Private Narratives in Public Places: The Experiences of Predominantly White Gay Male Undergraduates on LGB Classroom Panels

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PRIVATE NARRATIVES IN PUBLIC PLACES: THE EXPERIENCES OF PREDOMINANTLY WHITE GAY MALE UNDERGRADUATES ON LGB CLASSROOM PANELS

by

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PRIVATE NARRATIVES IN PUBLIC PLACES: THE EXPERIENCES OF PREDOMINANTLY WHITE GAY MALE UNDERGRADUATES ON LGB CLASSROOM PANELS

James Patrick Dolan, Jr., Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2007

The scholarly literature addresses the common practice and effectiveness of using classroom panel presentations by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) speakers to increase awareness of LGB experiences and to change attitudes. However, little is known about the experiences of the speakers themselves or how the experience may affect the speaker’s sense of self or identity. From an identity as narrative perspective, the goal of this study was to learn what effect the repeated telling of a coming out story in a public setting may have on the teller’s identity, the story they tell, and the meanings and feelings associated with the story. To examine this phenomenon, the experiences of gay male panel participants were explored. Initial in-person and follow-up in-person or phone interviews were conducted with ten participants who self-identified as gay males (not transgender), took part on LGB classroom panels as undergraduates for at least one semester, and had completed at least one semester of higher education. Interview questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions of the panel experience with attention to how the experience affected the participant and the story being told. A phenomenological approach to data analysis was used to capture the essence of the panelist experience by identifying common themes and elements. An important
contribution of this study is that it provides information about the panelist experience. Panelists identified several essential aspects of their experience including a strong desire to make it easier and safer for others to come out; a high level of dedication and enthusiasm; self reflection and personal growth; recognition of the therapeutic aspects of the experience; and a connection with the gay community. The repeated telling of the coming out story seems to have a number of effects: a refining effect that clarifies the coming out experience and how the story is told; a shaping effect influenced by the audience and the other stories being told; a labeling effect from listening to others tell their stories; a strengthening effect for identity; and a connecting effect to the gay community. The findings suggest direct implications for panel programs and directions for future research.
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I completed this dissertation in the wake of fellow CECP doctoral students Amy Borgman and Melissa Bullard. Thanks for making the way easier with your example, your advice, but mostly by listening. Amy inspired my self-confidence by trusting me to be part of her research. Melissa and I enjoyed many “dissertation lunches” at Maggie’s Campus Cafe that never quite seemed to stay on topic. Her contribution to this work is much appreciated.

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James Patrick Dolan, Jr.
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Truth used to run around the world naked. This frightened people so they avoided him. One day Truth saw someone dressed in glorious, beautiful robes who was surrounded by friends and admirers. Truth was lonely and also wanted friends. Truth went up to this person and asked his name. “I am Story” he said, “and I can clothe you.” And from that day forth, Truth and Story have traveled together.

FROM JEWISH FOLKLORE
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study is a story about stories. It describes the experiences of gay males who as undergraduate students told their coming out story on classroom panels addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns. The idea for this study comes from my own experiences telling a personal narrative, my coming out story, in a public place, the classroom. The design of the study draws on a narrative perspective on identity. From this perspective “personal stories are not just merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities are fashioned” (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 1). In essence, we are our stories.

When my family gets together for summer vacation, the first night is invariably spent recalling the stories from past vacations in a kind of ritual reaffirmation of family bonds. When I meet other gay men it is inevitable that at some point coming out stories are shared; sometimes as a badge of courage, sometimes as way of deepening intimacy, always as way of establishing a bond. Stories or personal narratives are also at the heart of my work as a psychologist. I listen to people tell their stories and guide them to a deeper, hopefully more functional understanding of problematic material. It makes sense to me, therefore, to think about identity as narrative, as the stories we tell others and ourselves about who we are and how we fit in this world. The purpose of this chapter is to describe my perspective on identity as narrative and the origins of the question examined in this study.

Imagine if you will that your identity is not a tapestry woven from threads of experience or an intricate web of intersecting strings of self. Rather, picture your identity
as a solar system where all the varied objects comprising the system represent the many aspects of your identity and the celestial forces at play are the myriad influences that govern the expression of self. Astronomy tells us that a solar system is made up of the seen and the unseen. The seen are all the physical objects that we observe in the heavens – the sun, planets, moons, etc. The unseen are the forces that hold the system together such as gravity. Science also tells us that the solar system is in motion and that the objects in the system mutually interact and affect one another. For instance, the gravity of the Sun holds the Earth in orbit and the gravity of the Earth holds the moon, but the gravity of the moon exerts tidal forces that affect the seas on the Earth. Add mass to the moon and the tidal forces would be stronger. Move the moon further away and the forces would weaken. Likewise, the different aspects of our identity mutually interact and affect each other. Education is one aspect of your identity, socioeconomic status another. With more education, you may increase your opportunities for a higher socioeconomic status. With less education, your opportunities to improve your socioeconomic status may be limited. This example oversimplifies the relationship between these two aspects of identity and the numerous influences and forces that affect self expression, but illustrates the relational nature of the varied aspects of our identity.

Using this solar system metaphor as a way to understand identity, the stories of our exploration not only chart the solar system but provide points of references that give context and meaning to the journey. Narratives are used to organize knowledge and meaning and are “a way of introducing some order in the face of the chaotic nature of experience” (Goncalves & Machado, 1999, p. 1180). Through our experiences we develop systems of personal meaning in order to make sense of the world and our place
in it. The dialectic of identity formation is not just between the internal and the external, rather both environmental and internal psychodevelopmental processes interact in identity formation. We communicate who we are to others through the stories we tell.

As a gay man one of my most important personal stories is my coming out story. As a graduate student active in leadership roles in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and in educational outreach on college campuses, I told my coming out story to more people and in more settings than I can remember. Then one day I suddenly didn’t feel like telling my story anymore. At the time I was enrolled in a seminar on lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns looking to broaden my knowledge of the psychological and treatment issues specific to this marginalized community. More personally as a member of this community, I wanted to know what was being studied and said about my community in the classroom. I expected an experience that would be professionally and personally broadening. What I got from this seminar was the strange and disturbing experience of reinterpretting my life in the classroom. Although my entire education has been filled with coursework concerning the human experience, for the first time content aligned with professional and personal interest in such a way that I was keenly aware of studying aspects of my own life in an academic setting. While this heightened self-awareness was energizing in the sense of exploring a history shared with others similar to me, it was also mentally and emotionally draining as I revisited past events and uncovered aspects of my experiences that I had set aside either because I was unwilling to fully integrate them into my story or because I did not appreciate their significance at the time. In the midst of this re-examination I experienced an odd loss of voice, an inability and unwillingness to speak about my experiences or my opinions. To
me, this loss of voice stood out in stark contrast to my very public work as a speaker on LGB panels. As a panelist and as a student leader in the LGB community, my policy was, for the most part, “you ask, I’ll tell” when it came to sharing my experiences as a gay man growing up and living in a heterosexist culture. Now, in a classroom filled with supportive allies and members of my own community who in theory could provide affirmation and understanding of my experiences, I suddenly felt shut down and unwilling to share any personal stories.

As a panel speaker I considered myself non-traditional in two ways. First, at age thirty-three I had returned to school full-time to pursue a second bachelor’s degree. Second, I had only been out as a gay man for three years. As an adult with some “real world” experience, college was definitely easier the second time around and taking part in panels was something I could do for myself and the community that was in some ways a “do over”. I was not ready to come out when I was an undergraduate and I thought if sharing my experience could help others then I should do it. I was typically the oldest speaker on the panel and I think my maturity and life experience provided a unique perspective on my coming out experience. I was also very aware of the stories other students were telling, which seemed full of loss and sadness. Although my coming out experience was filled with fear and anxiety, I did not experience any outright rejection from family or friends. My sisters were actually rather nonplussed when I told them I was gay and remarked that they had been wondering how long it would take me to come out. Since my experience was mostly positive, I decided the focus of my story would emphasize the lighter and happier moments in order to balance out the dramatic stories that seemed to be the norm. Looking back, I wonder if by choosing to focus on the
lighter moments to show that all coming out stories are not sad ones, I may have set myself up for a future reckoning with a more holistic story. The loss of voice or unwillingness to tell my coming out story as a doctoral student likely resulted from the need to reconcile the “public” story with my experiences and feelings, the “private” story, as well as the demands of my current situation.

As a first year doctoral student in the process of starting a new program, building a new life, and focused on moving forward, it made sense that I was hesitant to shift my focus to past events. Because I was heavily invested in writing a current and future history, I was not willing to excavate the past. More than that, the introspection and reinterpretation sparked by the course content rendered the understanding of my past history if not exactly suspect then somewhat compromised and too fragile to discuss in public. If we think of our life histories and the meanings we derive from our past experiences as a story that interprets our experiences and shapes them into meaning, I was in the process of reviewing and rewriting this story to accommodate new learning and life experiences. This process therefore made my story inaccessible to public telling. The old narrative might serve well enough as a “story” to be told for educational purposes, but when circumstances called for a truer version, I was not willing to share a work in progress. Perhaps more significantly, I wasn’t certain what my story was anymore or if the meanings and understanding I had made of my experience were the same as they once were. Finding myself suddenly a storyteller without a story made me wonder about the experiences of others who use a private narrative in a public way.
The Journey to the Question

The seeds for my research question came from my own experience. This personal connection with the question is central to a qualitative study. Indeed, according to Moustakes (1990) “an unshakable connection exists between what is out there…and what is within” (p. 9). He endorses heuristic research as a starting point for understanding human phenomenon and describes it as

…a process of internal searching through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries (p. 9).

In this view, making sense of your own experience allows you to develop a frame of reference to understand the experience of others. Awareness and understanding of a phenomenon await discovery through reflective thought and insight. The heuristic journey begins with an awareness of something within one’s own life experience that begs a question or requires a deeper understanding. The essential qualities of this discovery process are an openness to one’s own experiences; trust in one’s self-awareness and understanding, an internal locus of evaluation, and a willingness to enter into a process rooted in the self (Rogers, 1963). Using the data that is within the self, the challenge of a heuristic journey is to discover and explain the nature of the experience.

Engaging this method to reflect on my “gay” identity, I realized that my loss of voice perhaps had less to do with this particular aspect of my identity as it did with the noise made by other aspects of my identity. Sorting out the relationship of my sexual orientation with other aspects of my identity demanded my time and attention. The revision of my story was not so much about the actual events, but rather the relationship
between the varied aspects of my identity and the meanings I needed to re-examine as a result of new experiences, knowledge, and learning. I began to understand that it was more important to focus on the process rather than the product. As a student, exposure to new ideas and theories on identity development prompted self reflection as a means to understanding. Three works provided an initial perspective for my exploration: Personal Dimensions of Identity as presented by Arredondo, Toperek, Pack Brown, Jones, J., Locke, Sanchez, and Stadler (1996); self-authorship as discussed by Baxter-Magolda (1998); and the inclusive model of lesbian identity formation described by McCarn and Fassinger (1996).

Arredondo et al. (1996) proposed the Personal Dimensions of Identity (PDI) model as a framework for seeing individuals more completely and recognizing the complexity of identity. This model uses three dimensions of variables – personal, social, and historical – to describe how everyone is essentially a “multicultural person.” Baxter-Magolda (1998) discusses how young adults use self-authorship to meet the cognitive demands of everyday life. Self-authorship is described as the “integration of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of development” (p. 144) resulting in an internally generated belief system that regulates one’s interpretation of experiences. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) presented an inclusive model of lesbian identity formation that distinguished between the two processes of personal development of same-sex sexual orientation and redefinition of group membership and group meaning, which were conceptualized as separate but related and continual processes.

What stayed with me from these works was not so much the particular models or methods that the authors were presenting, but the ideas that resonated with my
experience: the idea that people are multidimensional beings comprised of diverse elements that have parallel status but interact and combine in ways that are both unique to the individual and shared in their sociocultural context; the idea that the dimensions of identity have complexities of their own that evolve in a continuous, reciprocal, and iterative way; and the idea that individuals have the authority and the ability to author their own stories and that these narratives can change over time with experience and learning. These are the ideas that guided my heuristic journey to the research question.

As I began this journey I was reminded of the old pun, “Wherever you go, there you are.” The point being that wherever the internal search takes you, whatever experience you are remembering or whatever meaning you are making, you are your own companion on the trip and the baggage you carry contains the accumulated learning and experience of your life up to that moment of reflection. On my journey to a deeper understanding of my loss of voice, two aspects of this type of self presence strike me as important. First, that in the moment of introspection, as in the moment of experience, different aspects of our identity may be more salient than others given the specific context or purpose for reflection. For example, attending a church service may provoke reflection on the religious or spiritual aspects of your identity. Singing a hymn arouses a sense of familiarity. Watching children receive communion takes you back to your younger self. Realizing you are reciting a creed by rote makes you question if what you are saying is what you really believe. All of these thoughts and feelings take place in the presence of your entire self, but the particular part of you that informs or defines your religious or spiritual identity comes to the foreground and is the focus of your being at that moment. After the service, when someone asks how your job is going, then perhaps
the work-related aspects of your identity come forward and are now the focus of your attention and presentation. Both aspects of self are always present, but not necessarily active in a conscious way until called forth. This means it isn’t possible for me to consider my identity as a gay man without considering the relationship of my sexual orientation to other aspects of my identity.

A second important aspect of the heuristic journey is the temporal quality of the inner search. The heuristic journey takes us from the present into the past and from the past into the future. You replay the experience as the person you were. You review the experience as the person you are. You recast the experience with self-awareness and self-knowledge, using insight and awareness to guide your future actions. You are not just present as an observer of the past, rather your self-presence acts as a lens that both focuses your vision and filters your awareness with the purpose of gaining understanding and insight into the experience. Understanding your experiences as they relate to your identity development can provide greater depth to self-understanding and greater awareness of the varied elements that comprise your identity. As I continue on my journey of understanding, I discover new ways of knowing and making meaning of my experiences. I believe that a deeper awareness of my own identity processes can help me to understand or at least better communicate with others about theirs. Narrative is a vehicle for communicating identity to others as well as the structure that holds and relates the meanings and understandings of our experiences. Narrative is the context for my understanding of identity and developmental processes.

“Narratives are a way of organizing events, interpreting experience, and creating meaning while maintaining a sense of continuity” (Ben Ari, 1995, p. 155). Often these
narratives center on moments of change in people’s lives and can be viewed as an attempt to understand and bring a sense of order to conflicting thoughts, feelings, and events. For lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, coming out stories represent a new and perhaps liberating narrative that provides structure and meaning to material that is often problematic if not outright traumatic. As the clinical literature points out, narratives can often help individuals assimilate problematic material as they gain insight through introspection and active construction of meaningful connections (Goncalves & Machado, 1999). The narrative process is dynamic and discursive as we continually make new meanings based on both past and present experiences, which means that even narratives based on turning points in one’s life can continue to evolve as we gain new understanding about our self and our circumstances. Meanings and understandings associated with a coming out story then, although rooted to a pivotal point in one’s life, can continue to change and grow with the individual.

So, what happens when we are in the process of rewriting our story? In my case I experienced a sense of losing my public voice, i.e., an inability to articulate my narrative, my expression of self. It could be that until we understand the new narrative or integrate the new information, we are unable or unwilling to communicate our narrative based on past understanding. This loss of voice was particularly vexing for someone accustomed to accessing a coherent narrative used in psychoeducational endeavors. As a panel speaker on lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues, I told my coming out story in public settings for many years as a means of educating and increasing awareness on lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns. I stopped when I began experiencing a kind of objectification of my public narrative where the experiences I shared had been refined to a point where it
seemed more like a story and not necessarily my narrative. And while I found myself able to tell this refined story in public, albeit reluctantly, my inner voice was expressing doubts as to whether this object that I was presenting was really me. I began to wonder if by offering up my story as a catalyst for change in others, as an object to be assimilated, had I been trapped into rendering myself as a *what* instead of a *who*?

I began to think back on the questions I was asked as a child, undoubtedly one of the first was “*What* do you want to be when you grow up”? These kinds of questions are often answered in terms of attributes and qualities that can be shared by others – doctor, dancer, smart, stylish – but overlook individuality. *What* is your name? *What* do you do for a living? *What’s* your sign? We ask a litany of “*what*” questions as if there is some mathematics of attributes that results in the sum of a person. And while these properties indeed provide us information about a particular person that allows us to know something about *what* they are and perhaps *where* they belong in our personal and social hierarchies, they do not tell us *who* the person is. In order to gain a sense of *who* a person is, we must experience them as an individual with a personal history, a narrated life. The same is true for knowing ourselves. It is through introspective scrutiny and making meaning of experiences that we begin to understand how all the *what’s* we are make up *who* we are.

As a panelist telling a story I became focused on *what* I am, a gay man telling a story, rather than *who* I am, an individual whose shared attributes are also uniquely my own (Kerby, 1991).

Reflecting on my experience as a panelist gave shape to the question at the heart of this phenomenological inquiry: in the context of the panel experience, how does the repeated telling of a personal story in a public manner affect the narrative and the
meanings associated with the narrative with regards to identity. The goal of this study was to better understand the phenomenon of the repeated sharing of a private narrative, the coming out story, in a public manner, on an LGB classroom panel. Of particular interest were how the experience affected the individual; how the understandings or meanings associated with the coming out story may have changed; and how the actual story being told may have changed. To answer these questions, the experience of gay men who told their coming out story as undergraduate participants on classroom panels addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns were explored. From an identity as narrative perspective, it seems reasonable to believe that the process of sharing a private narrative in a public way, for that matter sharing any type of personal narrative, has implications for one’s understanding of self and experiences as well as the meanings made about self and experiences. The next chapter provides a review of selected literature that will situate this study in the current literature and provide a perspective for understanding the origins of the research question and the results of this study. This is followed by a chapter presenting the methods used in gathering and analyzing the data for this study. The fourth chapter relates the results of this study. The final chapter discusses the findings of this research study with regards to their contribution to the literature, implications for panel programs and training, and directions for future research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to better understand the effect the repeated telling of a coming out story in a classroom setting has on the teller, the story they tell, and the meanings associated with the coming out story. To investigate this phenomenon, the experiences of gay men who as undergraduate students told their coming out story on classroom panels addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns were explored. The existing literature on these types of classroom panels is scant and focuses on the experiences of the audience or the purpose of the panel, not the experiences of participants (Chase, 2001; Crawley & Broad, 2004; Croteau & Kusek, 1992). This study will add to LGB scholarship by contributing to a fuller understanding of the LGB panel phenomenon by examining the experience of the panelist. From an identity as narrative perspective, particular attention will be given to what affect, if any, using a private narrative in a public manner has on the meanings and understandings associated with the coming out story.

This chapter presents a review of selected scholarship that will situate this study in the current literature and provide a perspective for understanding the genesis and the results of this study. In the first section, a general review of the literature on sexual orientation identity development is provided with the intention of informing the reader about the general concepts of traditional stage models for sexual orientation identity development and discussing the call for newer, multidimensional and continuous perspectives on sexual orientation identity. The second section discusses the ways in which narratives and narration provide meaning to what we refer to as the self and
examines a process for how individuals assimilate and revise personal narrative. In the third section, coming out narratives are discussed as a type of sexual story concerned with establishing a consistent, integrated sense of self that provides identity not just for oneself but for others through the stories we tell. The fourth section presents the literature on LGB classroom panels.

*Sexual Orientation Identity Development*

Since the 1970’s, much of the theory and research regarding sexual orientation identity development has resulted in the emergence of theoretical stage models describing lesbian and gay identity. While the number of stages and their descriptions vary from theory to theory, these models assert that individuals move through a series of identity development stages, usually resolving some sort of identity conflict (Cass, 1979, 1984; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Minton & McDonald, 1983-1984; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1979, 1988). The milestone marker in many models is “coming out” or identity disclosure as the hallmark of developmental maturity.

Gonsiorek (1995) described shared aspects of these stage models, which generally describe how individuals move from a naive to more complex understanding of their sexual orientation identity. Typically, these models begin with a stage in which individuals become aware of an attraction or interest in same-sex individuals. Multiple defense strategies are engaged for a non-specified period of time in an attempt to block these feelings. The process of expending energy to deny and minimize feelings may have negative consequences for overall emotional health. The next stage(s) involve(s) a gradual recognition and cautious acceptance of same-sex feelings followed by a period of emotional and behavioral experimentation with same-sex relationships, often
accompanied by a growing sense of personal normality. Some models describe times of identity crisis, such as the ending of a first relationship or estrangement from family and friends, when negative feelings about being gay or lesbian return. As the individual again begins to accept same-sex feelings and attractions, a sense of identity as lesbian or gay becomes internally integrated and is viewed as a positive aspect of self. While most scholars describe the coming out process in clear stages, they also note that it is generally more fluid, with stops, starts, and backtracking (Cass, 1979, 1984; Troiden, 1979).

Eliason (1996), Garnets and Kimmel (2003), Ritter and Terndrup (2000), and Savin-Williams (2005) review stage models of sexual orientation identity and each describe similar limitations to these models. First, as Savin-Williams (2005) notes, the “empirical base for these models is extraordinarily scant (p. 75).” Eliason (1996) states that most of the researchers developed models from their data without validating their data through further research (p. 53). Further, Garnets and Kimmel (2003) discuss the difficulties in obtaining representative samples of lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual man and women, therefore limiting the ability to generalize findings to the group under study. This relates to a second major criticism that the models do not consider the influence of other aspects of identity such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other important characteristic and the complex interactions these components may have with sexuality. The lack of representation of older individuals and minority populations in the research as well as the general insensitivity of the models to cohort, gender, and ethnicity seem to present an imposition of dominant white male developmental norms that are unfairly extended to explain female and minority populations.
A third problem associated with the older multi-stage models is that the stages are generally thought to be linear with a discernable starting and end point and therefore the same for everyone. Considering the complex interactions of biological, cultural, and psychosocial influences as well as the differences in individual lives, it seems unlikely that a developmental experience resulting in a sexual identity would be the same for everyone, even for individuals who may identify in the same way. Finally, few of the theories account for a bisexual identity. The lives, experiences, and identities of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are more varied, complex, and fluid than the models suggest (Fox, 1995). Further, as Savin-Williams (2005) notes, while these models may have been applicable at one time, the lives of many gay people, in particular young gay people, may no longer fit the mold.

More recent models of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity formation attempt to rely less on disclosure as the seminal event in the process of identity formation and are more intentionally inclusive of demographic and cultural influences. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) present a model for lesbian identity development recognizing that individuals are not only forming a personal sexual identity, but a group membership identity as well. This model proposes separate but reciprocal processes of changes in awareness and attitudes toward individual identity as well as changes in group membership and group meaning (Fassinger, 1998; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Still other models of LGB identity formation attempt to be inclusive and global by combining elements of LGB sexual identity formation models with elements of minority racial identity models that consider the concepts of targeted and dominant groups in identity formation (Sullivan, 1998).
As an alternative to developing a comprehensive theory, Savin-Williams (2005) suggests using the *differential developmental trajectories* framework as a way to understand sexual orientation identity development from a broader, less restrictive perspective. Drawing from his experience and scholarship and the supportive research evidence, this perspective offers a more continuous, multidimensional, and inclusive approach to sexual orientation identity development. He asserts that such a perspective allows for both what we know and what we don’t know about the complex and varied lives of same-sex attracted individuals. The basic assumption of this perspective is that sexuality is a valid developmental context for consideration *regardless* of sexual orientation; the developmental trajectory of any individual is different from that of any other, but that are likely to be some similarities across people resulting from biological, psychological, and social influences.

