heterosexual couples and engage in a supposedly sanctified way of being in relationship; thus, questions regarding “equal to what?” are raised. One does not have to look far to find exclusion as particular “rights” are granted to those who have heretofore existed without them while others who cannot or choose not to engage in such “rights” remain in the margins. Indeed, the boundaries created by partial inclusion are as strong and potentially damaging as those created by exclusion; therefore, careful scrutiny of ideology contextualized within “rights” must continue to occur if boundaries are to be disrupted. Ultimately values and principles associated with social justice, equity, fairness, and peace are vital to work in the arena of sexual and gender identities.

### **Opportunities for Transformation**

Change begins with careful reflection and evaluation of one’s social positionality and engagement with critique and critical thinking. Of course, a spark for change is often found in exposure to what is unknown or to what one has been unable to bear to know.

Greene (1988) calls on us to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange in an effort to move toward transformation; indeed, it is only when we step outside the boundaries of what we know that we can hope to be transformed. Evidence of this process may be found in recent efforts to affect social change.

Beginning in the 1990s, the Gay-Straight Alliance movement, beginning in Utah, sought to form conversations between high school students who identified as “gay” and those who identified as “straight” and supportive. Friedman-Nimz et al. (2006) and Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub (2009) discuss the integration of support and social action and highlight the transformative and empowering potential of organizations and events that promote dialogue about respect and inclusiveness. Using interviews of GSA leaders in California, Russell et al. (2009) describe three dimensions that interrelate including personal, relational, and strategic empowerment which, if used in combination, create opportunities for social change. Again, the personal as political is threaded through transformative efforts as individuals begin to acknowledge willingness to disrupt their positions by working toward an understanding of positions and ways of being that are outside their experiences.

Such individual efforts may become collective and often find locations in popular culture as evidenced by a fairly recent emergence in “hip-hop” of the Deep Dick Collective, which embraces celebrations of difference and “queerness” as well as gay identities while refuting homophobia and calling for queer political activism (Wilson, 2007). Openness to what is unfamiliar has the potential to create opportunities to disrupt boundaries that may be carefully guarded as evidenced by Manning’s (2007) work, which

highlights her experience as a school administrator with a student who exposed her to the cultural dimensions of hip-hop as a space for promotion of social justice and antiracism. Another recent development in popular culture that offers opportunities to (re)imagine identities engages the notion of masculinity as restrictive boundaries around male-male relationships are blurred through “bromance,” which is read as intimate and often covert homoerotic contact between and among supposedly “straight” males.

Films such as *I Love You Man*, *The Hangover*, and *The Forty Year Old Virgin*, among others, imagine relationships between men as locations for deep friendship, connectedness, intimacy, and love while maintaining a comedic approach and carefully avoiding overt sexual contact, though physical interactions go beyond what is usually acceptable, e.g. hitting, punching, or tackling (Setoodeh, 2009). Interestingly, bromance seems to exist beyond film as evidenced by my recent involvement with high school students in a music education activity where many of the males who identify as “straight” engage in deep, intimate friendships and seem to think nothing of hugging, holding hands, even kissing each other playfully while maintaining traditional relationships with females. One only has to peruse social networking sites such as *Facebook* or *My Space* to see images of males engaged in bromantic poses with other males, indicating a willingness to blur the boundaries defined by traditional masculine identities. Perhaps opportunities to push beyond what has defined identities lie in the courage of young people to express themselves between and beyond the boundaries created by identity labels that have been rigidly followed and reiterated through sociocultural structures.

Indeed, the postmodern offers spaces to explore plurality and multiplicity and people, particularly youth, in the new millennium seem to waste no time in doing just that.