Based on the growing body of scientific research on sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation, Garnets (2002) also proposes the need for a new continuous and multidimensional conceptualization for sexual orientation development that recognizes not only the individual differences between identity and behavior, but also the complex influences of other aspects of human diversity as well. She stresses the importance of using models that are based on multiplicity, not sameness and that consider how persons develop within the full range of individual diversity. “No single element of identity, be it race, ethnicity, class, disability, gender, or sexual orientation can truly be understood except in relation to the others” (p. 127). This idea of mutual influence between multiple aspects of identity suggests that the behaviors and choices one makes relating to sexual orientation are more complicated than just erotic or affectional attractions and that
developing a sexual orientation identity requires an understanding of the relationship between these varied elements of identity.

As a way of understanding the varied aspects of identity, Arredondo et al. (1996) describe the Personal Dimensions of Identity Model that “provides a reference point for recognizing the complexity of all persons” (p. 3). The PDI describes three dimensions. Dimension “A” consists of those characteristics that a person is born with or born into, such as age, culture, ethnicity, language, physical disability, race, sex, sexual orientation, and social class. Dimension “B” consists of social and environmental factors such as educational level, geographic location, income, marital status, and religion. Dimension “C” consists of major economic, historical, political, and sociocultural contexts or events that affect an individual’s life experiences. The A and C dimensions are described as relatively fixed whereas dimension B may reflect the outcomes of the A and C dimensions. In a broader context, the authors seem to be describing a multidimensional person comprised of diverse elements that have parallel status but interact and combine in ways that are both unique to the individual and shared in their sociocultural context. This view is consistent with a social constructionist perspective on individual development, which holds that “social and historical contexts shape and circumscribe the ways in which people can understand themselves and others” (Broido, 2000, p. 57). At the core of this constructionist view is the idea that individuals construct their own identity influenced by personal characteristics, social norms, and life experience. It is a two-way, interactive, and continuous process between the person and society in which the meanings a person gives to these interactions in turn influence self-constructs and identity. A social constructionist approach when applied to human experience considers
the meanings individuals give to experience based on historical, social, and personal factors and the forces that influence their perception and understanding of experience. As applied to identity, this approach looks at the interaction of the multiple aspects of an individual’s identity, the choices available to them surrounding their identity, and the social interactions that maintain their identity (Broido, 2000; Garnets, 2002; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). Viewing sexual orientation identity as socially constructed based on an individual’s experiences provides for a broader perspective on sexual orientation identity development that allows consideration of the boundless diversity and endless combination of human characteristics and experience.

For the purposes of this study, the perspective on sexual orientation identity development I am suggesting considers that sexual orientation identity develops in relationship to other aspects of identity and that it is through a process of constructing a self-narrative that we explore and define the relationship and fit of sexual orientation with other aspects of our identity. Further, this self-narrative provides a sense of structure that helps individuals develop meaning from experiences and communicate their identity to others. The following section discusses the concept of identity as narrative and the dynamic and relativistic nature of the self-narrative.

Identity as Narrative

In *Narrative and the Self*, Kerby (1991) writes about the ways in which narratives and narration provide meaning to what we refer to as the self. His aim is to “examine the ways in which our experience of selfhood and identity is in fact dependent on language and self-narration” (p. 115). He proposes that what we call the self is not an unchanging entity but rather a nexus of meaning, a social and linguistic construct knit together
imaginatively in a continual process of integration, interpretation, reconciliation, and expression of experience and meaning. Included in this construct is not only “what” we are – the characteristics, qualities, attributes, and labels that describe (or proscribe) pieces of the self and can also be shared by others (doctor, teacher, homosexual, kind, liberal, etc.) – but also “who” we are – the integrated whole grasped and related in our own personal story in which we are the hero. By narrating the acts of the self we contribute to the creation of the self by finding personal identity not only in difference from others but through the continuity of our personal experiences. Identity is the “gradually unfolding narrative that is lived time” (p. 109). Narrative is an imaginative act that generates self from the environment of time and memory by configuring experience into something with meaning and structure. We exist in this structure which is a network of past, present, and impending future that makes identity accessible not as a static representation but as a dynamic reconstruction of a more or less coherent self-narrative seeking to provide unity and continuity of lived experience.

“Narratives of the self don’t simply rest within us to motivate and guide our actions, nor do they lurk behind our backs as social templates to stamp us into selves according to the leading stories of the day” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Rather we use discursive practices to assemble and communicate our identity. The manner in which individuals recount their histories, what they omit, what they choose to emphasize, and the relationships they establish between the teller and the audience contributes to the shaping of their personal identities. Self-narrative is developed and self-understanding is realized within a socio-cultural discourse that circumscribes how individuals construe their own identities and how they communicate their self-narrative to others. A self-
narrative is “a way of organizing events, interpreting experience, and creating meaning while maintaining a sense of continuity” (Ben-Ari, 1995, p. 155). It refers to the “individual’s account of the relationships among self-relevant events across time” (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 162) and it is subject to continuous alteration.

The self-narrative is both a process of creating identity and a method for communicating who we are to others. We construct and express meaning to others through the stories that we tell (Mischler, 1992). Experiences are communicated in the form of narratives that are not just “records of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life” (Josselson, 1995, p. 33). The self-narrative process is dynamic and individuals are engaged in an on-going discursive process in an effort to understand and make sense of their experiences. In this sense, our understanding of our current self is based on both our past and present self and the self-narrative reflects both the evolution and the understanding of self. To understand self-narratives is to understand a process in process (Josselson, 1995, p. 35), that is, narratives are dynamic and relativistic to a person’s past, the other persons involved in an individual’s experiences, and the person’s socio-cultural context.

A particular type of self-narrative, the coming out story, is the main focus of this study and will be described in the next section.

Coming Out Narratives

Plummer (1995) asserts that we live in a world cluttered with sexual stories and that human beings could be classified as “homo narans: humankind the narrators and storytellers” (p.5). He describes these stories not simply as texts or discourses to be
Plummer views human beings as social world makers constantly engaged in the process of using symbols and language to story the world around us – its people, places, and events. This process results in the authoring of identities for ourselves and others as well as creating social context and meaning for our experiences. Plummer states that the meanings described in our stories are never fixed since they arise from the endlessly shifting course of interaction between the teller and the listener. He relates that some stories may become habitualized over time, but understanding and meaning is always linked to shifting contexts. He states “change is ubiquitous: we are always becoming, never arriving; and the social order heaves as a vast negotiated web of dialogue and conversation” (p. 20). The stories that we tell about ourselves emerge from our interactions with each other and become the forces that bind us together, drive us apart, and make our society work. Our culture can be viewed as an assembly of stories seeking to provide context and meaning for human life. Sexual stories are a part of this assembly. Plummer defines sexual stories as personal experience narratives that center around the intimate: narratives that are not always focused on the ‘sexual’ itself, but are connected to sexuality in some way. Coming out narratives are a type of sexual story.

Coming out stories are a central organizing force for making meaning in the lives of lesbians and gay men (Crawley & Broad, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Kennedy 1995; Plummer, 1995). Indeed, in traditional stage models for lesbian and gay identity development ‘coming out’ is typically seen as a hallmark of transition from a confused or immature identity to a more integrated and cohesive sense of self (Cass, 1979, 1984;
Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1979, 1988). The social oppression experienced by individuals belonging to a sexual minority, running the gamut from name-calling and teasing to work-place discrimination and violence, can significantly hinder the development of this organizing identity narrative. Individuals will often choose to lead a life commonly referred to as “in the closet,” where a person has a public, more socially accepted identity that allows them to pass without suffering direct forms of oppression and a private identity, felt to be socially unacceptable, that is vulnerable to harmful cultural consequences. The experience of finding oneself in a minority position often creates a type of cognitive dissonance that prevents an individual from reconciling a socially expected identity with an actual identity (Radkowsky & Seigel, 1997). When a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual decides to integrate these narratives and “come out,” a new narrative results that becomes the coming out story.

Plummer (1995) describes the coming out story as a type of sexual story consisting of a tale of suffering, surviving, and surpassing. The classic coming out narrative is a story that begins in childhood and relates a sense of otherness and unhappiness, a moment of sexual orientation awareness, searching for community, and finally a formation of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. For lesbians, bisexual men and women, and gay men it becomes a central organizing narrative used to convey the identity they have constructed in order to comprehend themselves as they go about their daily lives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Ultimately, according to Plummer (1995), the coming out story is concerned with establishing a consistent, integrated sense of self that
provides identity not just for oneself but for others through the stories we tell. He describes four critical processes that are seemingly captured in a coming out narrative:

- **coming out personally**, in which a self-conversation emerges and clarifies who one is;
- **coming out privately**, in which the first steps are made to tell specific others – family, friends, work peers – in defined spheres;
- **coming out publicly**, in which many others are now told the story, and indeed it may become public knowledge out of the self’s own control; and finally **coming out politically**, in which the story is used very widely as a means of social change (p. 57).

These processes do not occur in a fixed order and are tied to the context of experience and telling.

Recently it has been suggested that the “traditional” coming out narrative does not fit the experience of the modern era (Crawley & Broad, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Jolly, 2001; Seidman, 2002). Plummer (1995) suggests the “traditional” form of the coming out story is actually becoming clichéd and proposes this change in the public telling of sexual stories is occurring for three reasons: a shift in the authority of telling stories from officials and scholars to the individual who has the actual experience; a recognition that there is no one singular experience that can define the truth for all; and the inclusion of additional aspects of identity.

Savin-Williams’ (2005) review and synthesis of LGB scholarship seems to support this contention in his description of the evolution of the scripts used to understand and portray gay youth over the past thirty years. He describes a script of difference for gay adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s that portrayed the development of gay youth as separate and different from that of their heterosexual peers. In the 1980s
and 1990s a “suffering suicidal” script was presented that emphasized marginalization and the resultant social and psychological problems. The script of the early 2000s is one of possibility, resilience, and adaptation as gay youth shrug off labels for identity and sexual behavior as they seek to explore their identities. Savin-Williams expresses hope for a future where a specific “gay” adolescence script is no longer necessary as people come to understand that same-sex attracted individuals are not necessarily any better or worse off than others.

For the purposes of this study, the process of coming out publicly, specifically, telling a coming out story as a member of a classroom panel is the process under consideration. The following section describes college LGB speaker panel programs and the limited research available about these programs.

*Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Speaker Programs*

The use of speaker panels in classrooms to provide information and increase awareness of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) concerns is a familiar practice on college campuses (Crawley & Broad, 2004). Also known as speaker bureaus, these panels are comprised of LGB students, faculty, staff, and community members who share their personal coming out narratives as well as facilitate discussion and answer questions about LGB issues, concerns, and their own experiences (Croteau & Kusek, 1992; Lucksted, 1998; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). The first published material regarding the design and implementation of LGB speaker programs was by Croteau and Kusek (1992). Guidelines for designing and implementing or improving a campus speaker program are provided in a chapter by Lucksted (1998). The typical format for these programs is for panel members to tell their stories and then engage in a question and answer session with
the audience. Ground rules for participation and facilitation are often provided by a trained moderator. In addition to increasing visibility and awareness of LGB people, these programs seek to reduce homophobic attitudes.

The existing literature focusing on these types of classroom panels is scant and focuses on the experiences of the audience or the purpose of the panel, not the experiences of participants (Chase, 2001; Crawley & Broad, 2004; Croteau & Kusek, 1992). However, there is evidence that making LGB individuals and concerns more familiar through educational programs helps to reduce homophobic attitudes. In their then current review of the studies evaluating educational strategies to reduce homophobia, Croteau and Kusek (1992) state that there is “reasonably good empirical evidence that speaker panels do reduce homophobia” (p. 399). However, the authors point out some methodological concerns that may lessen the strength of their conclusion, such as mixing openly gay or lesbian speakers with other educational activities or presentations or quality checks such as speaker training or observer feedback.

Subsequent studies seem to support the idea that educational activities lessen homophobic attitudes. Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, and Edlund (1995) examined changes in student attitudes towards LGB individuals after attending panel presentations made by LGB individuals. Many of the 260 participants indicated a change in attitudes including recognition of their similarity to LGB individuals and an increase in self-reflection on concerns related to their own sexual orientation. In a 3-year study of 186 medical students participating in a psychiatric clerkship, Wallick and Cambre (1995) measured the long-term effect of course content on homophobic attitudes. Attitudes as measured by the Index of Attitudes Towards Homosexual remained consistently lower
for the cohort that experienced more course content on homosexuality than subsequent cohorts. Oldham and Kasser (1999) reported mixed results in their assessment of the effect of scientific information on attitudes towards gay men. The authors presented 28 undergraduate students with an article suggesting male homosexuality has a biological component or a control article. The results showed that lessening of homophobic attitudes was related to other factors such as the subjects major and degree of religiosity. Hillman and Martin (2002) designed an activity that allowed students to experience the stigma and stereotyping often directed towards lesbian women and gay men. Analysis of pretest and posttest scores on the Homophobia Scale for the 68 undergraduate participants indicate this activity fostered more positive attitudes towards LGB individuals.

Some more recent studies have moved away from examining audience attitudes to looking at the participants’ narratives. Crawley and Broad (2004) suggest that panelists are telling life stories as a means of social activism. Using observational methods to assess stories told by panelists, the authors relate that although panelists are encouraged to “be themselves” and relate their authentic experiences, the setting demands may circumscribe the stories being told in ways that favor a formulaic coming out story. Chase (2001) discusses the effects of institutional discourse on individual narratives. Her comparison of sexual identity narratives between two students attending two different universities with differing forms of discourse on diversity provides evidence of the interaction between settings and individual narratives. More specifically that such differences in discursive environments provide opportunities and protocols for the construction of sexual identities (p. 154). If we are to understand the identity stories
being told in campus communities, we must make an effort to understand the discursive environments in which these identities are being constructed.

The empirical literature relating to LGB speaker panels and related educational activities is focused on the experiences of the audience and the goals of the activity, typically reducing homophobic attitudes. This study seeks a better understanding of the panelist’s experience with particular attention to how telling a personal narrative in a public manner may influence or change a person’s identity.

**Summary**

LGB speaker panels in the classroom are a common and accepted form of campus outreach used to increase visibility of LGB people, to increase awareness of LGB concerns, and to reduce homophobic attitudes. Participants on these panels tell their coming out stories as a way of personalizing the experiences of LGB people for the audience (Crawley & Broad, 2004). The coming out story is a particular kind of narrative used by LGB people to establish a consistent, integrated sense of self that provides identity not just for oneself but for others through the stories we tell (Plummer, 1995). However, when individuals relate a life story to someone, it is not merely a recitation of events. Personal stories are part of a self-narrative process that both creates identity and communicates who we are to others (Mischler, 1992; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Further, the manner in which individuals recount their histories, what they omit, what they choose to emphasize, and the relationships they establish between the teller and the audience contribute to the shaping of their personal identities. From this identity as narrative perspective, it is reasonable to believe that the telling of a personal narrative in a public manner may have implications for how one both understands and constructs
identity. The current study explores these implications by examining and describing the experiences of participants on LGB speaker panels. To date the research on LGB panel programs has focused on the audience and not the panelist. In addition to adding to a fuller understanding of the LGB panel phenomenon, this study may have implications for both panel design and panelist training as well as future research.
CHAPTER III
METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of repeatedly telling a coming out story in public and the effect this may have on individual identity, the story being told, and the meanings associated with the story by exploring and describing the experiences of gay male undergraduate students who tell their coming out stories while participating on classroom speaker panels. Qualitative research methods were used to investigate the experience of using a private narrative in a public forum. Specifically, a phenomenological approach was taken to gathering and analyzing data to identify themes illustrating the core elements and aspects, the *essence*, of the participants’ experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). A pilot study was conducted prior to this research and is discussed in the criterion section of this chapter.

This chapter provides a rationale and methods for this qualitative study. The first section introduces the research question under investigation. The second section discusses the appropriateness of qualitative methods for this research. The third section presents the procedures used for recruiting participants, selecting participants, collecting data, and analyzing data. In the fourth section the researcher’s background, experience, and assumptions about the research are reviewed. The final section addresses rigor in this study.

*The Research Question*

Although research has been conducted on the factors that effect change in attitudes towards lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, with exposure to LGB speakers panels (e.g., Croteau & Kusek, 1992; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Waldo & Kemp, 1997), there is a little information on the experiences of the panelists themselves, particularly as it relates to sharing a personal narrative in a public forum. The clinical literature suggests that recalling and objectifying narratives are part of the process individuals go through in
order to gain a more coherent and deeper understanding of the complexity and meaning of their experiences (Goncalves & Machado, 1999). From an identity as narrative perspective, we can expect that such retellings may have implications for an individual’s sense of self (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Plummer, 1995). The goal of the study was to explore how the experience of telling their coming out story as a means for promoting education and awareness of lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences and concerns affects a person’s sense of identity and the meanings associated with their coming out story. The focus of this study was an exploration of the salient themes, patterns, and categories in participants’ experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Three areas of interest regarding the use of a private narrative in a public forum are how has the experience affected the individual, i.e., what are the panelist’s thoughts and feelings about relating a private story in public, particularly as it relates to the purpose of education and raising awareness; how have the understandings or meanings associated with the coming out story changed; and how has the actual story being told changed?

**Qualitative Research and Phenomenology**

This section describes how qualitative research methods are appropriate for this study.

“A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). This study is a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of the participants utilizing qualitative research methods to investigate the research question. The research question is heuristic in origin, meaning it comes from the researchers reflection and internal search for the meaning of his own panel experiences related to telling his coming out story.
Moustakes (1990) endorses heuristic research as a starting point for developing a frame of reference for investigating and understanding human phenomenon. As indicated in the literature review, there is little research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual speaker panels and more specifically, none on the lived experiences of panel participants as it relates to their identity. Qualitative research is appropriate for studies exploring the experiences of individuals (Creswell, 1998), in particular for researching little known phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Phenomenological inquiry focuses on the “meanings of the lived experience for individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51) and employees “methods uniquely fashioned to assist psychological researchers in the investigation of human experience” (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). Therefore, this approach is appropriate for exploring the meanings the participants have for the panel experience.

*Procedures*

This section presents the methodological procedures used in this study for recruiting participants, selecting participants, collecting data, and analyzing data.

*Recruitment and Selection*

Prospective participants were recruited from LGB speaker panel programs at colleges and universities in the Great Lakes Region (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin). Typically these programs are associated with campus offices and resource centers for LGBT students. The respective campus offices were contacted to determine if a speaker’s panel program is offered on campus and who to contact regarding the study. In addition, a posting seeking assistance in recruiting participants was placed on the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in
Higher Education Listserv (Appendix B). An initial telephone call was made to the program coordinator or representative to discuss recruiting participants for the study and ask permission to send materials (Appendix B). With permission, an *Invitation to Participate in a Research Study* (Appendix C) was sent to the director / coordinator of the respective programs along with a cover letter asking them to distribute the invitation to potential participants. The *Invitation to Participate in a Research Study* (Invitation) asked interested persons to contact the researcher by telephone or by e-mail for more information. The Invitation stated that expressing an interest in further information did not imply they were participating in the research study. In addition, participants in the study were given copies of the Invitation for distribution to individuals whom they believed might be interested in participating in the research study.

Respondents who expressed an interest in participating received a recruitment letter (Appendix D) that included informed consent, identified the research topic and briefly stated how the study will contribute to the LGB scholarly literature, and invited the participation of individuals who (1) identify as gay and male; (2) do not identify as transgender; (3) participated on LGB classroom panels as an undergraduate for more than one semester; and (4) completed at least two semesters of undergraduate higher education. The recruitment letter also addressed the following: requirements for participation (completion of background questionnaire and participation in two interviews if selected); the measures being taken to ensure participant confidentiality; and the potential risks and benefits of involvement in this study. In addition, the researcher provided information pertinent to his training and experience in educational outreach with regards to LGB matters.
Criterion sampling is used to select participants who meet some important predetermined criteria (Polkinghorne, 2005). The basis for this determination is judging whose experience most authentically manifests or makes accessible what the researcher is interested in examining (Wertz, 2005). The concern is not so much in how much data is gathered or how many sources are used (Polkinghorne, 2005), as it is in selecting individuals who will provide an information rich sample (Morrow & Smith, 2000). For the purposes of this study, potential participants were those with sufficient experience with the phenomenon under investigation that they could provide a relevant description of their experience (Polkinghorne, 2005), that is, gay males who participated on LGB speaker panels in a classroom setting as an undergraduate student in a higher education setting. Creswell (1998) states that it is important for a phenomenological study to “describe the meaning for a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 122). Although there is no agreed upon standard number of participants, phenomenological studies are viewed as needing fewer participants than other types of qualitative studies (Creswell, 1998; Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2002). Creswell indicates that phenomenological studies represented in the literature run the gamut from 1 to 325 participants, but that working with relatively small numbers of participants can provide depth to data. In keeping with phenomenological inquiry, a relatively small sample of 10 information rich interviewees was selected for this study.

The first stage of selection involved gathering information from interested persons through a background questionnaire (Appendix E). Information provided in the questionnaire was used to select interviewees who fit the criteria for the study. Respondents were asked to provide demographic (biological sex, gender, age, race,
sexual orientation, semesters of post-secondary on-campus education completed), panel participation (length of time spent as a panel member, approximate number of panels done, role on panel, and settings for panels done), and contact (name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and preferred method of contact) information on the background questionnaire. Demographic and panel information was requested from respondents in order to facilitate the selection of interviewees who had experiences relevant to this study. Personal contact information was gathered from interested respondents in order to provide the investigator with a means for setting up interviews with selected participants.

The second stage of selection involved selecting appropriate interviewees based on criteria. For this study, participants had to: (1) identify as gay and male; (2) not identify as transgender; (3) have participated on LGB classroom panels as an undergraduate for more than one semester; and (4) have completed at least two semesters of undergraduate higher education. These latter two criteria reflect results from a related pilot study conducted by the researcher as part of a graduate course in qualitative research (Dolan Jr., 2000). The findings from this study indicate that participants who were both further along in their undergraduate studies and who had participated on speaker panels for more than one semester demonstrated a greater ability to reflect on and describe their experiences as a panelist in detail. The ability to reflectively discern aspects of an experience improves the richness of qualitative data (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Recruiting sufficient participants to meet the desired sample size of 10 participants proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Six institutions were contacted directly and the panel program coordinators agreed to assist in recruiting participants. A total of 12 individuals from 5 of these institutions expressed interest in participating in
the study. Completed background questionnaires were returned by 10 individuals. All 10 respondents met the criteria for this research study and were therefore selected as participants. The individuals included in this study represent a range of experiences that vary by age, institution, years of panel participation, and other factors, which provided an information rich sample. For example, one participant has been participating on panels for over 10 years and another has been involved with panel programs at two different institutions.

**Participants**

Participants identified as gay, male, and not transgender. Their ages ranged from 18 to 36 years old with a median age of 22 years old. Six participants reported growing up in suburban areas, two in urban areas, and two in rural areas. Their socio-economic backgrounds varied. One participant said he grew up poor, four were from working class families, three from the middle class, and one upper-middle class. All but one of the participants identified his race as Caucasian/White. One identified as bi-racial, White and African-American. All participants indicated some mix of Western European heritage, including the participant who identified as bi-racial and one who also indicated Cherokee heritage. Nine participants reported growing up in a Christian household with one relating a mixed Christian and Jewish background. One participant related growing up agnostic. At the time of this study, five participants were still working to complete an undergraduate degree and five were pursuing graduate degrees. The lowest number for panel participation was seven panels and the highest was approximated at over 100 over a course of 12 years. On the whole, participants have taken part in at least a dozen panels.
Data Collection

Participant interviews are the most used approach to qualitative data gathering (Polkinghorne, 2005). Interviews are a useful way to get large amounts of data quickly that can provide a rich and inclusive account of the interviewee’s experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In this study, an initial in-person and a follow-up phone or in-person interview was conducted with each interviewee. First interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes. Second interviews were scheduled for one hour. Both interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the researcher or a research assistant.

Although this study is a phenomenological inquiry, the underlying research question is heuristic in origin. Moustakes (1990) states that the conversational interview is the most appropriate technique to study a question with heuristic origins since it “is most nearly consistent with the rhythm and flow of heuristic exploration and search for meaning” (p. 47). Polkinghorne (2005) likens research interviewing skills to those used by counseling psychologists engaged in counseling and psychotherapy. “Both practices require an ability to form an accepting relationship, skill in active listening, and focus on the other’s experiential world” (p. 142). However, the purpose of the research interview is to obtain from the participant a rich and detailed account about the phenomenon under study, which needs to be made clear from the beginning. Further, Polkinghorne describes the interviewer’s task as one of assisting the interviewee to unpack and explore their experiences through the skillful use of probes and clarifying questions.

Because of the individual differences of interviewees and the unpredictable flow of a research conversation, qualitative interviewing cannot be reduced to a set of techniques or instructions, rather, it relies on the skilled judgment of the interviewer to move the conversation along (p. 143).
As a counseling psychology doctoral student who has completed his formal training, the researcher’s skill set is appropriate for this method of data collection.

The first interview began with a review of the purpose of the study and guidelines for the interview (Appendix F). This was followed with the open-ended question “Describe for me your experience telling your coming out story as a member of a classroom panel?” Prompt questions relating to the research questions were used. Probes and clarifying questions were used to gain a fuller understanding of the participant’s responses and to ensure the interviewer’s understanding of the responses. Because of the emergent nature of the interview, probes and clarifying questions could not be fully prepared in advance. Examples of some probes and clarifying questions used were “Can you tell me more about that?” “How did you feel about that?”, “What was that experience like for you?”, and “What do you mean by that?” In addition, follow-up questions were used at the end of the first and second interviews to pursue themes the researcher noticed, to examine the context of responses more fully, or to explore the implications of what was said.

Overall, the first interviews resulted in a wealth of information about individual experiences as a panelist. Participants were enthusiastic and forthcoming with details about being a panelist as well as more personal information about their coming out and general life experiences that provided context and depth for understanding the role of the panel in their life. With regards to retelling the coming out story on the panel, participants seemed to struggle with conceptualizing and discussing how this phenomenon may have affected their coming out story or identity. Repeated probing about changes in the story and associated meanings as a result of repeatedly telling the
coming out story was at times met with resistance or frustration. However, using more indirect questions and exploring ideas presented by the participants resulted in a satisfactory outcome to the interview.

Second interviews (by telephone or in person) took place with each participant after analysis of the data from their first interview. This round of interviews began after data analysis of the first 5 interviews, which provided sufficient data to identify emerging themes. There were two outcomes from the data analysis, collective themes (presented in the results section) and depictions of each individual’s experience (Appendix H). Prior to the second interview, participants received a copy of their individual depiction along with a request to review the material (Appendix B). The purpose of the second interview was twofold. First, to check to see how well the analysis fit with the participant’s experience and whether any aspect of their experience as related in the individual depiction was missing or misunderstood. Overall, participants responded positively to the individual depictions and indicated that they accurately and succinctly captured their individual experiences as discussed during the first interview. Many expressed being pleasantly surprised that the written depiction was able to convey the essential aspects of their experience as a panelist and provide a sense of who they are as an individual. Participants related positive regard for the researcher’s care and ability to really hear and then reflect what was said during the first interview.

The second purpose of this interview was to discuss the fit of the participant’s experiences with general themes emerging from the data analysis for all participants. This included asking pertinent questions about themes that emerged from the data analysis. New data that emerged from the second interview was analyzed and
incorporated in the final results. The second interview provided additional depth and richness to the data by providing participants an opportunity to respond to collective themes or clarify particular points in their individual depiction. For example, one participant responded strongly to a collective theme and began to detail how his experience fit the theme. Another participant took the opportunity to clarify the order of events in his story.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and their responses, the following steps were taken.

1. Participants were assigned a pseudonym. The researcher kept a master coding list that identified the participant with their pseudonym. The master coding list was used so that audio-recordings and transcripts of first and second interviews were not labeled with the participant’s names. A hard copy of the master coding list was kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home and was destroyed upon successful completion of his dissertation defense.

2. A research assistant was provided digital audio recordings of completed interviews for transcription. During the transcription process, digital audio recordings and transcripts were kept on the research assistant’s personal computer. Only the research assistant had access to this computer. Upon completion, transcripts were delivered electronically to the researcher and all electronic copies of the transcripts and the digital audio recordings were deleted from the research assistant’s computer.
3. The researcher altered or removed any identifying information from each transcript. Identifying information includes demographic information, geographic information, personal names, names of institutions, and names of programs that are specific to an institution or any information that could associate data with a particular person or his academic institution. After transcripts were altered to render them anonymous by the primary researcher, they were saved, stored, and used for analysis. Paper copies or computer versions of the original verbatim transcripts were destroyed by the primary researcher once anonymous transcripts were created. Participants were provided with a copy of the results section and asked to inform the primary researcher if there were any passages or quotes that they believed to be inappropriately revealing of their identity (Appendix B). Only three participants responded to this request and they did not request any changes.

4. While research was ongoing, the researcher held the signed consent documents and a hard copy of the data in a locked filing cabinet in his home. A copy of the anonymous transcripts was saved on his personal computer. Only the researcher had access to this computer. While working with the data, the researcher’s doctoral advisor also received an electronic version of the transcripts to be kept on her office computer. Only the doctoral advisor had access to this computer.

5. Upon project completion, the researcher’s computer copy of the anonymous transcripts was saved to disk and deleted from his computer.
The researcher will store the hard copy and electronic copy as well as copies of the signed consent documents and background questionnaires in a locked filing cabinet in his home for 7 years following final publication of this research project. The doctoral advisor was provided a disk copy of the anonymous transcripts and the original signed consent documents and background questionnaires. The doctoral advisor will store these materials in a locked filing cabinet in her office for 7 years after completion of the project. Any electronic project data or documents will be purged from the doctoral advisor’s computer.

Data Analysis

Wertz (2005) describes some typical variations and options in phenomenological research methods and suggests some guidelines for data analysis. He asserts that data analysis in phenomenological research is a reductive process that uses the rich and detailed descriptions provided by persons about their experiences to produce knowledge of psychological essences that are structures of meaning in human experience. This study followed his suggested guidelines for data analysis while also incorporating ideas described by Moustakes (1990) and Marshall and Rossman (1999). The data analysis was facilitated using Qualitative Solutions and Research Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (QSR N6) computer software.

The following steps were taken in data analysis:

1. Read through each transcript to gain a sense of the individual’s experience.
2. Identify significant statements or phrases that relate to the experience.
3. Identify meanings of statements or phrases and develop descriptive labels.
4. Develop individual depictions.
5. Organize meanings into themes.
6. Verify analysis with participants.

Steps 1 through 4 were carried out for each individual transcript. During step 1, the researcher highlighted words or phrases to identify important elements of the participant’s experience. Key words such as “training”, “story”, and “feelings” were noted in the margin as a start to identifying themes. Step 2 involved copying significant statements and phrases into a separate document and then sorting and grouping by key words. For example, grouping statements having to do with training or coming out or audience reaction. During step 3, more specific meanings for significant statements were identified along with descriptive labels. For example, “statements regarding training or preparatory work for panels” and “statements describing panels as providing affirmation”. Step 4 resulted in the written depiction of the individual experience (Appendix H) resulting from the significant statements group in step 3.

Three groups of collective themes began to emerge; statements relating to the panel, statements relating to the story, and statements relating to the audience. Collective themes that emerged from earlier interviews suggested an initial coding schema that provided a framework for analyzing subsequent interviews. In step 5, the structured coding scheme was entered into the QSR-N6 analysis software. Text files of each interview transcript were then imported and significant statements coded according the coding schema. This allowed production of node reports that included related statements.
from each participant. The coding schema was refined throughout the data analysis process as collective themes strengthened and their meanings deepened.

Step 6 of data analysis took place during the second interview with participants. Prior to this interview, participants were provided with and asked to review a written depiction of their individual experience (Appendix H) that resulted from steps 1 through 4 of data analysis. Overall, participants responded positively to the individual depictions and indicated that they accurately and succinctly capture individual experiences as discussed during the first interview. Many expressed being pleasantly surprised that the written depiction was able to convey both the essential aspects of their experience as a panelist and provide a sense of who they are as an individual. Participants were given an opportunity to suggest revisions to clarify or improve accuracy of the individual depictions. Two participants requested some minor factual revisions, while at the same time indicating the overall depiction was sound. Also during the second interview, participants were asked to verify collective themes (presented in the results chapter) that emerged from steps 1 through 5. Participants discussed their reaction to the theme as it fit with their own experience as well as their perception of how the theme might fit with the experience of other panelists.

Steps 1 through 5 were repeated for data collected during the second interview. New or clarifying information was incorporated into the individual depictions (Appendix H). The individual depictions and collective themes were used to develop a composite depiction that represents the essential aspects of the panelist’s experience. This depiction is presented at the end of the results chapter.

An auditor was also consulted in order to increase the rigor of the analysis. The
Auditor was an individual who is knowledgeable in both qualitative research and in the subject area. After step 6 was completed, the researcher provided the auditor a written copy of the researcher’s assumptions, a copy of the anonymous transcripts, the QSR N6 printout of data organized by significant statements, meanings, and clusters of themes, and a written summary of results. The auditor was asked to read selectively from each of these items and evaluate how congruent the original data are with the researcher’s identification of significant statements, meanings, clusters of themes, and summary of results. All questions and recommendations offered by the auditor were reviewed and addressed by the researcher and his doctoral advisor.

The auditor indicated that the selected individual depictions were accurate and that the collective depiction was comprehensive and clearly tied to the data. Overall, she felt the researcher’s identification of significant statements, meanings, and clusters of themes fit the data. The auditor suggested adding some additional quotes to sections on Personal Growth, Campus Climate and Safety, and Affirmation and Connection to enliven those sections for readers who have not read the transcripts; additional quotes were selected from the coded data in order to better represent the depth and power of the ideas expressed by participants.

**Researchers Background, Experience, and Assumptions**

Polkinghorne (2005) relates that the interviewer’s presence and form of involvement is integral to the quality of participants’ responses. He suggests that “the function of an interviewer is more like a supportive editor” whose purpose is not to infiltrate the account with their own notions, rather to keep things focused on the participant’s own understandings (p. 143). Researchers therefore need to manage their
influence in both the production and analysis of qualitative data. One way to accomplish this is for the phenomenological researcher to examine and put aside prejudgments, assumptions, and experiences (Creswell, 1998). Following is a description of the researcher’s background, experience, and assumptions resulting from self-reflection in an effort to keep preconceived notions from influencing the research.

The researcher is a doctoral student in counseling psychology in the final stage of his training, which provides a good foundation for qualitative research. Polkinghorne (2005) suggests two reasons that qualitative research is appropriate for counseling psychologists. First, qualitative research provides information about the life experiences of the people served by the field. Second, counseling psychologists are trained in the interview skills required to produce rich and detail experiences from participants in qualitative research.

The researcher, as described in more detail in Chapter I, is a gay man with experience telling his coming out story for educational purposes. In addition, he has served as a board member for LGBT resource centers at two universities; advised two LGBT student organizations; created and developed LGBT Awareness and Safe Space presentations and programming; and consulted with colleagues on LGBT concerns during his doctoral internship at a university counseling center. Currently the researcher is engaged in consulting on LGBT awareness training programs for residence life staff at a public university in the state of Michigan.

The researcher’s assumptions about the study are:

1. That the process of telling a private narrative in public has an effect on both the individual’s identity and the meanings of their story.
2. The more experience one has telling one’s coming out story in public, the more insight one has on the experience.

3. Exploring the actual experiences of individuals who tell their coming out stories in public will provide a greater understanding of the experience.

**Rigor of the Study**

Morrow (2005) discusses rigor or trustworthiness in terms of Lincoln and Guba’s (2000) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These concepts are described as parallel criteria to the quantitative concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, yet are more appropriate when using a qualitative paradigm.

Credibility is analogous to the quantitative concept of internal validity and refers to the probability that authentic findings will be produced. Prolonged engagement, member-checking, constant comparison, and auditor review are techniques to increase the probability of credible findings. Prolonged engagement increases the probability of credible findings by allowing the interviewer sufficient time with each participant. In this study, conducting two interviews (approximately 2 ½ hours total) with information rich participants provided substantial contact with respondents. Member-checking involves sharing findings with participants to receive feedback about the fit of the researcher’s preliminary interpretations with the participant’s experience. This was accomplished in the second interview and by having participants review the written results. Overall, participants indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the depiction of their individual experience, with many relating some surprise that the depiction truly captured the essence of their experience. A few offered some clarifying comments, which were incorporated
into the final document. Participants also generally agreed with the collective themes, although some indicated more or less fit with their personal experience. Constant comparison of the data was done by the researcher in data analysis steps three and four. The auditor also checked the fit between the original data and the researcher’s written themes as previously discussed.

Transferability, the qualitative form of external validity, refers to the extent to which the researcher provides adequate information so that readers are able to fit the results of the study to his or her own situation. Transferability is enhanced by providing sufficient information about the researcher, the research processes, the research context, and the participants so that readers are able to decide how the findings may transfer. Information about the researcher and the research contexts and processes is provided in this chapter. A thick description of the participants’ experiences is provided in the results section through use of direct quotes. Contextual information about the participants is provided in this chapter. The findings in this study are illustrated using the participants’ own words to increase the reader’s ability to determine how applicable findings may be in other contexts.

Dependability is analogous to the quantitative concept of reliability and refers to the extent that the processes through which findings are derived are explicit and repeatable. In this study, the auditor reviewed data management procedures, data analysis processes, and the fit of the data with the researcher’s results. Also, member checks increased dependability by allowing participants to comment on the researcher’s conclusions. Participants judged the results to be a good fit with the data.

Confirmability refers to objectivity and acknowledges that research is never
objective. From this perspective, the integrity of the data relies on the researcher’s ability to “tie together the data, analytic processes, and findings in such a way that the reader is able to confirm the adequacy of the findings” (p.252). In this study, the auditor provided an outside perspective to ensure that the researcher’s assumptions did not unduly influence the findings or the processes and checked the analysis to see if it accurately fits with participants’ statements. Using copies of the researcher’s assumptions and biases, copies of the original transcripts, the researcher’s initial coding scheme, and the QSR N6 printout of data organized by codes, the auditor evaluated whether the researcher provided a rich picture of the participants’ experiences. The auditor reported that the individual depictions were comprehensive and accurately reflected the experiences described in the interview transcripts and that the collective depiction was clearly tied to the data.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

A phenomenological approach was taken in data analysis to identify the essence of the experience of gay males who tell their coming out stories as undergraduate members of LGB classroom panels. Essences are structures of meaning that represent the essential aspects or fundamental nature of an experience. This chapter describes the essence by identifying the common qualities and themes that emerged from interviews about participant experiences. Collective themes are described and then illustrated with selected quotes and examples.

The phenomenological analysis also produced depictions of individual experiences that relate the essential qualities and themes from each participant’s experience. These depictions can be found in Appendix H. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants and identifying details have been omitted or changed. The individual depictions and collective themes were used to develop a composite depiction describing the essential aspects of the core panel experience.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The chapter begins by describing the essential aspects of the experience that relate to participating on the panel or to the panel program itself. Common experiences relating to telling coming out stories are offered in the second section. The third section relates participant experiences and perceptions about the audience. Finally, in the fourth section, a composite depiction describing the panelist experience is presented.
The Panel

Participants’ related a variety of ideas about participating on panels or about the panel program. This section presents the common themes.

Motivation or Reason for Participating on Panels

Participants expressed a variety of motives and reasons for participating on the panels, ranging from the personal to the political. Some did it as means of connecting and taking part in the gay community. Others related a need to educate and increase awareness on coming out experiences and LGBT concerns. A desire to debunk myths and challenge stereotypes was also cited as a reason for taking part on panels. Participants expressed a desire to make a difference in the lives of others by creating a more positive environment for coming out and creating more enlightened and informed attitudes with family members and friends. A few participants indicated that the possibility of helping others or making their coming out experience easier made it worth taking a personal risk by telling their story in public.

“If people don’t hear our stories and if we don’t start becoming visible and start dispelling some of the myths about being gay then people are going to continue struggling just like I did, just like a lot of people do” responded Adam while talking about the reasons he started taking part on panels. “You have an opportunity with people here in this room to change their perspectives of what it means to be gay,” he went on, “an opportunity to change their mind for the people who are ready.” For Adam, “if [I] could make a difference for one person then going through the turmoil of adjusting my own attitude to being comfortable, being completely visible was worth it.”
Declan also talked about helping others. “You can help one person just opening the door or something, but if you can share an experience and introduce a new way of life and a new way of thinking and help open doors and windows for people, just by sitting there telling them something personal about yourself, even though it might be awkward at first, it will be something greater in the long run…I never knew gay people were such average people. I thought they were all this like a stereotype. And helping break those stereotypes is just part of helping bring some form of equal rights to people in the long run, because it opens their minds.” Similarly, Garde discussed his passion for educating others and encouraging new understandings about people “that could change the world.”

Hiro expressed very personal reasons for becoming involved in the speaker’s program. Prior to coming out he was very involved in his church, which was a central part of his life. When he came out he was no longer welcome at his church and felt a void in his life. Discovering the panel program and signing up was a way of finding something that he hoped would be “as intense” as his church experience and would offer him a sense of community.

Eamon talked about his motivation more in political than personal or educational terms. “So for me it had, I don’t know, I think it had much more do to with my commitment to other [gay] people and the queer community then any sort of sense of having to educate people.” He talked about the panels being a place where “you have to present [as] a unified front and where you have to present as a community on certain issues for people who are not part of it.” Eamon’s participation was also motivated by his strong connection with his queer identity and his desire to support others in his community. “…[The] queer community is something that I do feel very strongly about
and feel very connected to and feel very identified with. So, like I said, I think that’s why there’s that connection, because it’s my culture. It’s my support network. I’ve been supported by it, so I need to support it as well.”

Jude related that he is motivated by both a need to feel connected to the gay community and a desire to make a difference. “I’m making more friends now, because I didn’t have a lot of gay friends. But now that I do the panels I know more gay people and that’s really nice.” Jude also likes “the thought of these people coming here to learn and I can help them to learn. I think that’s the best part for me. I can do this and it’s benefiting other people.”

Training

A variety of training experiences were described by participants ranging from no formal training to a comprehensive seminar that took place over three days. Eamon recalled very little formal training before his first panel, “I don’t remember if I had [any] before my first one. We were a little more disorganized then. I think I did, very briefly. I think it was short, a half hour ahead of time and we’ll give you a crash course in what a panel is.” Hiro described a more organized effort that was a “six hour long training session.” Ismail was effusive about his twenty hour training experience that took place over three days. “The training was great. The training was amazing. I feel that the training --- I think everyone should go through the training, even if they aren’t going to take part in the [panel program].”

Training activities typically include reviewing procedures and ground rules, including “do’s” and “don’ts” with regards to language and demeanor; discussing the
history and purpose of the program, as well as past experiences of participants; and time for developing a coming out story that will be used on the panel.

Reflecting on his training experience Declan said, “I just sat down and some more people showed up and we read this pamphlet thing together. And it’s like, how to handle things, what to talk about, how to talk about it. Then we wrote out our stories…then we took turns getting in front of each other and just saying it.” Burke recalled, “…basically we spent an hour doing three things. We, uh, pre-did our stories, we wrote an actual script out for ourselves and…then we had certain words we’re not supposed to use. Never use the word ‘choice’ or ‘lifestyle’ or anything like that. Make sure not to make fun of the audience. That was another thing.” Cole discussed similar proscriptions, “They talked a lot about things not to say.” He stated further, “I suppose that some of the things we were trained for was more about ‘don’ts’ than ‘do’s’, you know. And the ‘do’s’ were things like do talk about how you felt, do talk about like what your emotional reactions to situations were, do because that’s the kind of thing that is going to give people a better sense of who you are and what your experiences have been.”

Garde stressed the importance of learning and understanding the ground rules for the discussion panel. “First and foremost you go over the ground rules and learn why the ground rules are the way they are…and ground rules are so important for something like this because, with this issue you have people really tottering on the edge of a lot of feelings for a lot of people so you could really spark something negative if things go wrong.” Hiro talked about using a manual during training, “I don’t remember everything that was on it…we talked about some of the main issues that come up…then we watched a video of a particular panel.” Learning about the history and purpose of the panel
program was also a common experience. “They basically gave us this pamphlet that basically had the history of it,” said Fredo. Cole expressed the underlying purpose and message of the panel trainings, “The training was an educational one, like that we were doing something to educate others and help people.”

The main focus of the training session is developing the coming out story to be shared on the panel. “So the training and the rules and going over past experiences are really important,” said Garde, “and then we get to the meat and potatoes which is the developing of the story.” During his training a worksheet was used to help develop the story. Garde described the worksheet “…[it] has questions like how old were you when you first knew, was there a significant experience that helped you figure it out or when did you tell your friends...all sorts of questions like that.” Cole recalled a less structured experience for developing his story, “The story that I did tell I had kind of thought about it ‘cause we had done [it] in the training, in the training we had done some storytelling.”

According to Ismail as you develop the coming out story for the panel, “You keep on refining your story. And they [the trainers] made it clear that even we were done there, our stories weren’t over. Our stories would keep changing and keep evolving and we would have to keep refining them, which is absolutely true. It was definitely an exercise in taking a large, sprawling story and paring it down and refining it down to five minutes, to a five minute coherent, comprehensive story.”

A major goal of developing and practicing the story was to keep it within the time limits for each participant, typically five to ten minutes. “…we started timing ourselves because we didn’t want to take a whole lot of time because most of the panels were a timed thing,” stated Burke. Garde’s experience was similar, “Then we kind of practice
our stories to cut the fat out and get it where it’s the real stuff…also so that we can fit three speakers in.” According to Hiro, “...then we sat down and wrote out our coming out stories, right then and there so we would know exactly what we had to say…it had to be like five to six minutes. We helped kind of edit if anything was necessary.”

Sharing stories and answering mock audience questions was a way of preparing new panelists for coping with personal reactions and consequences to telling a coming out story in public and for handling the types of questions that could be asked. “[At the conclusion of training] they did a scenario where people asked a few questions and how are you going to react just to make sure we wouldn’t react rashly or we wouldn’t react too quickly or get nervous,” said Garde. Hiro described his experience this way, “We talked about some of the main issues that usually come up. Then each of us also got a question. Like the facilitator [would say], ‘Hiro, if somebody asks you this, how would you answer it?’” Declan related having discussions about how to deal with the personal aspects of participating on panels. “I definitely got out of reading the pamphlet that it would be more than just sitting there. It will be kind of emotional and you need to be prepared just to be comfortable enough with who you are to do it. And I know they asked us before we even volunteered to do anything to make sure that this was something we wanted to do. Because once you do it you’re out. You’re very out on campus.”