### **The Post and Beyond**

At 16, John (pseudonym) personifies possibilities that exist with regard to what some have termed “pomoidentities” or “pomosexuality,” the antecedent referring to the postmodern. John grew up in rural North Carolina, which reiterated traditional values and ways of being; yet, at an early age, John seemed to explore so-called feminine aspects of his personality as he played with dolls, helped mom with “housework,” and often wore a T-shirt on his head, flipping it around like long hair. As he explored the “feminine” he continued to be involved in traditionally masculine expressions of identity, romping in the woods, riding his bicycle, and demonstrating fearlessness in scraps with other males. As John approached puberty, he began to engage in what some may identify as transgendered actions, wearing “girl” jeans and underwear, eventually buying a long wig and heels. He often paraded around in his “female” attire, though he may just as well be in his “boy” clothes, or he may blend clothing associated with particular gender roles. At 14, he declared he was “gay” and proceeded to seek out males to date; yet, at one point, he found that he was attracted to a female who had, incidentally, identified as “lesbian.” His interactions with “straight” males were/are indicative of pomoidentity/pomosexuality as he reports “making out” with the guys and, later in the evening, “making out” with their girlfriends. According to him, he is not alone in his (re)imaginative efforts regarding who he can *be* and perhaps most telling, he does not voice shame about all that he is. His identities, and perhaps the identities of his peers, appear to be fluid and plural, indicating

a postmodern approach to *being* through exploration of identities that are imaginative, though they are contextualized within traditional expressions of gender.

Such (re)imaginings of sexualities and gender identities are not new; yet, they seem to be more common in terms of being expressed and lived. Reischel (2007), Blackburn (2007), and Blackburn and McCready (2009), among others, address the current generation of youth who seem to be exploring plural and fluid gender and sexual identities at earlier ages. Indeed, the notion of being either “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and/or “transgendered/transsexual” seems to have given way to a postmodern concoction of identities, calling into question the need for new language about being if it can be languaged at all. So-called metasex indicates that there are many ways of being sexual and they may be plural (Vassi, 1997). Queen and Schimmel’s (1997) collected works challenged assumptions about gender and sexuality, calling on the postmodern as a space for (re)imagining identity possibilities and ways of being. It is within the context of plurality that emancipatory possibilities exist and notions of inclusion are imagined as “difference” gives way to variety.

Shame associated with being “different” seems to lose ground as one imagines identities that are formed and shaped in environments that support the idea that variations exist and gives cause for celebration. Privilege may become dispelled if egalitarian approaches are adopted and variety is honored rather than used as a tool to sift and sort into hierarchal constructs of what is “desirable” and “undesirable” with regard to fairness, justice, peace, and love. I do not advocate a “free-for-all” approach; rather, I believe that principles of respect, care, concern, and justice must be implemented when exploring

ways of being keeping in perspective that it is vital to be mindful of the impact of one's living choices on others. As we move into spaces around and beyond the postmodern, it is important to (re)examine how we live, how and what we learn, and how and what we teach if we are to confront oppression and injustice.

Thus, a burden is placed on those of us who are educators and who practice critical and/or queer pedagogies grounded in social justice. We must, as Sears and Williams (1997) indicate, carefully examine methods and strategies for deconstructing and examining homophobia and heterosexism as we imagine new possibilities for the existence of gendered spaces that do not conform to heteronormative, patriarchal structures. Using the prophetic voice, we must call into question the injustice that is propagated by what we have come to believe is “normal” and “natural” as we offer opportunities to create spaces that go beyond acceptance and tolerance of differences into spaces that celebrate support, and include pluralistic constructions of what we name sexuality and gender. Knowing and understanding the power that resides in constructing, negotiating, maintaining, and disrupting gender and sexual identities will offer opportunities to facilitate personal and political action.

Pragmatically, it is vital to disrupt the power structures that maintain hegemonies that promote harassment and persecution not only for reasons related to physical safety, but also to decrease the damaging psychological effects brought on by the experience of being told and shown that you are a damaged and deviant person who is inherently flawed. The old school mantra “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” seems to express an attempt to negotiate the pain that is inflicted when

one is named with a label that represents disgust and disdain. Certainly, such hurtful words and labels played a central role in shaping my identity and the identities of those who participated in this work. Indeed, they continue to resonate within our self-esteem. Perhaps the knowledge surfaced in this project will offer space for personal examination and/or the examination of policies and politics that promote power structures which enable hurtful and demeaning practices. In any case, this dissertation has allowed me and those who participated in it including the reader the opportunity to explore the notion of identity and how we might imagine heretofore unknown possibilities for discovering and (re)negotiating power and human connection as emancipatory.

We need to give each other the space to grow, to be ourselves, to exercise our diversity. We need to give each other space so that we may both give and receive such beautiful things as ideas, openness, dignity, joy, healing, and inclusion.

Anonymous

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