About his training experience he said, “Yeah, it helped with the whole doing it. Because regardless of how many times you have come out, how many people you have said it to and how many internet places you have posted it on such as Facebook, My Space, Live Journal and the other blogger sites like that, it is just nerve wracking to get in front of even gay people and talk about personal issues like that, good or bad. And you hear them
so you know how good you have it in some cases. It helps a lot because if you can do it in front of gay people, you should have no problem doing it in front of straight people.”

Fredo heard an important message during training, which is “Don’t be afraid to do it.” Reflecting on how scary it can be to open up to a complete stranger, he thinks it is important to focus on the fact that you can’t give wrong answers in order to help cope with anxiety. “You’re giving very personal answers” that relate to your own experience. Further, he says “…there is nothing to screw up because it’s really your own story.” Fredo feels that it is important to come out of training knowing that other people have done this before, therefore so can you.

Generally, those who engaged in training found some aspects of the session helpful, but indicated no amount of training could prepare them for the reality of the first panel experience. Cole said “I think it prepared me in that I had never done anything like that before. I mean I had done some public speaking in high school, but nothing terribly daunting or important.” He went on to reflect, “…thinking about it now I think maybe I didn’t know what I was getting into, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.” Adam related a more visceral experience with his first panel, “Oh, it was tough! Nervous shaking. I think I even threw up after the first one because I’m such an internal, introverted person that it was tough.” For Adam, the training was only helpful in a knowledge and procedural way, but did not prepare him for his reaction to the actual experience, “…there [was] nothing the training could have done to help me get over my own internal struggle with being in the spotlight.”
Therapeutic Aspects

Participants related that the process of sharing their coming out experiences on panels had therapeutic qualities or as Garde put it, “It helps you kind of work through things that you may need to or are trying to [work through].” Adam stated, “I can’t really describe it any other way than to say it’s very therapeutic to be able to share your story and to have people interested in hearing about it and wanting to know more and to ask you questions and to talk about it. It’s therapeutic.” Fredo indicated that the program organizers at his institution recognize the therapeutic aspects of the panel, but discourage participant’s from thinking about it that way. “In some ways it really is [therapeutic]. But, I mean, we are also told, you know, this is not a therapy session.”

Cole indicated purposely becoming involved in panel activities as a means for dealing with his coming out experience. “I had only just come out right at the time I had started college, at least to my immediate family. My friends had known for some time, so it seemed like a good way to be able to kind of process that. I had never really been good in one-on-one therapy settings so I felt like I would be more comfortable, which is strange that I felt like I was more comfortable talking to a room full of strangers, total strangers.” Reflecting on the benefits of the experience for him, Cole said “…it helped me to identify with, um, it helped me identify with certain things that were going on in my life a lot more readily than had I not done that. So, you know, much in the same way when you’re, I guess, and again I’ll make that analogy to talk therapy.” About the therapeutic aspect of the panel he says , “…it’s great…it’s very freeing…it is nice to be in situations and this is why later I did actually learn to work with and enjoy therapeutic situations like one-on-one therapy situations. Because it’s nice to have somebody just sit
and listen to you talk about yourself. Because it’s not something that you can do…you can do it with your friends, you can do it with other people, but generally you don’t get an opportunity with the people that you know to just sit and talk about things that maybe your friends already know or maybe your parents already know or the people closest to you. They already know who you are. They already know things about you and so it’s nice to able to just sit in front of strangers or whatever and talk about yourself.”

Declan also related benefits from talking about his experiences on panels. “I just kind of forgot about the emotions I’ve felt in the past… from high school, social anxiety, so if you don’t always express the emotions, you can’t feel the results of them or the negative reactions from them or the nervousness and everything. I do remember thinking this was really fun and definitely something I would want to keep doing.” Similarly, Fredo said, “If you had tried to talk with your parents they would rather not talk about it and so you don’t talk about it. You don’t think about it. And then you are telling the story in a safer environment where people are willing to listen, rather than to go, ‘no’ or ‘get out my house’ or what have you. You remember more emotions that have been pushed back or more feelings or more actions. Like things that other people have said things that you have said or felt that can be hurtful. Remembering these things is good. I mean, to push them back and keep them there, I think, would be worse than bad. So even if it is painful, I think that little pain that you do feel is worth it, because you bring it back out. Had you never told the story, it would have stayed there in the back of your mind and would have been there for God knows how long, until eventually it would have come out, I believe. So telling these stories is getting all of that out, getting the whole puzzle put together, regardless of how ugly the pieces might be. I think it’s good for the soul.”
Personal Growth

Related to the therapeutic aspect is the shared experience of personal growth that describes a transformative element in the panel experience. For some this growth was about putting the past in perspective and discovering new meanings and insight on experience. Others related how the process of developing a story for the panel and repeatedly talking about their coming out experiences provided a tool for examining and reinforcing identity. Individuals also talked about personal growth in terms of improving their public speaking skills or lessening their anxiety about speaking in front of others.

Adam described his participation on panels as part of his life journey and related that the experience has played a key role in coming to terms with his past experiences and in making him the person he is today. For him the experience “deprogrammed a lot of internal programming that I had because I’m sharing very personal stuff with a room full of strangers…and just sort of let me grow and realize that not everyone is like the people I grew up with.” As an experienced panelist of many years, he talked about the importance of “shar[ing] the journey with somebody who doesn’t have all the experience that I have” and how letting go of his fears by sharing his story shows that “...I am not intimidated and not afraid of who I am and [I’m] hopefully setting up that type of atmosphere for the other people on the panel who are at the very beginning of their journey.”

Burke and Cole both talked about using the panel experience to gain a new and deeper understanding of their coming out experience by incorporating new meanings gained from discovering new aspects of their self and their coming out experience. Burke described speaking on panels as a “catalyst” that helped him come to a more
holistic understanding of his coming out experience. He believes he would have gained this understanding eventually, “just maybe not as quickly.” For him, it’s not so much that the experience changed his life, but as he says “it changed the way I think about it.” Now when faced with learning from new experiences he says that instead of “just letting it run around in the back of my head I’m actively thinking about it” in order to make new meanings and gain insight. As a panel participant, Burke began to understand how to gain a deeper understanding of his coming out experience by learning to make connections with “different aspects of myself and just other people, other life experiences…and how they impact me.” Cole said that reliving his experiences when speaking on panels helped him to “identify with certain things in [his] life more readily” than if he had not been engaged in this activity. He found himself not only telling his story to others, but listening to himself as well, which provided insight to some of his deeper thoughts and feelings, things he wasn’t always consciously aware of. Cole said that “self monitoring…helps [you] to realize when you are saying a certain thing or when you’re speaking in a certain way or reacting to a situation in a certain way,” which can provide insight on your thoughts and feelings about your experience.

As a result of taking part on panels Declan said, “I’ve become more myself.” Jude appeared to agree with this identity reinforcing aspect when he stated, “…it’s made me more able to say that I am gay and that I am because I’ve had to say it so much.” Garde described his experience this way, “It improves confidence…it improves pride…it improves people’s ability to be firm in who they are.” Ismail stated that he has taken on and additional aspect to his identity, that of a panel program speaker and volunteer. He related that by going through the panel training and taking part on panels he now has an
“identity tool kit” he can use to examine and “retool” his identity and the story he tells so that it reflects personal growth and experience.

Another aspect of personal growth engendered by participating on panels results from sorting out what being gay means to you from the expectations placed upon gay people by stereotypes and labels. Being both bi-racial and gay, Hiro described tremendous struggle reconciling the perceptions and expectations attached to these labels with his own thoughts and feelings about his identity. Through the panel experience, both talking about his self and listening to others, he was able to “think more about labels” and started questioning if he identified with any of the labels and expectations being placed upon him. He came to the conclusion that “…maybe I don’t need any labels” and after recognizing the “fluidity of life,” he decided to stop constraining his own identity with labels so that he could “just be me.” Burke seemed to capture the essence of this aspect of the panel experience when he related that the panel experience has “…made it more clear that my concept of myself is not the same as everyone else’s concept of me.”

On a more practical note, both Adam and Garde indicated that taking part on panels resulted in developing transferable skills related to their profession and helped them to be comfortable speaking in public. As a future teacher, Garde said doing panels is “a way for me to get practice” not only in speaking in front of a group, but also in transmitting knowledge and with facilitating discussions. Adam described himself as shy and introverted by nature and stated that taking part in panels has “helped me come out of my shell,” which is important for him in his role as a student affairs professional who needs to be comfortable meeting people and directing groups. Jude related a similar
personal benefit for himself. Before speaking on panels he had a hard time talking in groups or relating stories without starting to “mumble or trail off.” Now he feels that he can be much more focused when answering questions and taking part in conversations.

*Panel Proceedings*

Generally classroom panel presentations consist of two parts; panelists telling their individual coming out stories and then answering questions from the audience. Burke described the general format of this type of panel. “We had a leader who was in charge of introducing everyone who was on the panel and then each person did a short five minute life story as a gay person and then we would open up to questions.” There is a panel facilitator who discusses ground rules for the experience and moderates the questions from the audience. The facilitator may or may not take part on the panel.

Participants indicated that while sharing coming out stories is an essential aspect of the panel, the question-and-answer period can be just as important. “Another big aspect of the panel for me is the question and answer period, because I really love doing [it],” said Ismail. He added that for him the quality of the question-and-answer period “makes or breaks a panel.” Eamon was even less enthusiastic about storytelling indicating that the “…coming out story for [him] was always just the icebreaker,” something that served to “establish a bit of authority” to answer questions and represent his community.

With the recent addition of straight allies as panel members, a “Guess the Straight Person” activity has become a popular way to begin the classroom panel discussion. “I think it [is] a good way to get started, to really kind of, obviously break the ice, but also to get people to realize the stereotypes they might have are completely unfounded,” said
Eamon. However he also understands that this activity “could have also invalidated a lot of stuff about someone’s identity … this whole idea of having to try to pass.”

This type of activity was a tremendous source of mixed feelings for Jude who gets “a lot of votes from folks who think I’m straight,” which provides him a sense of accomplishment from achieving the goal of the activity by showing that “not every gay person is the same,” but at the same time provokes anxiety about not saying something that would be perceived as gay. “I felt like I had to say the right things. Like if somebody asks me my favorite musical group I would say this person and not this other thing ‘cause this thing is really gay and this other thing is less gay in my head so I would say this even though I liked them both.” Jude, who says he is “happy to be gay,” experiences some consternation at the irony of having to pass as a straight man as part of the panel where he comes out as a gay man.

Debriefing

Although many programs acknowledge the emotional and personal aspects of this activity for participants, most programs do not have a formal debriefing process that allows participants to discuss their reactions after a panel. Ismail stated that debriefing after a panel is part of the program at his institution, which “can be helpful” in reviewing how the panel went and helping others to sort out their reactions. Eamon talked about meeting informally with other panelists in order to “process a lot of emotions that during the panel you kind of just keep bottled up.” Declan felt that discussing the panel experience would be helpful for new panelists, especially if they “just felt like they did bad” and might not want to continue. Garde indicated that this activity works best when it is spontaneous and associated with a difficult or surprising panel experience.
Debriefing after a panel is a way of encouraging folks to continue with the work and help them put it in the proper perspective.

Level of Experience

Several participants indicated that the level of experience or familiarity with the panel proceedings affected their experience. For some this lessened their performance anxiety and enabled them to be more open to revealing their feelings. For others it provided practice in telling their stories and answering audience questions. Jude learned about becoming more comfortable with sharing his story in public from “just the experience of doing them and knowing it’s going to be okay.” Fredo stated that “the more you get into, the easier it becomes…it’s not all focused on you. You learn that even though you’re on the panel that the event is focused on the panel, it becomes easier.” Adam related that after several years of participating on panels “there is probably not a question you could ask that would surprise [me].” Eamon said, “…it’s a lot easier for me to be vulnerable after [doing this] for four years.” He said that with practice and familiarity it becomes easier to separate his own feelings from “someone’s emotions being thrown at you.”

Campus Climate and Safety Concerns

Generally participants reported minimal or no concerns about personal safety with regards to participating on panels. Jude said, “I’ve never experienced any problems. Every one [panel] has been positive…Sometimes it feels like some of those people just came to get out of doing something else that maybe was harder than just coming to listen to someone speak, but I’ve never felt like I was in danger.” Adam expressed a similar sentiment, “I, knock on wood, have never been in a situation where I have felt unsafe.”
Burke related no concerns about the campus climate for LGB folks. “You can walk down the street holding hands with your boyfriend.” Garde said that his campus has “improved leaps and bounds” since he arrived and attributes the more positive atmosphere to the public activities of the campus Gay Straight Alliance and the panel program.

If concerns were expressed it was due to the specific environment for that particular panel or from a personal experience. “I’m trying to think if there was ever a time that I didn’t feel safe” stated Hiro. “I think one of the times where I felt the most wary a bit was when we did the teen panel. It was an outward bound or something, upward bound? And so teens carry all sorts of stuff with them these days that…we found a shank, a wooden shank in the audience…you never know with kids these days. I mean that was the only time I ever felt anything like that.”

Eamon experienced safety concerns in what seems an unlikely place. He described participating on a panel as part of awareness training for a local police department. “There is nothing quite like being in a room with 20 people with guns that just makes you a little uneasy.” He explained that another aspect of his trepidation came from the bad history between the gay community and the police. “I think it’s the law. I know exactly. Especially given queer experiences with the police are generally not favorable and I’ve found that to be true.”

Affirmation and Connection

Becoming a member of a speakers panel program is a way for participants to connect with the LGBT community on campus and affirm one’s identity. “That’s my support network. That’s my culture too,” says Eamon of the LGBT community on his
campus. He feels very strongly about not only maintaining his connection with this community, but supporting the community. Eamon stated, “I’ve been supported by it, so I need to support it as well.” Hiro expressed a similar sentiment when he said, “I’m doing something that’s helping our community.” Adam expressed feeling a sense of solidarity from “going through this experience with other people” resulting in strong bonds with fellow panelists and community members.

Hiro experiences a sense of well being and place when he takes part on a panel. “It’s like there’s just this overwhelming happiness of being around [gay people].” Jude talked about not having a lot of gay friends and at times questioning how he fits in the community. Taking part in the panels has “helped [him] to find a place in the gay community and it’s been positive … and affirming.” After looking into the history of the speakers program on his campus, Jude also experienced a sense of continuity with the past, “I’m part of something that has been happening for a long time.” Garde believes that the panels provide opportunities for participants to not only connect with other gay people but “maybe [connect with] audience members” as well. More importantly he believes it offers participants an opportunity to connect with their self and “to become more in tune with their insides and really who they are and to become accepting of themselves and to like themselves and to explore more about themselves.”

The Story

Participants described a number of common experiences relating to telling coming out stories on the panel. This section describes these experiences.
Retelling the Story

Fredo had a unique way of describing the experience of repeatedly telling his coming out story on panels when he said it is “as if I am watching a movie.” He explained, “I mean you never saw yourself retelling the story a day or a week or a month afterwards. But now that I am where I am, every detail is clear. There’s no jumble of emotions. I’ve just flattened it all and I can see it in such a better light. I mean it’s still an ugly thing, but I can see it more clearly.” For him the process of telling his story over and over again or retelling “constantly just sharpens everything and keeps it that way” because the process of organizing experiences into a coherent story “helps…you develop the puzzle. You begin to lay it out in a way that people can understand, see it the clearest.” Recognizing the paradox implied in this separation of self and story, Fredo offered the following explanation.

“Odd as that may seem, it is something that you become removed from because I’m still [me] but I’m a different [me]. I’m not the same person that I was when I was coming out…now when I tell that story and go over it and over it, the more I tell it the more I see differences in how I was then and realize how much I’ve changed now. So it is very separating. It’s me at that point in time and this is me now, but I’m still the same person in the sense that I remember it all and I can still relive those feelings. I’m not so removed that I think ‘why did I feel that way’ or ‘why did I react or do that’. I understand all the implications that come with what I was then. Realizing that, because it has turned me into such an educator I guess you could say that, I wouldn’t change it painful as it could be then and as much pain as it may bring me in the future, I wouldn’t because I feel for the most part that it has made me better overall. So I’m separate from it
because I’m a much different person than I was then, but I’m still that person because I remember that pain. I remember that fear and I understand it. It’s not something that I’ve grown past or gotten over or coped with, it’s still very much there, but I’m better for it.”

Ismail echoed this sense of separation resulting from retelling his coming out story. “I think my perspective on my story has changed, but my story itself doesn’t. It’s really interesting because I feel that the more that I’ve told my story, the more my story crystallizes and doesn’t want to change. It’s almost as if my story sort of becomes reified into this thing that is part of me, but isn’t, in some ways. Maybe because I’ve told it so many times to so many different people, that I’ve shared it and now it’s a part of their, even though they’ve only heard it, it’s also somewhat a part of their lived experiences too. My story has definitely become crystallized and redefined in my mind as My Story. Capital ‘M’, capital ‘S’.” Despite acknowledging how the perspective of time and experience creates a feeling of separateness between self and story, both Fredo and Ismail insist feeling that the story they tell is not truly separate from them and remains integrated in their identity.

Although participants made it clear that the experiences related in their coming out story did not change, retelling the story allowed them to polish both the story and the way they told the story. Declan said, “Sometimes it felt like I was just reading something about someone else. There is no way I could have done this, or said that. When it is one of those things you know you did or said…sometimes it gets to the point where it’s just like you’re just reading it, you’re not saying it. You’re just reading it from memory, like rehearsing a play.” Cole described the refining effect from this type of rehearsal “like watching a plant grow.” The more he told the story, the better able he found himself at
“keep[ing] a story flowing naturally” as he became more practiced with the story he wanted to tell.

Other participants related different benefits from retelling the coming out story. Understanding that participants come out every time they do a panel was a revelation to Jude who stated that “telling my story over and over made me realize that [coming out] was a process…it will continue through my whole life.” Like Jude, Ismail indicated gaining insight through re-telling his coming out story. “It has definitely given me greater understanding about my coming out process and why things happened the way they did and why I did them the way I did. And I would say I don’t regret anything.”

Hiro said that by sharing your story again and again “you’re strengthening yourself.” This feeling is shared by Fredo who said he not only feels strengthened when he tells his coming out story, but that is essential “for one not to forget their roots.” Eamon related a different type of practice effect that came with re-telling his story. For him, practice made “it easier to separate yourself from someone else’s emotions in a way…where you don’t get personally involved.”

Hiro reflected the general feelings of participants about retelling their coming out story when he said, “I was always as invested in it as the first time and there was never a time where I was like, ‘Oh God!’ I have to go in there and tell the story again.”

*Listening to Yourself*

Telling their coming out stories to an audience provided panelists a unique opportunity to gain insight into their coming out experience and how they were relating the experience to others.
“The neat thing about talking about yourself is that you’re also listening to yourself,” is how Cole described an important aspect of his panel experience. Cole related that one reason he monitors what he says is to avoid making a faux pas. “I have to check my speech because I don’t want to come off in a certain way.” Cole indicated that he would clarify his statements or the intent of his statements if he felt the need to modify how he was coming off to the audience. However he also stated that sometimes he found himself voicing an unconscious thought or floating an emerging idea. “In some cases it’s a method ….of testing like maybe this is an acceptable idea and maybe it isn’t,” he said. Cole indicated that he liked to reflect afterwards on what he said during a panel because it could bring him new insights on both his coming out experience and his panel performance.

Other participants described reactions and insights from listening to themselves telling their coming out story. Adam noted that “it surprises me that even after 12 years sharing that stuff it’s not, it’s not dead. I’m not numb to it.” For him the experience of retelling his coming out story and the attached feelings are in many ways as vivid today as it was the first time he told it or lived it. Fredo expressed a similar connection with his past when listening to his story, “…once I tell that story, I am able to go back and those feelings are just alive.” Listening to his story allows him to examine his past experiences in the light of the present, which “helps [him] to know what to say or what to think.” Ismail related, “I need to have my own voice on these panels, not just what I have been told is best.” Listening to himself tell his own story affirms that he is relating his own experience and perspective rather than something created from training guidelines.
**Listening to Other Panelists**

The experience of listening to the other panelists relate their individual coming out experiences also provided the participants insight into their own experiences.

Participants related a number of effects from listening to other panelists tell their stories. Adam related finding the courage to tell his story from hearing others on the panel. “It gave me the courage to say wow, you know, he shared a suicide experience, maybe next time it would be alright for [me] to try it (sharing his own suicide experience). Here’s the reaction he got for being courageous and sharing that part of his life, you know. Test the water.” He also gained comfort and felt affirmed hearing other stories. “It was good to hear other stories and feel like wow, I really didn’t grow up being alone, other people were going through the same experiences just in different places.”

Other participants echoed a sense of affirmation and felt less alone in their coming out experience after listening to other panelists tell their stories. “It’s helpful,” said Hiro, “not so much a oh good I’m glad that somebody else went through this hell because it sure wasn’t fun, but it was helpful to see that somebody else did go through this and so somebody else can understand where I’m coming from.” Ismail related, “Sometimes I’ll hear their stories and I’ll hear a particular event or a particular way they felt about something and it will strike a chord.” According to Garde, listening to other panelists provides “common ground with other people and that’s a big part of the affirmation.”

Listening to other panelists tell their stories provides insight on panel participation as well as into one’s own experience. As Fredo put it, “Once you hear their stories, it’s
very emotional. You feel, because you’re coming from where they’re coming from you feel what they feel. It’s like, oh, I’ve been through that same process. But because it’s a new story, once they tell a certain aspect…that’s what’s very different. You know where they’re coming from, but those differences…it’s just very raw and very emotional and you’re like, wow, thank God that never happened to me or, wow, I wish that had happened to me. So it’s kind of like you’re seeing it from a situation that’s like, okay, I’m in a position where I am understanding of you no matter what you say. But this new information being thrown at me … it’s just extremely emotional because you’re feeling all these different feelings. Like, you feel for that person and you also you’re either disgusted by the actions that the parents had or the friends had or envious of what their parents or friends said. So it’s a huge emotional bomb, which is so many things that you feel when they tell their story, because not only do you understand, but it’s so different. You understand where they are coming from, but it’s a totally different story. And so it’s just very emotional to hear what they have to say.”

In addition to the emotional impact, Fredo said he learned how to better communicate his coming out experience. “So you learn a lot, number one, not even just with wording, but also with expressing emotions.” Further, he indicated that there is personal growth to be gained from listening to others. “It’s one thing to tell your story over and over and grow from that. It’s another thing to hear everyone else’s stories. Because you’re not always on the same panel with the same people and hearing all these different stories really does help you grow and help you feel like --- Wow, what I’m doing really is a good thing and these people telling their stories is an extreme help, because it’s like you have people behind you.” Cole related a similar sense of learning
from hearing other stories that prompted him to rethink some of his own coming out experiences. “Sometimes hearing other people think of the same kind of reaction [you had] in a different way, you know, where you would see some things as a negative reaction and they would say well actually when this happened to me I thought it was a good thing or later I started to think it was a good thing because of this and this and this. It kind of gave me a sense that, yeah, maybe I have thought about this totally wrong and I was on the wrong wavelength or at least not open enough to what might be going on.”

Changes to the Story

Participants indicated that the coming out story they tell remains virtually unchanged over the course of their panel participation. When changes are made to the story it is typically in response to audience demands, intentional focus on a specific aspect of their coming out experience, or the desire to incorporate new experiences into the story.

“For the most part it stayed relatively the same,” remarked Adam when asked if his story had changed over the years he has been involved in the speakers program. “Some pieces change a little bit,” he continued, depending on “the needs of the classroom.” Similarly, Fredo talked about changing the focus of his story based on the classroom context and the needs of the audience. He said he will change aspects of the story he tells “depending on what people ask us to focus on and…once we get into the situation and see what kind of people we are dealing with.” He gave an example of doing a program for a high school gay straight alliance group where panelists were asked to “focus especially on emotion” whereas on typical college panels the audience is more interested in “what we were thinking” during the events being described in the coming
out story. Fredo described this as “not actually really changing the story, just focusing on specific aspects.” Ismail expressed a similar experience, “My story does not fundamentally change…just in different situations you might emphasize one thing, omit one thing or add another thing.” He talked about doing a panel for an eighth grade class on human sexuality and how he focused on his early high school years to make the story relatable for the audience. Ismail explained, “My story only changes when I know that I have to tailor it for a particular group.”

Cole, Declan, and Ismail talked about how new life experiences resulted in changes in their stories. Ismail related that with life experience you gain new insight into your past, therefore “you keep refining your story…stories [keep] changing and keep evolving.” Declan said that his story is “the same story…just more information is added” as he continues his college coming out experience and learns more about himself and his life as a gay man. “As I continued to do these [panels] and as I got older I added more stuff because I had more interesting experiences,” said Cole. He also indicated that he learned to “leave out the boring bits” in his story and doing so allowed for “more detail for the more interesting stuff,” which provided a richer story.

Changes in how the story is told also resulted from panel experience. As Garde said, “A lot has changed about how I tell it because I’ve learned a lot from [the panel] experience.” He indicated that “It’s [his story] more organized. I’m used to telling it now and so I can tell it [with] less meandering.” Hiro related changing how he presents his story, “I think I changed once or twice the opening that I made, because I was trying to start it off with a joke and because it didn’t go off the way I wanted.” Cole indicated that the storytelling experience itself helps to make the story “coherent instead of
choppy,” which is important for engaging the audience. He expressed feeling a need to keep the audience attentive by telling “…stories that flow together [which] are more entertaining and they keep people involved.” While he related certainty that the facts of his panel story are genuine, he described it as a “version that is not outside reality”, which suggests Cole’s use of the storyteller’s license to emphasize or omit elements of the story to keep the audience engaged.

In contrast, Burke stated that “you can say that my story changed” as a result of participating on panels. His experience stands out from that of other participants. He related, “I looked at being gay as naturally my life is going to be hard. I’m going to have to deal with discrimination. I would constantly deal with pushing back.” These assumptions lead him to telling one version of his story during his first semester of speaking and a second version the next. He said that during the first semester in the speakers program he noticed the “stories tended mostly towards the dramatic and a lot of people were talking about how they were yelled at and made fun of. All those things that tear you up.” Hearing these stories influenced him to focus on the more negative aspects of his own coming out experience. “So I was trying to think about that…and that was my story.” Burke said that after a semester of doing panels and hearing the really horrible ordeals that others had been through that he realized “I hadn’t been through anything horrible in my life…everyone else was being dramatic because they actually had important events to talk about.” He realized that he “had something else to say” and began to understand that although he “might have to deal with those [negative] things…that was only part of [his experience]” and that he would have to deal with all the things that happened to him in his life “not [just] the negative that comes with it. If I
focus just on that then I would probably be sick.” He said he wanted to “tell my story as a whole…[not] just be telling a bunch of random events” and so began telling a story that was much “closer to [my] experience than just talking about the bad things.” Of his original story Burke said, “It was absolutely my story, it’s just that I was focusing more on the negative than just actually telling my story.” He related that his second semester panel experience was more satisfactory as a result of his changes.

_Audience Effect on Story and Storytelling_

Participants indicated that the audience had an effect on the content of the coming out stories being told on the panel as well as their storytelling style. For Adam, this had to do in part with being comfortable with the audience. “It took me a long time to share some real personal stuff,” he said. “I remember my coming out story being very short,” he offered, “because…it was easier than to have all of the eyes on me.” Over time Adam became less concerned with how the audience was reacting to him and more concerned with communicating the entirety of his experience. Adam would also adjust the content or focus of his story based on the needs of the classroom. He related that it is easier to adjust his story now than when he first began doing panels. “At the beginning of my journey on the panels I wouldn’t have been able to do that.” Similarly, Eamon related changing his focus and delivery style based on the panel setting. “In a classroom setting…I probably my responses fall into a little bit more of a classic intervention sort of style…whereas in other situations I feel I can perhaps be a little more radical.” The type of audience also influences the focus of Fredo’s story. “If you were dealing with adults, I would probably focus more on how my mother felt, because that is something that they
could relate to,” whereas with people his own age he would focus more on his own thoughts and feelings.

Burke described how the reaction of audience members influenced his decisions on how to tell his story. “I noticed that the real serious stories were kind of making people uncomfortable…and I realized that if I told my story the way that I wanted to tell it...focusing on the whole story instead of just the painful parts, it made things go a lot more smoothly.” He observed that audience members were “tuning out” after hearing one dramatic story after another and so decided to find a way to tell his story in a way that would “open peoples’ minds” a little to make them more receptive to the story.

Cole related that he had no idea what kind of information the audience members might have about gay people, so his strategy was to cram every possible detail that he could into his story. “I found myself trying to explain everything I possibly could.” He also decided to incorporate humor into his storytelling. “I think that it does help to make it a bit entertaining. Make it humorous because if people are laughing they’re not going to be throwing fruit.” Cole observed that other panelist’s stories that included humor were often well received “and so I took from that that it’s a tool I can use as well.” Declan also incorporated humor into his story as a way of engaging the audience. “In general it’s a lot like theatre…an audience that laughs…[is] more open.”

Garde and Hiro related that they would change up the pace of their storytelling if they observed that the audience was beginning to lose interest. “Just watching their faces has affected my story more than anything,” said Garde. He stated, “If the overall reaction from the class is just kind of…not there at all…I will usually move through a little bit faster and hit on some of the more curious parts of my story to maybe hopefully peak
Regarding his story, Hiro said “I didn’t ever change it for their sake,” but that he would take a quick read of the audience to see if he needed to take them through his account more quickly. Feelings of anxiety or discomfort speaking in public also lead participants to rush through their story, particularly in the early stages of their panel career. Reflecting on how he rushed through and limited his storytelling on early panels, Adam recalled engaging in some self-talk to reduce his distress. “I remember…feeling like ‘Don’t think about it until they get to you. Share your story and it will be over and it will be okay.’”

Labeling the Story

Participants’ descriptions of the types of stories being told on panels seemed to fall into two categories; uneventful or dramatic. Uneventful stories are ones that reflect a relatively easy or “happy” coming out experience as opposed to the stereotypical troubled coming out experience consisting of rejection by family and friends and social hardships. Participants seemed to label their stories in the context of listening to other panelists. Burke said that his “life is very, very boring,” which is reflected in the relatively straightforward, “chronological” order of his story. “I had a relatively uneventful, but now I say…relatively happing coming out story,” remarked Cole. Declan also describes his story as “pretty much happy in nature” as he suffered no true rejection, but rather was flooded by acceptance from family and friends. Garde provided another descriptor by labeling his story “the nothing really happened story.” Even Hiro, who described suffering a terrible personal loss when he was rejected by his church congregation for coming out remarked “I grew up and had a good life, what do I have to say?” He indicated that his story focuses on pivotal events that illustrate his journey, which overall
has been positive. In contrast Fredo calls his story “an ugly thing” because his coming out experience was “dark and unpleasant” and a storm of raw emotion.

Participants indicated that it is important to have all types of stories on the panel in order for the audience to understand that not all coming out experiences are as negative as the stereotypes or myths make them out to be. “Everyone’s story is kind of different,” said Garde. He related that each story can “help a certain segment of the population understand certain stuff, understand a facet of the gay community. Everyone’s story…contributes to that.”

*Purpose of the Story*

Discussing the purpose of telling the coming out story on the panel, Ismail started more broadly by first relating that “the purpose of the panel itself is … to put some sort of face on this concept of LGBT.” More specifically he talked about the need to educate the audience about the coming out process: what this process is; why it happens; what it means to the individual. “These are personal stories,” he says, “We do not make any claim to speak for an entire community.” However, by sharing a variety of experiences from a diverse group of panelists, you can illustrate the common threads of the coming out experience as well as the individual patterns in a person’s life. Ismail believes that “the purpose of telling the story is…to show people who may not have any idea what we go through, what LGBT people go through, having to come out, because we live in a hetero-normative world.”

Garde discussed how telling a story makes the educational aspects of the panel more relatable to the audience. “People can identify with a story more than just regurgitated facts and figures. I do have a lot of facts and figures, but I weave together
[into the story]…I think it helps them digest it…it’s less dry and more effective.” Eamon believes that the story serves as “the ice breaker” and establishes his authority to answer questions about the LGBT community. The story shows that he “has the experience to be able to answer” questions about important issues like gays and religion or gay marriage. Jude related a more personal purpose for telling his story. “People will talk to me like I’m straight,” he said. “I guess that’s not bad….[but] it’s the weird thing of [the perception] I’m not gay enough.” Telling his story helps him to assert his identity and make it more public.

Sharing Private Information in Public

Participants commented on the notion of sharing a private story in a public forum. “It seems totally absurd!” expressed Cole. “Who in their right mind would do something like that,” he wondered? Burke concurred, “It’s strange. It’s kind of like, I’ve never met these people…and suddenly they know more about me than a lot of people I talk to on a regular basis.” Garde pointed out an underlying concern of the panelists about sharing such intimate thoughts and feelings when he said, “It’s scary. The fact that it is public, part of the scariness of that is that you never know how people are going to react or what the consequences are.” Declan talked about seeing someone he knew in the audience, someone who didn’t know Declan was gay, which affected his willingness to tell his story “because you don’t want someone’s opinion of you to change.”

Ismail pointed out that the structure of the activity is what “makes me so comfortable with it.” Fredo noted that over time the act of sharing his story publicly “becomes so much easier because, even though you are telling very intimate parts of yourself and a very touchy subject…it [becomes] about them [the audience] and
educating them.” The belief that they are educators who are making a difference in the lives of others seems to reduce or at least make bearable the discomfort that can result from sharing a private narrative in public. Eamon indicated the necessity of making the reality of coming out experiences public. “These private things are publicly shaped and publicly constructed,” he said, “and trying to pretend like they are private and things you shouldn’t talk about keeps the silence.” Eamon believes that his “life is already being controlled and constricted by public decision. The only way to fight that is to make my identity public.” Jude concurred, “It gives you legitimacy when you get to tell your story and people are listening.”

The Audience

Participants experienced the audience in a variety of ways and related their feelings and beliefs about the audience sometimes changing over time. The interaction with the audience during the question and answer portion of the panel seems to be an important part of the panel experience. Participants talked about experiencing both explicit and implicit performance demands.

Changing Expectations About Audience Members

Participants related expectations about the audience that were influenced by prior life experiences or assumptions. “My perception was that I was going to be perceived negatively, because of my growing up experience,” said Adam, “I don’t think I had any other thought that I would be perceived any other way then that.” Declan related some experiences of being taunted and harassed on his campus that made him wary of audience reaction. “I had some not positive experiences just walking around [campus] and so I was a little worried that people would get up and walk out and say or somebody would
start shouting ‘You’re all going to hell!’” Cole recalled that the audience for his first panel was comprised mostly of women, which was comforting to him since he “felt that women would be more understanding.” Jude also felt more comfortable with a predominantly female audience. His first panels were in Women’s Studies classes where the audience “…was mostly women and I was more comfortable.” Jude started doing panels while he was still going through his coming out process and related a fear of someone saying something that would hurt him in some way. He feared that there would be a “bunch of burly guys in the corner” of the classroom who might yell out “Fag!” or something worse. Declan expressed similar negative feelings about men in the audience, “Some audiences make me feel a little awkward…especially when it’s a football player type, butch guy audience.”

Over time and with experience participant perceptions of the audience changed. Adam said that after his first few panels he began to understand that there were audience members who would not only be sympathetic and supportive, but might also identify as gay. Thinking back to when his attitude started to change, Adam recalled that “it was a slow progression to recognize okay maybe there will be some allies in the audience.” After a year or so of doing panels he realized that “in a classroom of 30 people you’ve got three [gay] people, if we base it on statistics, who maybe [are in] a different place in their journey” towards understanding their identity as a gay person. After more than ten years of participating and coordinating classroom panels, Adam has observed changes in the audience. “When we first started doing the speaker’s panels nobody made eye contact with you, nobody wanted to have a conversation with you. They were quite often giggling that a gay person would be here in class…now it’s more you know I’ve had gay
friends for years, I know all of this stuff, help me understand this or where is this going, it’s more, they want to more of the political [and] what can we do type of things. There are still some who still just want to know when did you come out, when did you know, but it’s interesting to see the dynamics that have changed in the classroom.” Adam attributes these changes to the influence of having gay characters on television and the increased visibility and acknowledgement of gay people in everyday life.

Declan’s preconceived notions about audience members changed when the reality of his first panel experience did not live up to his fears. Declan recalled at first feeling a sense of shocked calm while “reflecting on that I had actually just sat in front of a group of people and told them a little bit of private information I normally didn’t share with just random people.” After the initial shock he observed that the audience was actually quite polite and he began to experience “a little bit of a good feeling of accomplishment” knowing that his actions might make it easier for someone else to come out and be accepted by others.

“Because nothing [traumatic] ever happened [during a panel]” Jude became less fearful. As he gained panel experience, he became surer of himself and more confident in his ability to handle anything that might come up. “I used to worry about it…when it was just guys,” he said, “but I’m over that now.” Cole’s perception of women in the audience changed not because of audience members, but rather from his “mother’s and grandmother’s reactions to my [coming out].” His expectations that his mother and grandmother would be accepting and comforting were not the case. This led him to rethinking his perception of women in the audience as being more prone to support gay people.
Garde also talked about how the audience members have changed over the five or so years he has been participating on panels. He expressed feeling that audience members who feel positive about gay people and gay issues outnumber the negative folks in the audience. “I really feel now, every panel I do, I feel, like, tolerant allies in the room who outnumber significantly the non-allies.”

Performance Demands

Participants related experiencing some performance demands from the audience. “Demands come in the form of questions,” said Cole, “I always think…what could they possibly come up with?” Cole feels that the audacious nature of some questions, which can be quite personal, and his willingness to contemplate answering almost anything if he feels it will help to educate combine to create a sense of excited wariness. He also related a pressure to entertain the audience since “we live in an entertainment culture so people want to be entertained even when they are sitting in a college classroom.” Cole admitted that some of this pressure comes from his own expectations since he also hates to be bored in the classroom.

Fredo feels that sometimes the audience looks at panel members as “if we’re piles of information.” The fact that the panel takes place in a classroom and that panel members are brought in as educators sets up an expectation that panelists are experts of some type. “When you get in front of a whole bunch of people…you’re supposed to be the experts,” said Hiro. According to him “it is pressure,” but “it’s okay to not know [the answer to a question] too.” Hiro does not perceive falling short of audience expectations as a failure on his part since he can only be an expert on his own experience. Garde
“feel[s] the responsibility to be an expert too,” but likes the challenge and enjoys thinking of himself as “a gay almanac.”

Depiction of a Panelist’s Experience

The depiction of the panelist’s experience describes the essence of the participant’s experience as a speaker on an LGB classroom panel. This depiction represents the essential aspects of the core experience expressed by the participants in this sample, but does not include all of the unique details of each participant’s individual experience.

The Panelist

The Panelist arrives on campus having already come out, with varying degrees of success, to some of the people in his life. He wants to live openly as a gay man in a place that he hopes will be accepting and safe. The Panelist seeks out community by investigating LGBT student organizations or campus resources where he learns about the speakers program. He is attracted to the idea of becoming a panel participant for reasons ranging from the personal to the political. Previously he may have felt stifled from expressing his identity and sees the panel as a place to make his voice heard and to make some noise about who he is. He may be motivated for more political reasons, seeking to become an advocate for his community and a champion for social change. Mostly The Panelist has a strong desire to make a difference in the lives of others who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual by creating a more positive environment for coming out through the fostering of more enlightened and informed attitudes with family members and friends. He seeks to contribute to ending the oppression and hate that cause so many people pain and trauma during their coming out experience. The Panelist believes that
any possibility of helping others or making their coming out experience easier makes it
worth the personal risk of telling his coming out story in public. The strength of his
desire to make a difference for others and his enthusiasm for panels fuels his willingness
to participate as often and for as long as possible. He also feels a strong need to educate
others and increase individual awareness of coming out experiences as well as the lives
and concerns of gay people. This includes a willingness to challenge the stereotypes and
debunk the myths contributing to negative feelings towards LGB people. Taking part on
panels is a way for The Panelist to forge bonds with other panelists and to create a strong
and visible community on his campus. In turn, being a panelist affirms The Panelist’s
identity and place in the LGB community.

Before taking part in a panel, The Panelist undergoes training to prepare him for
the experience. The training is presented by the program coordinator or experienced
panelists and consists of organized activities designed to: familiarize The Panelist with
the history and goals of the program; provide The Panelist with an opportunity to reflect
and gain insight into his coming out experience; instruct The Panelist in the rules of
engagement, including etiquette and the use of language; guide The Panelist in
developing a story to be shared on the panel; and give The Panelist an opportunity to
practice telling his story as well as practice answering questions that could be posed by
members of the audience. The greatest training challenge for The Panelist is condensing
his coming out story to fit the time limit, usually 5 minutes. Reflecting on his experience
in a way that produces a coherent narrative is not something The Panelist has done
before. He ends up with a story comprised of what he believes are the pivotal moments
of his coming out experience and that fits with the training guidelines. At first The
Panelist might feel constrained by these guidelines, but as he gains storytelling experience, he understands it is more important to find his own voice and experience authenticity with his story than it is to follow training guidelines.

Shortly after training, The Panelist participates in his first panel training. He experiences an odd mixture of anxiety and excitement and perhaps even dreads telling his coming out story to a room full of strangers for the first time. Over time he becomes more comfortable with the experience and finds it liberating to express and construct his own sense of identity rather than having an identity placed on him. The experience of coming out to the audience each time he tells his coming out story is an odd echo of earlier experiences. Retelling his story evokes thoughts and feelings that are a constant reminder of why he chose to take part in this endeavor in the first place. The Panelist takes pride in his participation and at first volunteers for panels as often as hears about them, whether by a phone call or email or word-of-mouth. However, after a time, The Panelist’s interest may wane due to a busier course load, different interests, panel fatigue, or a desire to make way for newcomers.

During a panel, panelists typically share coming out stories first and then take questions from the audience. The Panelist sees value in both parts of the program, but might enjoy one more than the other. At first both aspects may provoke some uneasiness, but after a few panels the experience becomes familiar. The more panels he takes part on, the more comfortable The Panelist becomes with handling challenges and questions from the audience, which at times can be quite shocking and personal. While he feels that storytelling creates the connection with the audience, during the question-and-answer period there is an opportunity for an interactive dialog that can be the basis for learning
and change. The Panelist believes that both parts of the panel are important for making a difference in the lives of LGBT people, their families, and their friends by creating a safer, more accepting society for all people.

The Panelist finds that retelling his story and listening to others tell their story promotes personal growth. Depending on his personal needs and level of participation, this growth ranges from informative to transformative. He discovers that sharing his coming out experience in a group setting has a therapeutic quality that helps him to make sense or gain insight into various aspects of his coming out experience. The Panelist may find himself recalling aspects of his experience that he typically doesn’t think about or re-experiencing feelings that enrich his recollections. Listening to other panelists tell their coming out stories provides a larger context for understanding and creates an affirming connection that helps The Panelist feel less alone. After a particularly emotional or surprising panel experience, The Panelist likes to debrief with the other panelists, which strengthens his sense of connection and community. In addition to the therapeutic and social aspects of the panel, there are practical benefits. The Panelist gains public speaking and presentation skills that he finds are transferable to other situations.

The Panelist recognizes that the notion of sharing a private narrative in such a public way not only sounds absurd, but could also turn out to be more than he bargained for. However, his trepidation gives way to his strong desire to make a difference in the lives of other gay people. Through the seemingly simple act of honestly sharing his thoughts and feelings, The Panelist hopes to connect with the audience on an emotional level, communicating the common elements of human experience in his story and sparking a new awareness for audience members. The Panelist comes to understand that
through sharing a variety of personal experiences from a diverse group of panelists, you can illustrate both the common threads of the coming out experience as well as the individual patterns in a person’s life.

The Panelist has expectations about audience members that come from life experiences or personal assumptions and beliefs. The reactions of family and friends to his coming out as well as his socio-cultural context strongly influence these expectations. Over time The Panelist finds that his perceptions about the audience begin to change as he gains experience as a panelist and is exposed to different types of audiences and educational contexts. The Panelist also experiences performances demands from the audience who expect The Panelist to tell an engaging story and be able to respond to any type of personal or LGBT-related question that might be asked.

The Panelist finds that he enjoys the way his story comes alive when he tells it. Retelling his coming out story over and over again gives him a unique opportunity to re-examine his experience and organize it into a coherent narrative. While this opportunity results in The Panelist having a deeper understanding of his coming out process, it can also lead The Panelist to experiencing paradoxical feelings of being both part of the story and removed from it at the same time. This is an effect of perspective resulting from the present day Panelist connecting with his self in the past. The Panelist experiences himself as that person in the past and at the same time knows he is a different person in the present. While this paradox may be helpful in understanding the personal growth and change that has taken place, retelling his coming out story on the panel keeps the past alive for The Panelist in a very unique way.
The Panelist believes that the core of the story he tells remains the same, although retelling the story allows him to polish both the story and the way he tells the story. Listening to other panelists helps him shape his story to communicate the aspects he feels are most important for the audience to hear. The Panelist also engages in self-monitoring to ensure he is saying what he means to say and how the story is affecting the audience. He will sometimes incorporate a humorous element in his story as a way to engage the audience. Although the heart of the story remains the same, The Panelist may shift the focus of his story to fit the situation. For instance, if he is speaking to high school students he might talk more about his high school experiences in order to help the audience better relate to his story. The Panelist may also add or change his reflections on his coming out experience based on new life experience or different understanding about the persons and events he is describing.

While The Panelist is engaged in doing panels, the activity becomes an important and sometimes preeminent aspect of his identity. He experiences a sense of affirmation and purpose giving back to his community. Depending on his personal circumstances and needs, he may continue to take part on panels for years as both an undergraduate and then graduate student. The longer he remains engaged, the more he finds that his role on the panel changes. The Panelist enjoys the role of mentor as new panelists join the program. He takes great satisfaction in helping younger students to learn not only about being a panelist, but being a member of the gay community as well. At some point in his career The Panelist may be called upon to facilitate panels or to take part in special topic panels. Whether The Panelist is active for one year or ten, he views the experience as
important to developing a deeper and more meaningful understanding of his coming out experience, his place in the community, and his identity as a gay man.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to better understand the phenomenon of the repeated
sharing of a private narrative, the coming out story, in a public manner, on an LGB
classroom panel. Of particular interest were how the experience affected the individual;
how the understandings or meanings associated with the coming out story may have
changed; and how the actual story being told may have changed. To answer these
questions, the experience of gay men who told their coming out story as undergraduate
participants on classroom panels addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual concerns were
explored. A depiction describing the essence of the panelist’s experience was presented
in the last chapter.

This chapter discusses key findings of this study with regards to their contribution
to the literature, implications for panel programs and training, and directions for future
research. The first section of this chapter elaborates on findings related to the panel
experience. The next section focuses on findings concerning the repeated telling of the
coming out story on classroom panels. Implications for panel programs are discussed in
the third section and implications for further research are considered in the fourth section.
The next section presents limitations of the current study. Concluding comments follow.

The Panel Experience

An important contribution of this study is that it broadens the knowledge
regarding LGB classroom panels, but more significantly it provides information about the
panelist experience. The existing literature on these types of classroom panels is scant
and focuses on the experiences of the audience or the purpose of the panel, not the
experiences of participants (Chase, 2001; Crawley & Broad, 2004; Croteau & Kusek, 1992). The general structure and processes for panels identified by participants in this study fit with what could be called the traditional format of participants telling their coming out story and then engaging in a question and answer period with the audience (Lucksted, 1998). However, with the addition of transgender individuals and heterosexual allies to the panels and the increasing social and political awareness about LGB concerns, participants are addressing a wider variety of questions from a seemingly more knowledgeable audience that sometimes goes beyond their personal narrative. Panelists reported motives for taking part on panels that also fit with the traditional goals of panels to increase visibility and awareness of LGB people as well as to reduce homophobic attitudes (Croteau & Kusek, 1992; Geasler et al., 1995; Wallick, Cambre, & Townsend, 1995).

**Essential Aspects of the Panel Experience**

Participants identified several essential aspects of their panel experience. Across the board they endorsed a strong desire to make it easier and safer for folks to come out. Participants felt that any risk on their part resulting from telling their coming out story in public was worth it if they made a difference in someone’s life, whether that was by communicating the simple but powerful message that they are not alone or by making a family member or friend more likely to be supportive or contributing to a safe and affirming campus climate. The findings indicate support for the idea that panelists use their stories as a type of social activism (Crawley and Broad, 2004). Participants believe that sharing a personal story makes them more relatable to the audience, which in turn adds power and a deeper meaning to the messages they hope to communicate. They seek
to provide audience members with both a better understanding of the coming out experience and more accurate information about the real lives of gay people that hopefully promotes new awareness and potentially spur positive personal and social change. Of particular note is the high degree of motivation and dedication panelists feel towards participation. Participants talked about overcoming fears of public speaking, personal consequences of being publicly out on campus, and even skipping classes in order to take part on a panel. Some participants have been participating on panels for three or more years and indicated a willingness to continue as long as they are able. Such commitment may reflect a particular investment in strengthening both their identity as a gay man and their affiliation with the gay community as well as expressing pride in their identity (Cass, 1979, 1984; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Another important aspect of the panelist’s experience is the personal journey. Participants described this in a number of ways such as an opportunity for self reflection or as gaining new understandings about himself and his experiences or as a way of building a self narrative. The common ground here being that this journey takes place in the context of sharing coming out stories, listening to other people telling their coming out stories, and interacting with the audience through the question and answer period. In a sense the interactive environment of the panel promotes the social construction of the panelist’s identity through the mutual influence of the panelists and the audience. As applied to identity, a social constructionist view holds that the multiple aspects of the panelist’s identity, the choices available to them surrounding their identity, and the social interactions that maintain their identity contribute to the individual construction of identity (Broido, 2000; Garnets, 2002; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). On the panels, self
narrative is used to both create identity and communicate who the panelist is through the story he tells (Mischler, 1992). This self narrative is dynamic and relativistic to a person’s past, the others involved in the individual’s experiences, and their current life context.

Over time, panelists described developing a kind of then and now perspective from listening to themselves recall past events and feelings in their current place in life that provided them insight on their personal journey. Listening to other panelists tell their stories allowed participants to make sense of their coming out experience in comparison to the experience of others, which resulted in relative judgments on the degree of hardship or adversity the participant faced coming out. One participant stated that he felt “lucky” that he had it so easy. Another related that even though his experience was rough, he heard stories from people who had it worse, which provided him new perspective. Reactions from the audience also influenced how participants treated their story. For example, after observing a positive reaction to disclosure of suicidal thoughts, one participant felt it would be okay for him to open up about that aspect of his own experience. From identity as narrative perspective, the findings seem to support the notion that sharing a private narrative in a public way has implications for one’s understanding of self and experiences as well as the meanings made about self and experiences (Goncalves & Machado, 1999; Kerby, 1991).

In a common theme related to the personal journey, participant’s experienced or recognized that the sharing of coming out stories in a group setting had therapeutic qualities. Participants related finding it therapeutic to share a personal story with people interested not only in hearing about your experience, but also wanting to ask questions
about it. Indeed, Yalom (1995) states that interpersonal interaction and expressing oneself freely is central to group therapy. He identifies eleven therapeutic factors in the group therapy experience and many of these factors have parallels in the panel experience as reported by participants in this study. Four of these factors seemed particularly relevant to the panelist experience.

**Instillation of hope.** Yalom says that “the installation and maintenance of hope is crucial in psychotherapy” and that a group members “belief and confidence in the efficacy” of the experience has its own therapeutic effect (p. 4). Panel participants indicated a sense of hopefulness in two ways. First, some participants had only recently come out or had very negative coming out experiences. Taking part on panels provided positive affirmation of their identity and experiences that instilled a sense of hope that things would turn out all right. Second, participants expressed a strong belief that telling their story in public would help others by increasing understanding about the LGB community and reducing homophobic attitudes provided participants.

**Universality.** Understanding that you are not unique in your suffering or alone in your feelings is another therapeutic factor in group therapy. Participants related that one of the most powerful aspects of the panel experience was gaining an understanding that they were not alone in their experience.

**The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group.** Members of therapy groups often have a past of highly unsatisfactory experiences with their primary family group. Therapy groups resemble families in many respects and through more functional interpersonal relationships offer members an opportunity for a corrective emotional experience. Panel members may have experienced unsatisfactory or negative responses
to coming out to family and friends. Taking part on the panel offers them an opportunity for support and affirmation from other panelists and audience members.

*Catharsis.* This refers to the purging of strong sometimes negative emotions. Participants related a sense of ventilation or relief from just getting things off their chest by taking part in panels.

A final essential aspect communicated by participants is the connection with the gay community that results from taking part in the panels. Participants described enjoying just being in the company of other gay people as well as feeling less alone and sometimes discovering something in common with the experience of other panelists. Going through the panel experience creates a sense of solidarity with other panel members, which results in strong bonds of affiliation and friendship. Taking part on the panel was also a way for participants to support a community that in turn supports them. Being a panelist offers participants a role and an opportunity to explore their place in the gay community.

*Telling the Story*

The goal of this study was to better understand the phenomenon of the repeated sharing of a private narrative, the coming out story, in a public manner, on an LGB classroom panel. The findings indicate that although panelists comprehend the absurd and daunting notion of sharing a private story in public, they also share a common belief that by sharing a personal story they will create a personal connection with audience members, which increases the likelihood of creating a new awareness that will make a difference for gay people. The findings also indicate that through sharing their personal story the panelists themselves gain new insight and awareness on their coming out
experience. The clinical literature suggests that recalling and objectifying narratives are part of the process individuals go through in order to gain a more coherent and deeper understanding of the complexity and meaning of their experiences (Goncalves & Machado, 1999). From an identity as narrative perspective, we can expect that such retellings of the coming out story may have implications not only for the meanings associated with the experience, but also for an individual’s sense of self (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Plummer, 1995). This section discusses the effect of retelling the coming out story on the panel, particularly how the experience affected the individual; how the understandings or meanings associated with the coming out story may have changed; and how the actual story being told may have changed.

Retelling the Coming Out Story

Repeatedly telling their coming out story stories on panels seems to have a number of related effects. There is a refining effect on the story and the storytelling. Developing a coherent narrative that captures and describes pivotal events and accompanying feelings from their coming out experience helped participants to clarify events and their thoughts and feelings about the events. Also, with each opportunity to tell their story, participants were able to polish their story to make it flow more naturally as well as perfect their delivery style.

The findings indicate a shaping effect on the story being told. Panelists would shift the focus of their story or emphasize certain events not only based on audience demands, but also based on the types of stories or events being related by other panel members. Plummer (1995) states that the meanings described in our stories are never fixed since they arise from the endlessly shifting course of interaction between the teller
and the listener. The panel is a unique storytelling environment where the teller is also a listener who takes storytelling cues from both the audience and the other panelists. Participants reported not only developing a greater awareness of the spectrum of coming out experiences form listening to others, but shaping their stories to complement others and provide the audience with a balanced and broader view of the coming out experience.

Participants described a labeling effect that occurred from listening to other people tell their stories. Although they acknowledged a continuum of coming out experiences ranging from good to bad (and the importance of having all types of stories on the panel), they labeled their own stories as either “uneventful” or “dramatic.” Despite gaining new insights into the complexity and variety of coming out experiences, stories are collapsed into two types.

The act of telling their story and coming out at every panel had a strengthening effect for individual identity. Panelists experienced a sense of affirmation from being invited to tell their story and from the attention of the audience. Each telling was a liberating public declaration of identity that bolstered the individual’s sense of self. For example, Hiro related how the experience helped him to shrug off labels and social expectations in order to just be himself. Such findings seem to fit with a broad interpretation of Savin-Williams (2005) idea of differential development trajectories as a less restrictive way to understand identity development. The panel experience strengthens the panelist’s understanding of both the common and unique aspects of their developmental experiences, which in turn validates their trajectory and strengthens individual identity. Also, from coming out each time they told their story, panelists
learned that coming out is a continual process and that each coming out can strengthen you for the next instance.

Related to this is a connecting effect. Sharing stories was an affirming experience that left panelists feeling more connected to the gay community. Also, recounting the past strengthened connections to their roots that seemed to help in forming new insight on their coming out experience.

Relationship to the Story

The findings indicate that panelists may experience a paradox from feeling both part of the story and separate from it at the same time. This is an effect of perspective; the present day panelist telling a story about his past self. Plummer (1995) relates that over time coming out stories can become habitualized, but understanding and meaning is always linked to shifting contexts. Narratives are a “process in process” (Josselson, 1995, p. 35), that is to say that narratives are dynamic and relativistic to a person’s past, the other persons involved in the individual’s experiences, and the person’s socio-cultural context. The same process of organizing a coherent narrative that clarifies events also seems to crystallize the story in a way that makes it somewhat resistant to change and perhaps reified into a shared object that is influenced by the audience and the context for telling. The more a panelist tells his story, the more like a story it becomes and over time, with new learning and experience, the panelist begins to experience a separation of their person in the present from the person in the past. The separation is not so much with the events as it is with the feelings then and now. The findings indicated that telling the coming out story brings the past emotions alive again, sometimes as if the person is reliving the events. This kind of emotional umbilical cord with the past seems helpful for
telling the story and recognizing personal growth, but may also create dissonance between how a person feels about their experiences today in the presence of their past feelings.

Implications for Panel Programs

Training

The participants in this study reported a range of training experiences from the informal to the formal. Generally, those who engaged in training found some aspect of it helpful, but indicated that no amount of training could prepare them for the reality of the first panel experience. However, the findings suggest that those who took part in a more comprehensive training program felt better prepared for taking part in their first panel.

Participants viewed developing the coming out story as the most important training activity. They indicated that condensing their coming out story to fit the panel’s time limits is challenging. Providing them with guidelines or a worksheet with prompting questions or an example story is helpful. Preparing a coming out story to be told on the panel is often the first time the participant formally reflects on his coming out experience. This can be an unsettling and enlightening process. Skilled facilitators can help panelists to process feelings and help guide participants in creating a narrative they feel comfortable sharing.

Participants said that practice telling the story and answering questions is the second-most important aspect of training. Allowing panelists to find their own voice within the panel guidelines is important to making them feel authentic and affirmed. Listening to themselves share their coming out story and receiving constructive feedback is helpful in developing the narrative. Experiencing a question-and-answer session gives
participants a feel for the types of questions they may face and examples for how to both answer questions and handle challenges from the audience.

Providing panelists with a sense of the history of the panel program on campus gave them some context for the purpose of the program. It can also provide a connection with the past that brings a sense of continuity to the work. Discussing the evolution of the program and its current mission helps panelist to understand their role and fit with the program. Understanding their role and the ground rules for the panel activity helps provide structure for first time panelists. Knowing that an experienced facilitator will establish ground rules and mediate the audience interaction can reduce panelist anxiety.

Despite training, many panelists expressed feeling unprepared for the reality of the first panel experience. Some experienced anxiety from speaking in public. Others were hit with the realization that they just came out to a group of virtual strangers. Some even felt euphoric. While it is unlikely you can prepare individuals for the full scope of their reactions, it is important to be explicit about the emotional and provocative nature of the panel experience during training. It may be helpful to offer some follow-up with those participants who so desire.

Debriefing

According to participants, many panel programs acknowledge the emotional and personal aspects of this activity for participants, but most programs do not have a formal debriefing process that allows participants to discuss their reactions after a panel. A formal or structured conversation to process a panel experience could be helpful, particularly for new panelists who are looking for feedback on their performance or after
a panel that was eventful or challenging. Debriefing after a panel could be a way to encourage folks to continue with the work and help them put it in perspective.

**Guess the Straight Person Activity**

With the inclusion of straight allies on the panels, a new type of program or panel activity has become popular, *Guess the Straight Person*. This involves the audience questioning the panelists in order to determine who the straight ally on the panel is. While the merits of this activity as being educational or effective in reducing stereotypes and homophobic attitudes is beyond the scope of this study, the findings indicate that participants are uncomfortable with or at least questioning of this type of activity. The explicit message of this activity is that perceptions based on stereotypes may have nothing to do with sexual orientation. The nature of the activity, however, may foster an idea that participants need to fool audience members or in some way filter their responses so in order to pass for straight. Since the resolution of sexual orientation identity conflicts and coming out are associated with developmental maturity (Cass, 1979, 1984; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1979, 1988), the potential for panelists feeling that they should subdue or mask their identity in order to fool the audience seems detrimental to continuing personal developmental as well as having the potential to create conflicts for those still working to resolve identity issues or coming out concerns. Indeed, one participant related experiencing paradoxical feelings from taking pride in being a gay man and a sense of accomplishment from more often than not being selected as the straight person on the panel. The idea of pretending to be something you are not seems to go against the very purpose of the panel, which is to provide a forum for individuals to come out proudly and
be affirmed in their gay identity. Organizers need to carefully consider the impact this activity could have on gay panel members and the messages it may be sending to the panelists and the audience members. Further study on the efficacy and outcomes of this activity is called for.

**Therapeutic Aspects of the Panel**

Although the panel is not intentionally designed to be a therapeutic experience, the activity is clearly comprised of elements similar to the therapeutic factors in group therapy. It is not enough for organizers to simply point this out to participants and ask them not to use the experience as therapy. The experience is clearly therapeutic and depending on the needs of the individual may require some follow up work with panelists or referral to a professional to work through issues that may arise.

**Considerations for Future Research**

This study did not intentionally focus on the connections among various aspects of the participant’s identity. However, as discussed in the literature review it is important to think more broadly about identity. Gay individuals from other minority populations often encounter more obstacles than heterosexism when attempting to form positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identities (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). “[LGB] people of color may experience multiple layers of oppression, as they not only must contend with the negative societal reactions to their sexual orientation or gender nonconformity but also may experience racial prejudice, limited economic resources, and limited acceptance within their own cultural community” (Harper, Jernewll, & Zea, 2004, p. 190). In addition, cultural factors such as the significance of family, the function of religion, gender attributes, etc., affect sexual orientation identity development, disclosure, and
behavior (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Harper et al. (2004) report that the empirical literature on LGB people of color is scant and what published work exists is mostly theoretical in nature, making the science and theory for LGBT people of color a new frontier. Although the one participant in this study who identified as bi-racial did offer some interesting ideas in this area, e.g., the importance of transcending labels in establishing a sense of self, future research is needed to examine the influence the varied aspects of self, sources of oppression and privilege, and cultural context may have on panel participation or the coming out story.

As with any study, replication is helpful to verify results and refine understanding. This study examined the experiences of only one group of panelists, gay males. Future research on different groups of panelist, i.e., lesbian women, bisexual men and women, allies, and transgender individuals, is important to gain a broader understanding of the affects of retelling the coming out story on panels. Also, the participants in this study came from schools in the Great Lakes region, with those from Michigan institutions in particular experiencing an oppressive socio-political environment resulting from recent measures to ban gay marriage and repeal affirmative action. Chase (2001) indicates that institutional discourse has an effect on individual narratives and that differences in discursive environments provide differing opportunities and restrictions for the construction of sexual identities. Future studies with individuals from institutions in different regions may provide a broader understanding of the affects of panel participation.

Participants in this study experienced a labeling effect that cast their story as either uneventful or dramatic. This occurred in spite of participants also recognizing and
appreciating the diversity among panel members and their experiences. It is not clear from the current findings what social or psychological ramifications or personal meanings reducing one’s story to fit this binary may have for participants. Further study may clarify this phenomenon.

Finally, participants related some discomfort or questioning of the use of the *Guess the Straight Person* activity or panel format. While the merits of this activity as being educational or effective in reducing stereotypes and homophobic attitudes is beyond the scope of this study, the nature of the activity may foster unintended or paradoxical messages to panelists and audience members. Future studies on the efficacy and the outcomes of this activity are needed.

*Limitations*

This study relates the experiences of a very specific group – predominantly White gay males who share their coming out story as undergraduate participants on classroom panels. While their experiences make this a rich sample, the characteristics and qualities of this group are such that it would be inappropriate to generalize the findings of this study to other groups. Although the sample was diverse in some ways, such as age, level of experience, and socio-economic background, nine participants identified as coming from Christian backgrounds and all but one of the participants self identified as White. As noted earlier, while this study did not intentionally focus on the connections among various aspects of the participant’s identity, a predominantly White sample may limit our understanding of the panel experience and the effects of retelling the coming out story as influenced by cultural context and the complicated picture of oppression that can result from overlapping identities (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). For some individuals, cultural
influences may decrease the likelihood of disclosing sexual orientation outside of family (Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004). Future studies with a more culturally diverse sample may yield a different perspective.

The sample in this study included individuals whose personal understanding of self includes a coming out story that can be explored and shared. Recent scholarship suggests that a fuller understanding of sexual orientation will also recognize that for some individuals who experience or express same-sex attraction neither the coming out experience nor labeling oneself as LGB may be part of their self narrative (e.g., Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007). While these individuals would not be expected to participate on LGB speakers’ panels, it is possible that a better understanding of their experiences would enhance our understanding of sexual orientation identity development that would in turn provide additional perspective on identity as narrative processes.

Finally, the experiences and perspectives of the participants in this study may not reflect those of others who participate on classroom panels. Participants volunteered to take part in this study and it is possible that their attitudes about the panel experience may be more positive than others who did not volunteer for this study. Also, the participants in this study overwhelmingly endorsed panel participation and their attitudes may not reflect those whose panel experience was less positive or formative. In addition, the participants all came from universities in the Great Lakes region where the sociopolitical climate around issues such as same-sex marriage and inclusion and affirmative action is repressive and therefore may have implications for the types of stories they tell (Chase, 2001).
Conclusion

This study is a story about stories. The research questions originated from heuristic reflection on my experiences of using a private narrative in a public manner, telling my coming out story on classroom panels. This reflection began when I found myself experiencing a loss of voice, an inability and unwillingness to speak in a classroom about my coming out experiences, which stood in stark contrast to my past work as a very public speaker on LGB concerns. I was suddenly a storyteller without a story and left wondering not only why this had happened to me, but if other panel speakers had similar experiences. Using self reflection and insight as a starting point, I set out to explore the experiences of other panelists similar to myself in order to gain a better understanding of how the repeated public telling of their coming out story affected the meanings associated with the story and perhaps the story itself. If, as Moustakes (1990) says, there is a connection between what happens without and what happens within, then I can apply this better understanding of the phenomenon as described by others to enhance my self-awareness and self-knowledge about my experience with the phenomenon.

Before conducting this study I had speculated that my loss of voice had something to do with telling a version of my story that emphasized the positive aspects of my coming out experience in order to balance out the more dramatic stories being told by others. As time passed and I gained experience and insight, trying to tell this public version of my story may have resulted in dissonance with a more holistic private version. While the participants in this study did not relate any difficulties like my loss of voice or resistance to telling their coming out stories, their experiences seem to support the notion
of shifting the emphasis of stories to fit context. Like me, panelists recognized the
different types of stories being told on panels and the desire to balance the picture of
coming out experiences for the audience. A good example of this is when Cole said that
he tells a version of his story that is “not outside reality”. He, like others in this study,
reported shifting the focus and omitting or emphasizing details in the story to
complement other stories being told, to fit the context for the panel, or even to better
engage the audience’s attention. Indeed, Ismail went so far as to say that as a result of
multiple public retellings, his story has reified into a crystallized object that belongs both
to him and the audience and was resistant to change. This seems to fit with my
experience of having an educational version of my coming out experience that remained
static over the years. Although the story I told was a true version of events, it might not
have been the complete picture. Therefore, when called upon to present a more holistic
telling, this virtual story created dissonance that made it hard to tell any story.

The participants in this study related two additional points that I feel also provide
me with a better understanding of my loss of voice. First, Adam and in particular Fredo
talked about the emotional aspects of telling their stories. As Fredo said, “It takes you
right back” and you relive the experience, the good and the bad, with each telling. I
believe that at the point in time where I experienced my loss of voice, I was at a place in
my life where my emotions were already close to the surface and I was not going to break
that boundary in a professional setting. The cost benefit analysis in my then current
situation was not about a potential personal risk to help others, but a risk of feeling
exposed and open for examination by peers and a professor in a professional context that
I would continue to be part of for several more years. Perhaps an essential aspect of my
loss of voice was simply the struggle between my desire to be open and my nature to be private. A second point worth mentioning relates to the dedication and commitment that panelists have for doing this work. This personal investment in the panel program that strengthens both their ties with the gay community and their identities as gay men seems to be a fit for the kind of personal development work commonly talked about along the lines of Cass’s (1979, 1984) pride stage. It is very likely that I was further along in my development and along with experiencing doctoral student fatigue, I no longer had the energy or the need to engage in activities associated with solidifying my gay identity.

Beyond bringing me a deeper understanding of my personal experience as well as some new ideas to chew on, the findings from the present study increase our knowledge of the experiences of panelists and the effect retelling has on the panelist’s coming out story. Information rich participants, some with many years of panel experience, provided insight on panel processes, including training, therapeutic aspects, and educational activities that have implications for organizers, trainers, and other panelists. More specifically, panelists identified several essential aspects of their experience including a strong desire to make it easier and safer for others to come out; a high level of dedication and enthusiasm for being on panels; an opportunity for self reflection and personal growth; recognition of the therapeutic aspects of the experience; and a connection with the gay community. The repeated telling of the coming out story seems to have a number of effects: a refining effect that clarifies the coming out experience and how the story is told; a shaping effect influenced by the audience and the other stories being told; a labeling effect from listening to others tell their stories; a strengthening effect for identity; and a connecting effect to the gay community.
The findings illustrate an overall positive experience that is encouraging for current and future panelists.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Research Protocol Approval
Date: March 21, 2006

To: Mary Anderson, Principal Investigator
James Patrick Dolan Jr., Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Mary Lagerwey, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIIRB Project Number: 06-03-09

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Private Narratives in Public Places: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experiences of Gay Male Undergraduate Participants on LGB Classroom Panels” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 21, 2007
Appendix B

Letters, Communication Protocols and Scripts
SCRIPT FOR INITIAL TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH LGBT OFFICE /
COORDINATOR OF LGB SPEAKERS PANEL PROGRAM

“Hello, my name is Jim Dolan. I am a doctoral student conducting research on the experiences of gay male undergraduate students who tell their coming out stories on classroom panels. I am calling to inquire if you have such a program at your institution and if so, may I send you information on the study and materials to distribute to students who may be interested in participating?”

[If Yes]
“Thank you for your help. May I have your contact information so I can send you the materials? Also, approximately how many copies of the materials should I provide for distribution to your program members?”

[If No due to no speakers panel program]
“Thank you for your time.”

[If No due to other]
“I would really appreciate your help. If there is a better time to contact you or another individual I should speak with, please let me know.”

“Thank you for your time.”
INVITATION TO ASSIST IN RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Director,

This is request for you assistance in recruiting participants for a research study designed to investigate the experiences of gay, male, undergraduate students who tell their coming out story as speakers on LGB classroom panels. Potential participants are those who identify as male and gay; do not identify as transgender; participated on LGB classroom panels as an undergraduate for more than one semester; and have completed at least two semesters of undergraduate higher education. Prospective participants are limited to those from LGB speaker panel programs at colleges and universities in the Great Lakes Region (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin).

This research is part of James Patrick Dolan, Jr.’s doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. In addition to describing essential aspects of the panel experience, we expect the findings of this study to provide an understanding of how telling one’s coming out story in a public setting may affect how one tells the story and how changing the story may affect how one understands their coming out experience and perhaps their identity.

There is little research on LGB speaker’s panels and no investigation of the speaker’s experiences as it relates to their identity. This is an opportunity for you to help others gain insight into the panel experience and how that experience may have influenced their identity.

If you have a panel program at your institution or you know someone who fits the criteria for potential participants, please contact the student investigator by email, james.dolan@wmich.edu, or by phone, 269-26702526, to receive additional information.

Requesting information does not imply that you will participate in the study, only that you are interested in more information as it relates to recruiting participants. Below is a description of the research process for your review.

The first phase of this project involves the selection of potential interviewees based on a background questionnaire that takes about 10 minutes to complete. This background questionnaire requests respondents to provide some demographic and panel experience information. Information provided will be used to select a diverse sample for this study.

After phase 1, respondents may be selected and invited to participate in phase 2 of this project. Phase 2 involves two interviews scheduled individually at convenient times. The first interview will be held in person in a location convenient for the participant and will last approximately 90 minutes. A second interview will be by conducted in person or by telephone depending on location and availability, will last approximately 60 minutes, and will likely occur several weeks after the first interview. Participants will also be asked to review a written summary of their experience and the study results, which will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

All information collected is confidential. Demographic and panel experience information provided will only be used for selection purposes and to describe the interviewees as a group. No information that is specific to a person or an institution will be connected to your responses.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr., MS
Western Michigan University
(269) 267-2526
james.dolan@wmich.edu

Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University
(269) 387-5113
mary.anderson@wmich.edu
EMAIL REQUEST TO WEBMASTER FOR NATIONAL CONSORTIUM OF DIRECTORS OF LGBT RESOURCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION LISTSERV

Hello. I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. I would like to post an invitation to assist in recruiting participants for a research study on the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education Listserv.

This research is part of my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. I am investigating the experiences of gay men who tell their coming out stories as part of an LGB classroom panel. I'm hoping to reach coordinators of such programs in an effort to recruit participants.

I've attached a copy of the invitation for your review. This listserv has been helpful to other colleagues who sought participants for previous research studies. I hope that you will be able to assist me.

Please contact me if there is another procedure I should follow or if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Jim Dolan
Western Michigan University
269 - 267 – 2526
EMAIL REQUEST TO WEBMASTER

Hello. I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. I would like to post an invitation to participate in a research study on the [insert name of listserv].

This research is part of my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. I am investigating the experiences of gay men who tell their coming out stories as part of an LGB classroom panel. I'm hoping to reach members of your organization who may be potential participants.

I've attached a copy of the invitation for your review. I hope that you will be able to assist me.

Please contact me if there is another procedure I should follow or if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Jim Dolan
Western Michigan University
INSTRUCTION LETTER TO DIRECTOR / PANEL COORDINATOR

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Greeting],

Thank you for agreeing to assist in the recruiting process for my research study on the experiences of undergraduate students who tell their coming out stories as speakers on classroom panels.

As we discussed during our phone conversation, potential participants are those who identify as male and gay and tell their coming out story as participants on classroom speakers’ panels. Additional criteria for participants are that they do not identify as transgender; are undergraduate students with at least two completed semesters; and participate or have participated on classroom panels for at least one year.

Enclosed you will find copies of the Invitation to Participate in a Research Study for distribution to the members of your speaker’s panel program. I have included the number of copies you specified during our telephone conversation.

I truly appreciate your help in recruiting participants for this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Thank You,

James Patrick Dolan Jr., MS

269-267-2526
james.dolan@wmich.edu

enclosures
TELEPHONE RESPONSE TO INTERESTED INDIVIDUALS

“Hello. Thank you for your interest in this study. I will need your mailing address so that I can send you more information about the study. Can I have your mailing address?”

“Okay, let me repeat that so I make sure I have it right. Your address is [verify address].”

“I will be putting the materials in the mail right away. You should receive them within the next few days. This information is for your use in deciding if you want to participate in the study. Thanks for your interest. Goodbye.”
E-MAIL RESPONSE TO INTERESTED INDIVIDUALS

First Response
Dear [Name],

You recently responded with interest in receiving more information about a research study designed to investigate the experiences of gay, male, undergraduate students who tell their coming out story as speakers on LGB classroom panels. I am writing to get your mailing address so that I can send you more information about the study. Please send a reply to this e-mail with your mailing address.

Requesting information does not imply that you will participate in the study, only that you are interested in more information. This information is for your use in determining whether or not you would like to participate in this research study.

Once I receive your address, I will send you the materials and an e-mail reply indicating that they are on their way.

Thanks for your interest!

Sincerely,
James Patrick Dolan, Jr. MS

Follow-up Response

Dear [Name],

As requested, I mailed information to you today about a research study designed to investigate the experiences of gay, male, undergraduate students who tell their coming out story as speakers on LGB classroom panels. You should receive the information in the next few days.

Thanks again for your interest in the study.

Sincerely,
James Patrick Dolan, Jr. MS
Dear [Name],

Thank you for expressing an interest in participating in a research study investigating the experiences of gay, male, undergraduate students who tell their coming out story as speakers on LGB classroom panels. Potential participants are those who identify as male and gay; do not identify as transgender; are undergraduate students with at least two completed semesters; and participate or have participated on classroom panels for at least one year.

This research is part of James Patrick Dolan, Jr.’s doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. We expect the findings of this study to provide an understanding of how telling one’s coming out story in a public setting may affect how one tells the story and how changing the story may affect how one understands their coming out experience and perhaps their identity.

Enclosed you will find (1) two copies of an informed consent form; (2) two copies of a background questionnaire; (3) and an addressed, stamped return envelope.

The informed consent form explains the research process in more detail. After reading the form, if you agree to participate in the study, please take the following steps:

1. Sign one of the consent forms. The other is for your records.
2. Complete one of the background questionnaires. The other is for your records.
3. Put the signed consent form and the completed background questionnaire in the enclosed envelope and place the envelope in the mail.

If you have any questions about the enclosed materials, please contact James Dolan by telephone at (269) 257-2526 or by e-mail at james.dolan@wmich.edu.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr., MS  Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University  Western Michigan University
(269) 267-2526  (269) 387-5113
james.dolan@wmich.edu  mary.anderson@wmich.edu

enclosures
FOLLOW-UP RECRUITMENT LETTER

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Name],

Three weeks ago you were sent materials in response to your interest in participating in a research study investigating the experiences of gay, male, undergraduate students who tell their coming out story as speakers on LGB classroom panels. Potential participants are those who identify as male and gay; do not identify as transgender; are undergraduate students with at least two completed semesters; and participate or have participated on classroom panels for at least one year.

This research is part of James Patrick Dolan, Jr.’s doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. We expect the findings of this study to provide an understanding of how telling one’s coming out story in a public setting may affect how one tells the story and how changing the story may affect how one understands their coming out experience and perhaps their identity.

We are contacting you because we have not received a response from you.

If you are still interested in participating, but have not completed the materials sent to you, we encourage you to do so.

If you sent us the completed materials and believe we should have received them by now, please contact James Patrick Dolan Jr by telephone at 269-267-2526 or by e-mail at james.dolan@wmich.edu to request new materials.

If you are no longer interested in participating, we thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr., MS  Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University  Western Michigan University
(269) 267-2526  (269) 387-5113
james.dolan@wmich.edu  mary.anderson@wmich.edu
RESPONSES TO RESPONDENTS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE NOT SELECTED FOR INTERVIEWS

By Telephone
“Hello [Name], this is Jim Dolan. You previously responded with interest in participating in a research study about your experiences as a speaker on LGB classroom panels. I am calling to let you know that although I appreciate your response and interest, I will not be able include you in the interviews. I selected a very small number of participants and am unfortunately not able to interview everyone who expressed interest in participation. Thank you for your response and for your interest in this project. “

By e-mail
Dear ____,

You previously responded with interest in participating in a research study about your experiences as a speaker on LGB classroom panels. I am writing to let you know that although I appreciate your response and interest, I will not be able to include you in the interviews. I selected a very small number of participants and am unfortunately not able to interview everyone who expressed interest I participation. Thank you for your response and for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr. MS
TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR SCHEDULING INTERVIEW 1

“Hello [name] this is Jim Dolan calling to schedule an interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. This interview will take about 90 minutes. I would like to schedule the interview for sometime in the next two weeks. Let’s figure out a date, time, and location that is convenient for you.” [Discuss scheduling logistics] “Okay, that sounds good. We will meet [date, time, and location]. Thanks for participating in this project. I am looking forward to meeting with you.”

If declines to participate
“Okay. You are free to end your participation at any time. I’m wondering if there are some particular concerns or reservations that I could address for you?” [If so, address concerns.]

If agrees to participate after addressing concerns
Let’s figure out a date, time, and location that is convenient for you.” [Discuss scheduling logistics] “Okay, that sounds good. We will meet [date, time, and location]. Thanks for participating in this project. I am looking forward to meeting with you.”

If declines again
“Okay. I appreciate your participation to this point. Thank you for your time. Goodbye.”
E-MAIL SCRIPT FOR SCHEDULING INTERVIEW 1

Hi [name]. I am contacting you to schedule an interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. The interview will take about 90 minutes. I would like to schedule the interview for some time during the next two weeks. Please reply with a date, time, and location that will be convenient for you. Or you can contact me at 269-267-2526 to schedule the interview.

I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks for your participation.

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, MS

Follow-up if no reply in 5 days

Hi [name]. I recently sent you an e-mail to schedule an interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. The interview will take about 90 minutes. I would like to schedule the interview for some time during the next two weeks. If you are still interested in participating, please reply with a date, time, and location that will be convenient for you. Or you can contact me at 269-267-2526 to schedule the interview.

You are free to end your participation at any time, but I’m wondering if you have some specific concerns or reservations that I might address for you? If so, please reply to this e-mail or call me at 269-267-2526. If not, thank you for your interest and participation to this point.

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, MS

If declines to participate

Hi [name]. I received your e-mail reply indicating you no longer wish to participate in the research study on LGB classroom panels. You are free to end your participation at any time, but I’m wondering if you have some specific concerns that I might address for you? If so, please reply to this e-mail or call me at 269-267-2526.

If not, thank you for your interest and participation to this point.

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, MS
TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR SCHEDULING INTERVIEW 2

For an In-person Interview

“Hello [name] this is Jim Dolan calling to schedule a second interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. This interview will take about an hour. When we last spoke you indicated you would be available for an in-person interview. Is this still the case?

[If Yes]
“Great. I would like to schedule the interview about two weeks from today. Let’s figure out a date, time, and location that is convenient for you.” [Discuss scheduling logistics] “Okay, that sounds good. We will meet [date, time, and location]. To prepare for the second interview, you will need to read the transcript from our first interview. I am mailing a copy of the transcript to you at the address you provided in your consent form. Is that okay or should I use another address? [If new address, verify.] Do you have any questions? [If yes, answer.] Thanks again for participating in this project. I am looking forward to speaking with you again.”

[If No]
“All right, then we will have to conduct the interview by telephone. To facilitate the interview it would be helpful for you to take the call in a quiet place. Let’s figure out a date and time that is convenient for you.” [Discuss scheduling logistics] “Okay, that sounds good. We will speak on [date and time]. Is this the phone number I should use? [Verify telephone number] To prepare for the second interview, you will need to read the transcript from our first interview. I am mailing a copy of the transcript to you at the address you provided in your consent form. Is that okay or should I use another address? [If new address, verify.] Do you have any questions? [If yes, answer.] Thanks again for participating in this project. I am looking forward to speaking with you again.”

For a Telephone Interview

“Hello [name] this is Jim Dolan calling to schedule a second interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. This interview will take about an hour. When we last spoke we decided to conduct the interview by telephone. I would like to schedule the interview about two weeks from today. Let’s figure out a date and time, and location that is convenient for you.” [Discuss scheduling logistics] “Okay, that sounds good. We will talk again on [date and time]. To prepare for the second interview, you will need to read the summary narrative from our first interview. I am mailing a copy of the summary narrative to you at the address you provided in your consent form. Is that okay or should I use another address? [If new address, verify.] Do you have any questions? [If yes, answer.] Thanks again for participating in this project. I am looking forward to speaking with you again.”
E-MAIL SCRIPT FOR SCHEDULING INTERVIEW 2

For an In-person Interview
Hi [name]. I am contacting you to schedule a second interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. The second interview will take about 1 hour and can be conducted by telephone or in-person. When we last met, you indicated you would be available for an in-person interview. I would like to schedule the second interview around two weeks from today. Please reply with a date, time, and location that will be convenient for you. Or you can contact me at 269-267-2526 to schedule the interview. To prepare for the second interview, you will need to read the narrative summary prepared from our first interview. I am mailing a copy of the narrative summary to you at the address you provided in your consent form. If your mailing address has changed, please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks for your participation.

For a Telephone Interview
Hi [name]. I am contacting you to schedule a second interview for the research study on LGB classroom panels. The second interview will take about 1 hour and can be conducted by telephone or in-person. When we last met, you indicated you would be available for a telephone interview. To facilitate the interview it would be helpful for you to take the call in a quiet place. I would like to schedule the second interview around two weeks from today. Please reply with a date and time that will be convenient for you. Or you can contact me at 269-267-2526 to schedule the interview. To prepare for the second interview, you will need to read the narrative summary prepared from our first interview. I am mailing a copy of the narrative summary to you at the address you provided in your consent form. If your mailing address has changed, please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks for your participation.
COVER LETTER WITH INSTRUCTIONS FOR INTERVIEW 2

Dear [Name],

Enclosed is a summary narrative based on the information you shared with me during our first interview. It is important to me to make sure that I clearly understand what you told me during the first interview. During our upcoming second interview on [insert date], I would like to ask you some questions about how well this written information captures your experience and see if there are any aspects of your experience that are missing. I will also share some themes I have discerned after interviewing other participants and discuss how well these themes fit with your experience.

Our [telephone or in-person] interview is scheduled at [insert date, time, location]. Please contact me at 269-267-2526 if this is incorrect or if you need to reschedule.

I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr.
COVER LETTER WITH INSTRUCTIONS FOR REVIEWING RESULTS

Dear [Name],
Thank you for participating in two interviews about your experiences as a speaker on LGB classroom panels.
Attached is a draft of the results for your interviews. I am writing to you to allow you an opportunity to ensure that the material you shared with me is written in a confidential manner and that your identity is anonymous. Please review this draft, and make note if there are any parts of this paper that you believe are revealing of your identity. Your material is highlighted in the draft.
If there is any part of this paper that you believe is revealing of your identity, write the page number below, and circle the word, phrase, sentence, or section that you would like changed on the draft. Please return this paper and the draft to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope within 7 days.
Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr.
FOLLOW-UP CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR / COORDINATOR OF PANEL PROGRAM

“Hello, this is Jim Dolan. We spoke a few weeks ago about my research project on the experiences of gay male undergraduate students who tell their coming out stories on classroom panels. I am calling because I am still in need of participants for my study. I want to make sure you received the materials I sent to you and to find out if you were able to distribute them to interested students?”

“If you need more informational materials I would be happy to send them. Also, if you could get the word out to potential participants in your program, that could be helpful.”

“If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 269-267-2526.”

“Thanks again for your time.”
Appendix C

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

This is an invitation to participate in a research study designed to investigate the experiences of gay men who told their coming out story in educational settings as a participant in a campus LGB speakers panel program. Potential participants are those who identify as male and gay; do not identify as transgender; participated on LGB classroom panels as an undergraduate student for more than one semester; and have completed at least two semesters of undergraduate higher education.

This research is part of James Patrick Dolan, Jr.’s doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. In addition to describing essential aspects of the panel experience, we expect the findings of this study to provide an understanding of how telling one’s coming out story in a public setting may affect how one tells the story and how changing the story may affect how one understands their coming out experience and perhaps their identity.

There is little research on LGB speaker’s panels and no investigation of the speaker’s experiences as it relates to their identity. This is an opportunity for you to help others gain insight into the panel experience and perhaps enhance your understanding of your own experience.

Below is a description of the research process for your review and consideration. If you are interested in learning more about participating or about the study, please contact the student investigator by e-mail (james.dolan@wmich.edu) or phone (269-267-2526) to receive additional information.

Requesting information does not imply that you will participate in the study, only that you are interested in more information. This information is for your use in determining whether or not you would like to participate in this research study. You may decline to participate at any point in the study without penalty or prejudice.

The first phase of this project involves the selection of potential interviewees based on a background questionnaire that takes about 10 minutes to complete. This background questionnaire requests that you provide some demographic and panel experience information. Information you provide will be used to select a diverse sample for this study.

After phase 1, you may be selected and invited to participate in phase 2 of this project. Phase 2 involves two interviews scheduled individually at a time convenient for you. The first interview will be held in person in a location convenient for you and will last approximately 90 minutes. A second interview will be by conducted in person or by telephone depending on your location and availability, will last approximately 60 minutes, and will likely occur several weeks later. You will also be asked to review a written summary of your experience and the study results, which will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

All information collected is confidential. Demographic and panel experience information you provide will only be used for selection purposes and to describe the interviewees as a group. No information that is specific to you or your institution will be connected to your responses.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr., MS
Western Michigan University
(269) 267-2526
james.dolan@wmich.edu

Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University
(269) 387-5113
mary.anderson@wmich.edu
Appendix D

Recruitment Letter and Informed Consent
Western Michigan University  
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology  
Principal Investigator: Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.  
Student Investigator: James Patrick Dolan, Jr., MS

Title of Study: Private Narratives in Public Places: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experiences of Gay Male Undergraduate Participants on LGB Classroom Panels

We are contacting you because you expressed interest in participating in a research study about the experiences of students who participate on LGB classroom panels. This research is part of James Patrick Dolan Jr.’s doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. Potential participants are those who identify as male and gay; do not identify as transgender; participated on LGB classroom panels as an undergraduate for more than one semester; and have completed at least two semesters of undergraduate higher education.

There is little known about the experiences of students who participate on LGB classroom panels. No investigation has elicited participant perspectives on their experiences as it relates to their identity. We expect the findings of this study to provide an understanding of how telling one’s coming out story in a public setting may affect how one tells the story and how changing the story may affect how one understands their coming out experience and perhaps their identity.

The first phase of this project involves the selection of potential interviewees. If you would like to be considered for interviews, your participation will involve completion of the enclosed one-page background questionnaire. This questionnaire will take less than 10 minutes of your time to complete. The questionnaire requests that you provide some demographic and panel experience information. Information you provide will be used to select a diverse sample of interviewees for this study.

After phase 1, you may be selected and invited to participate in phase 2 of this project. Phase 2 involves two interviews scheduled individually at a time convenient for you. The first interview will be held in person in a location convenient for you and will last approximately 90 minutes. During Phase 2 you will also be asked to review an initial written summary of your experiences and a draft of the study results. Review of these two documents is expected to take from 30 to 60 minutes. A second interview to discuss your reaction to the written summary of your experience will be conducted in person or by telephone depending on your location and availability; will last approximately 60 minutes; and will likely occur several weeks later. Both interviews will be audio recorded for transcription.

If you are selected to participate in Phase 2 of this project, you will be contacted to schedule an initial interview. If you are not selected to participate, you will be informed. Contact will be made using your preferred mode of contact indicated at this end of this form.

All of the information collected from you is confidential. No information that is specific to you or your institution will be reported. Pseudonyms will be used to identify all research materials. James Patrick Dolan, Jr. will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding pseudonyms. The demographic and panel experience information you report on the questionnaire will only be used for selection purposes and to describe interviewee participants as a group. Specific words or phrases used during the interviews that could identify you or your institution will be changed to broad identifiers such as “an academic institution” or “LGBT Speakers Panel.” Once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. All research materials will be retained in a locked filing cabinet for a minimum of 7 years in the principal investigator’s office.

Expected risks of participation include only possible mild discomfort in recalling or revealing information regarding any unpleasant experiences relating to a panel experience or telling your coming out story. Benefits of participation
include having an opportunity to reflect on your personal experiences; contributing to a study that will potentially inform your own and others LGBT-affirmative work on college or university campuses; and potentially adding to the generalizable knowledge about human identity development processes.

The student investigator identifies as a gay man with strong interest and involvement in LGBT issues. Mr. Dolan has a variety of campus experiences in LGBT issues including Safe on Campus membership and training, participation and training of LGBT Speakers Panels, LGBT student organization membership, and he was the organizing chairperson and a presenter for an LGBT student leadership conference held at Eastern Michigan University.

You may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact the student investigator, James Patrick Dolan, Jr. at 269-267-2526 or james.dolan@wmich.edu, or the principal investigator, Dr. Mary Z. Anderson, at 269-387-5113. You may also contact the chair of Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8298 or the vice president for research at 269-387-8298 with any concerns you have.

This letter contains consent information that has been approved of for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature in the upper right corner of each page. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is more than one year old.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

James Patrick Dolan, Jr., MS  Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.

By providing your signature below, you are indicating that you agree to respond to the background questionnaire and if selected, to participate in two interviews. Please return this signed form and the background questionnaire to the student investigator in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. An additional copy of this consent document is enclosed for your records.

________________________________________________________________     __________________________
Signature                                           Date

Print Name:________________________________________________________________________________________

Address:________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

Telephone:_____________________________________________________________________________________

Email:___________________________________________________________________________________________

Please indicate your preferred mode of contact:   ☐ telephone   ☐ e-mail
Appendix E

Background Questionnaire
If you would like to be considered for participation in two interviews concerning your experiences on LGB classroom panels, please complete this background questionnaire, sign the enclosed informed consent form, and return both documents in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please also keep a copy of each for your records. The information you provide below is for interview selection purposes. Review the informed consent form for additional steps that will be taken to ensure your confidentiality. Thank you for your consideration.

**Demographic Information (check one or fill in the blank)**

I identify as male. □ Yes □ No  
I am a biological male. □ Yes □ No  
I identify as gay. □ Yes □ No  
The area I grew up in is best identified as □ urban □ suburban □ rural  
My family’s socio-economic status is best described as □ poor □ working class / blue collar □ middle class □ upper-middle class □ upper class  
Race □ African American/ Black □ Asian / Pacific Islander □ Caucasian/White □ Hispanic / Latino □ Native American / Native Alaskan □ Other  
Describe your ethnic / cultural heritage ________________________________________________  
(eg. Mexican, Dutch & Irish, Korean, etc.)  
Describe your religious background ________________________________________________  
Age ___________  
Highest educational degree obtained ________________________________________________  
Current academic institution ________________________________________________  
Number of semesters completed at current academic institution ________________________  

**Panel Experience**

Name of panel program ________________________________________________  
Role on panel ________________________________________________  
Number of panels you have participated on ________________________  

Thank you very much for your time.
Appendix F

Interview Script and Questions – Initial Interview
INITIAL INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND QUESTIONS

Opening
“Today I want to speak with you about your experiences as a speaker on LGB classroom panels. I’ll begin with a couple of questions about your experience as reported on the background questionnaire. Then we’ll have a discussion of your experiences. Before we begin, do you have any questions about how I will ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the information you provide?” [If yes, share and clarify measures taken; if no, proceed]. “Do you have any questions about the interview process?” [If yes, share and clarify process.] “Let’s begin.”

Introductory questions
You indicated on the background questionnaire that you have participated in [number] of panels. How did you become interested in participating on such a panel? On your campus, what is your understanding of the climate in regards to LGBT issues?

Main question
Tell me about your experiences as a speaker on an LGB classroom panel.

Prompt Questions
Describe how the experience made you feel?
Describe how your story may have changed over time?
Why did your story change?
Describe how the demands of the audience affected or changed how you told your story?
Describe how the experience of listening to the stories of other panel members affected you?
Describe how the experience of listening to the stories of other panel members changed how you told your story?
How has the panel experience affected your understanding of your coming out process?
How has the panel experience affected your identity?

Final question
Is there anything that you’d like to share about your experiences on speaker panels that we haven’t talked about?

Possible probes
Tell me more about that experience.
What happened exactly?
Can you give me an example of that?
What was that like for you?
How did you feel at the time?
What was your emotional reaction?
How did that experience impact you?
How did you react?
“Thank you for your participation today. I really enjoyed speaking with you. The next step is for me to transcribe the interview and prepare a summary narrative for review. The next step for you will be to participate in a second interview that will give us a chance to talk about how well the summary narrative captures your experience and if there is anything missing or that you would like to add. This interview should take place in four to five weeks. I would like to conduct the second interview in person if it is feasible for us to meet again. That means you would have to be no more than a two hour drive from East Lansing, Michigan and you would have a private place where we could meet. Do you know where you will be about four weeks from now?”

[If meets location criteria]
“Okay, it sounds like we will be able to meet again in person. I will contact you by [preferred means of contact as indicated on informed consent] in about three weeks to schedule our interview. Do you have any final questions?” [Answer questions]

[If location does not meet criteria]
“It doesn’t sound like we will be able to meet again in person. That means the second interview will have to be conducted by telephone. I will contact you by [preferred means of contact as indicated on informed consent] in about three weeks to schedule our interview. Do you have any final questions?” [Answer questions]
Appendix G

Interview Script and Questions – Second Interview
SECOND INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Opening remarks if by telephone
“Hello. This is Jim Dolan calling to ask you some follow-up questions about your experiences on LGB speaker panels. Have you received the personal narrative I sent to you and had a chance to read it?” [If yes, continue; If no, ask participant to read the narrative before proceeding with interview.]

Opening remarks if in-person
“Thank you for meeting with me. Today I want to ask you some follow-up questions about your experiences on LGB speaker panels. Did you receive the personal narrative I sent and did you have a chance to read it?” [If yes, continue; If no, ask participant to read the narrative before proceeding with the interview.]

Interview Questions
“First I’d like to ask you about the narrative I sent you, and later I’d like to share with you some themes that came up for other participants and see if these themes fit with your experience.”

1. How well does the personal narrative I sent you last week capture your experiences participating on LGB speaker panels? Are there any important aspects of your experience on speaker panels that are left out? If so, please tell me about these experiences.
2. Now I would like to share with you some things that other participants shared. One theme was [state theme]. Do you relate to this theme? If yes, how so? Another theme was [state theme]. Do you relate to this theme? [repeat for all themes].
Appendix H

Individual Depictions
Appendix H.i

Adam
Individual Depiction: Adam

The panel experience has two essential aspects for you; one centering on your personal journey and search for identity and the other making a difference for members of the LGB community. You described the panel experience as transformative, a journey over time that has helped you to overcome the many barriers and internal programming that prevented you from liking yourself and believing that you could have a good life as a gay man. Participating on a panel was a way of having your voice heard, of making you and your struggles visible as a means to make change so that others would not have the same struggles. Your personal journey and your panel experience are entwined, mutually influencing and express your struggle to heal from a lonely and hurtful childhood and adolescence.

Growing up in a small town in northern Michigan, you sensed at a very young age that you were different in some indefinable way from the other boys at school. You experienced isolation and ridicule, which led you to keep silent about your gay identity. One way you were able to keep silent about being gay was to distance yourself from your classmates by becoming something of a loner so you wouldn't feel pressured into having to come out. An important element of your panel experience was the satisfaction of “making noise”, i.e., by telling your story in public you were being noticed and people were paying attention to you. This was a novel and powerful feeling for you since growing up you felt stifled from expressing yourself. Participating in a panel allowed you to transform from a shy quiet young man withdrawn into himself to a confident adult who is no longer ashamed of himself or feels the need to be invisible.
Individual Depiction: Adam

You described the panel experience as being therapeutic. At the same time you were speaking out against negative stereotypes and dispelling myths about gay people for others, you were doing it for yourself. Sharing your story and having it heard by other people allowed you to work out your feelings of shame and internalized homophobia in an affirming and active manner. Hearing other people’s stories provided you insight into other people’s experiences as well as a sense that you didn't grow up alone. You felt a kind of connection with your fellow panelists that made sharing your private thoughts and feelings in public not only acceptable but welcome. And even though you initially experienced some fear and distrust of the audience, you eventually gained a sense that there were allies in the audience and that telling your story was making a difference for others. These positive experiences of connection, acceptance, and purpose began to outweigh your negative feelings towards yourself and others. The panel experience propelled your personal development and healing at a faster rate than would have otherwise been possible.

You related that the story you tell on panels has remained relatively the same over the years, but as you accrue more experience and develop greater understanding about yourself and your formative experiences, the story has become richer in detail. Your storytelling has at times been influenced by the stories of others and the audience. As a less experienced panelist, listening to others tell stories provided you the courage to add more personal elements to your own story. For example, one time someone related an incident involving a suicide, which let you know it would be okay to talk about your own suicide attempt. Sometimes audience reaction to aspects of other panelist’s stories that
Individual Depiction: Adam

are similar to your own provided influenced the elements of your experience that you included in the story you told. Now, as a more experienced panelist, you find that you choose the details of your story to suit the needs of the particular class that you are addressing or to complement or fill in gaps of the other panelists’ stories.

You related that the focused attention of the audience on you as you told your story was the most challenging aspect of the panel experience. At first you would keep your story brief in order to minimize your time in the spotlight. However, over time, you became more comfortable telling your story, especially as you began to experience satisfaction from being visible and “making noise”, i.e., having your voice heard and your experiences validated. You noted that at times the question and answer period was difficult because you never knew what an audience member might ask. Your comfort with answering questions has grown over the years as you matured and became more familiar with the types of questions that the audience might ask. As an experienced panelist you feel able to handle any question an audience member may ask as well as support other panel members who may not have the experience or knowledge to address the question. Your role on the panel has changed from rookie to coach and you enjoy your work with less experienced panel members, helping them to understand and make the most of their experience. You indicated feeling that the audience has changed over time as well, being generally less confrontational and hateful and more open-minded and supportive. You believe this could be an indicator that the greater awareness about gay and lesbian people in everyday life is having a positive effect on attitudes towards LGB people.
Individual Depiction: Adam

Overall, you feel that your panel experience has been a powerful force for positive change in your life and in creating positive change for LGB students coming to campus after you. You continue to participate on panels as a way of making change on your campus to improve the climate for LGB people and to be visible to those looking for positive role models. You would encourage LGB students to participate on classroom panels and don't see the need for such panels going away in the near future.
Appendix H.ii

Burke
Individual Depiction: Burke

Participating on a panel has been an informative experience for you, leading you to reflect on your identity and your experiences in a more holistic manner. An important aspect of the panel work is to make the lives of gay people more visible to others in an effort to combat the stereotypes about the lives that gay people lead. You have a strong belief that listening to a panelist’s story not only increases awareness, but can also influence people’s opinions and feelings towards gays and lesbians. Your role on the panel and the story that you tell has been influenced mainly by three factors: comparing your story with the stories of others; the reaction of the audience to the stories being told; and your need to tell an authentic story.

Reflecting on your two semesters as a panelist, you describe what almost sounds like two separate experiences. During your first semester as a panelist you developed a story based on training guidelines and a belief that your story should focus on the hardships of being gay. For you, the story you were telling rang a false note when compared to the truly tragic life events that others related. Although you talked about actual moments in your life, you weren’t portraying your authentic coming out experience. You began to understand that you had crafted a story that played to the negative expectations for a coming out story and focused on the few difficult events in your experience rather than on the experience as a whole. So, you began to shift the focus of your story to the more positive aspects of your experience. This was an effort to both paint a more realistic picture and to balance out the more negative stories being told. You wanted the audience to hear both sides of the story: sometimes coming out is hard, sometimes it’s easier, but in actuality there's more variety to the experience than
Individual Depiction: Burke

stereotypes allow for. The second semester experience was much more comfortable because you felt you were offering a truer version of your story.

Audience reaction also had an influence on the changes you made in your story. You described an almost interactive quality to your experience of the audience where you would add or subtract or emphasize different elements of your story based on audience reaction. If you noted that audience members were tuning out the sad stories you would be sure to talk about something happy. More often than not humor was your favored method for connecting with the audience. You enjoyed the sensation of having the audience's attention focused on you and attributed your comfort and ability to read the audience to your participation in the drama club in high school. You related experiencing the paradox of sharing the personal details of your life with a group of complete strangers. This helped you to understand how at times you were actually less candid with your friends and gave you the resolve to be more open.

You described your panel experience as a catalyst for achieving a more comprehensive perspective on your life and your identity. Before becoming a panelist you viewed being gay as something that was naturally going to make your life more difficult. This assumption played a part in choosing to focus on the more negative aspects of your coming out experience in the story you told on the panel. The more you told your story and the more stories you heard, the more you realized that you were the one choosing to focus on the negative aspects of being gay and if you continued to do so you'd become a very unhealthy person. You began to understand that you could not tell your story as a series of random events, rather it needed to be told as a series of
Individual Depiction: Burke

connected experiences, a story of a whole life that communicated not only events but a sense of who you are as a person. Now you have a better sense of how you are changing as a person and you consciously examine these changes in light of new knowledge and experience. You believe that your story will continue to evolve and change just as you continue to evolve and change as a person.

You decided to participate on classroom panels after attending a gay straight alliance meeting at your college. At first you were disappointed that the organization had a more social focus, but you discovered that there were some people interested in being more politically active. You grew up in a small town with no visible gay role models and you felt the community generally held negative stereotypes about gays and lesbians. Although you felt the climate on campus with regards to LGB students was better than that of your high school, there was still room for improvement. Telling your story and answering questions on the panels is a way for you to participate in social change and combat the influence of negative stereotypes promoted by the media and uninformed individuals. You have a strong belief that you can have an effect on people’s attitudes through the story you tell. Although you believe this experience could be beneficial to other gay people, you aren’t sure that everyone is suited or ready for the type of self examination and exploration inherent in the work.
Appendix H.iii

Cole
Individual Depiction: Cole

Participating in over 50 panels over the course of four years was an informative experience providing you a deeper understanding of your identity; you're coming out experience, and the reactions and influences of family members to both your coming out and to your being gay. The experience also provided you with a sense of affirmation and a real connection to other gay people that you couldn't get from books or articles. Although in theory the idea of sharing your private thoughts and feelings in public seemed absurd and you were nervous at first, in practice you eventually felt comfortable and gained a sense that you were helping others. You also began to enjoy the excitement resulting from both the attention you received from the audience and the immediacy of the experience. As someone who viewed himself as a somewhat calculating non-risk taker and who spent many hours carefully recording his thoughts and experiences in journals, the uncertainty of not knowing what words might come out of your mouth or what questions the audience might ask was stimulating and freeing.

As a freshman you became involved with the LGB student group on campus. Some of the older members of this group talked about their involvement on panels, which peaked your interest. Upon reflection you really didn't know what you were getting into, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. Training to be a panelist consisted mostly of learning the do’s and don’ts and did not truly prepare you for emotional impact of the work. Follow-up after panels consisted mostly of audience feedback forms that were summarized at times by you as a worker in the LGBT office. Occasionally there were informal gatherings of fellow panelists, which you found helpful for processing your experiences.
Individual Depiction: Cole

You described panels like “practicing in front of a mirror that reacts” resulting in a practice effect that works two ways. First, it gave you a sense of how people would react to what you said, which helped to gauge what you would and would not share with friends and family. Also, the more panels you did, the more practiced they became. Not only did you become more comfortable telling your story, but you began to feel that holding the audience’s attention was part of your role as a panelist. Also, keeping the audience entertained and having positive attention focused on you made the panel experience feel safer. The experience became a form of infotainment that provided the audience selected facts, truths, and perceptions about your coming out experience as well as “juicy bits” that kept them hooked. You told the audience versions of your story that were always based in reality, but influenced by the setting, the demands of the audience, and any new insight or learning or experience you had gained since the last time you told your story. You described your story variously as “boring” or “happy” in comparison to others with more tragic or dramatic life circumstances. Still, you felt it was important for the audience to hear your relatively uneventful story as a way of demonstrating the spectrum of coming out experiences and perhaps undermining the notion that coming out is always a terrible experience.

Story and narrative are important to your sense of self and provide you a means for understanding and relating not only your experiences but your identity as well. You have an internal narrative that acts as a map of experiences and how the experiences relate to each other. The idea of narrating your life started from listening to your grandfather’s stories about his life in the Navy. Early on you gained a sense that life is a
Individual Depiction: Cole

series of stories that are connected and can be told and so you began recording your life in journals. It turned out that writing your story was actually more of an intellectual endeavor that tended to distance you from your experience. Telling your story in public removed an element of control that gave you a new way of processing and reflecting on your experience as well as discovering your feelings about what had happened. In this sense your panel work took on a therapeutic nature, giving you a new and more holistic perspective on people and events, which in turn led to a deeper understanding of yourself and others. Also, the experience of being comfortable relating personal matters to the audience helped you to overcome your fears of relating personal matters in a one-to-one setting, which eventually allowed you to feel comfortable taking part in individual therapy.
Appendix H.iv

Declan
Individual Depiction: Declan

Participating on LGB speaker panels has been an affirming activity that has given you insight into your coming out experience and your identity; provided you a way to meet other gay people and make friends; and afforded you an opportunity to reach out to the community and help others. In addition to your love of storytelling, the chance to provide correct information and first person experience as a means to break down stereotypes about gay people is both motivating and satisfying. You have a strong belief that if you “talk about things and put the truth out there” there will be less bigotry and hatred towards gay people. You also experience a real sense of fit between your plans to be an educator and the panel activity, which continues to be a source for learning and personal growth.

As a freshman you found out about the campus panel program at a meeting of the LGBT student group. You were attracted to the idea of telling your story in public and influenced by the charisma of the panel coordinator. You recall enjoying the training for panel participants and that food was served at the training session. The training session was comprised of three parts. First, participants were provided an overview of the panel program and practical information about the do’s and don’ts for panelists. Next you wrote down your coming out story and read it out loud. The process of writing out the story echoed your experience of writing a note to your mother as your way of coming out as gay to her. It was also the first time that you had truly tried to put together a coherent coming out narrative and you found it interesting to reflect and remember in this way. Finally, the group role-played a question and answer session. Overall, you found the
Individual Depiction: Declan

training experience helpful. In particular, you enjoyed feeling welcome and began to
gain a sense of camaraderie with other gay people you hadn’t felt before.

You describe your first panel as a “vivid blur” and recall both a state of confusion
and a sense of accomplishment. You also experienced stage fright, which was an
unfamiliar sensation for you. During high school you were active in theatre and never
experienced any fear of speaking in public or being on stage. You believe the fear had
something to do with the fact that in theatre you are taking to the stage as a character with
a script whereas on the panel you are appearing as yourself with your story in an
unscripted situation. The anxiety comes from the uncertainty of not knowing exactly
what you might say or what the audience might ask. You also recall a sense of shock and
surprise from being outed in public when the panel coordinator introduced you as a gay
man. Although on some level you understood that you would be telling your coming out
story in public, the reality of “being gay” in front of all those strangers caught you off
guard and added to your sense of unease. Now that you have participated on over two
dozen panels, you feel more comfortable and describe the experience as liberating. You
would like to help new panel members feel more comfortable by talking with them to
help them process and make sense of their experience, something that wasn’t offered to
you in any formal way.

When you first began doing panels, the activity helped you come out to your
father by giving you practice in talking about your feelings, who you are, and who you
want to be. As you continued doing panels, you gained insight into your identity as a gay
man and as a member of the gay community. Through telling your story repeatedly,
Individual Depiction: Declan

listening to others’ stories, and engaging in a dialog with the audience, you began to answer some of the nagging questions you had about yourself, such as “are you really gay”. You also found yourself able to start reconciling some of your desires with your fears, such as how you are going to have children as a gay man. You feel that participating on panels has helped you gain a deeper sense of self and to be more comfortable with that self. As you began to feel more comfortable with yourself, you began to feel more connected with the other panelists and through them the gay community in general.

You said that before becoming involved in the panels you believed that every gay man needed to be like the character Jack from the television show Will & Grace; a stereotypically effeminate, sarcastic, self-centered, and sex-crazed gay man. Doing panels with many other gay men who acted in many different ways helped you to realize that there are “all different types of being gay”, i.e., a diversity of behavior and character in the gay community. Sometimes you experience feelings of being “less gay” than others as you explore ways of behaving and expressing yourself that felt more true to you.

You describe the story that you tell on the panel as “boring and dry”, however you believe that it is important to tell all types of coming out stories on the panel so that the audience is exposed to a wide range of coming out experiences so that people understand that not all coming out stories are sad ones. You feel that your own coming out experience was a “happy” one since both your parents and your friends were receptive and supportive. Sometimes it seems like your parents are over invested in your identity
Individual Depiction: Declan

as their "gay son", but for now view their involvement in this particular aspect of your identity is affirming and you incorporate more family stories and personal insights into the current version of the coming out story you tell on panels, which seems to change naturally with more life experience and reflection. While you always feel that you are telling your true story, sometimes on the panel you experience a sense of distance between what you remember and where you are today.

At times the audience may affect the story that you are telling. At first you felt more comfortable with audiences that were predominantly female. If you know someone in the audience, you tend to be more thoughtful and careful with what you share to protect yourself and others who might be part of your story. You believe that knowledge is power and providing others information about yourself may make you vulnerable in some ways. Ultimately however, you feel that you maintain control because you are the one telling the story.

Participating on panels has become an important part of your academic and personal life. This experience has shaped the person you currently are and holds promise for future change and understanding. You do not foresee a time when you will not want to take part on the panel.
Appendix H.v

Eamon
Individual Depiction: Eamon

For you, participating on LGB classroom panels is mainly a political activity that provides both an opportunity to express your views on social issues and allows you to give back to the Queer community. You believe that Queer identity is socially and politically constructed and that participating on panels is a way of taking part in and guiding the social discourse on Queer matters as an agent for your own identity. Although you don’t feel that participating on the panel was necessarily a way of creating identity, telling your story in public was a liberating experience that allowed you to construct your identity rather than having someone place an identity upon you.

As a freshman you took part in the panel program as part of your involvement in an LGBTA student group. At that time, this group was responsible for the panel program on campus and you became a panelist as a matter of course. Initially you described the group effort at training as somewhat disorganized and laid back, but on further reflection recalled spending several hours on training that focused mainly on answering audience questions, fielding difficult or controversial questions, and conflict resolution techniques for dealing with difficult audience members. You also remembered some discussion of public speaking techniques and practicing answering questions. Since that time you feel that the panel program and the training has become more “institutionalized” as the demand for panels increased and the LGBT office on campus began to take the lead with this program.

Your first campus experience telling your coming out story in public occurred during an LBGT student group gathering the first week of classes of your freshman year. Students were asked to introduce and talk a little bit about themselves and began sharing
Individually Depicted: Eamon

coming out stories. Although you took part and shared your story, you felt as if your identity was not defined by coming out, that your “identity had moved beyond just being gay” and past a point where coming out was the center of your existence. In fact, you label your coming out story as “bland and boring” since your experience was characterized by support and acceptance from family and friends. While coming out was still terrifying at times, there were no real negative consequences and you never experienced the process as an all-consuming event. You view coming out as a moment in your life when you became more forceful about your views and your identity, which in turn gave you the freedom to further your personal development.

Coming out in college was more political than personal. Participating on panels is a form of activism that gives you an outlet for your political views and fulfills your responsibility to be an involved member of a community that provides you support and a sense of belonging. Queer culture is important to you and you see panel participation as part of this culture – and as easier than standing on street corners handing out political leaflets. Panels also provide a way to make people think; reinforce connections with allies; and lessen homophobia by increasing individual awareness. During your first few years as a panelist you took every opportunity to be on a panel that came up. Lately you only do panels as necessary, reflecting not so much panel burnout as a shift in your priorities as you prepare to leave the institution and perhaps a sense that it is time to hand off the baton to others.

For you, telling coming out stories on panels is like an ice-breaker activity with the question-and-answer period being the main focus of the experience. The coming out
Individual Depiction: Eamon

story also serves to establish the authority of the speakers to speak on behalf of the Queer community. With experience, your story shifted from focusing on elements of your coming out experience to being more about your community involvement and political activism. Your focus changed from talking about yourself to talking about the groups you were involved with, from talking about your identity to how you express identity, which overtime was a way for you to empower others to express identity. You indicated that telling your story on the panel wasn’t a way of creating identity, but that you did explore certain aspects of your identity such as religion by identifying your beliefs in various ways. Your story and how you answered questions might vary depending on the state of your beliefs or how you wished to engage the audience. For example, you might say something about accepting Christ into your life as a way of challenging the perceptions of audience members when in fact that might not be true. Also, you would alternate between answering questions from the queer community perspective and you own perspective, which did not always coincide.

Initially you didn’t listen very closely to the stories other panelists were telling because you were more concerned about what you were going to say. Although you viewed your story as uneventful, you felt it brought balance to some of the dramatic stories being told and in that way lessened stereotypes about coming out experiences. You sensed a kind of “modeling” effect happening on the panels, that listening to how a person told their story affected how another person told theirs. For example, if one person shared a detailed experience and allowed their self to be vulnerable, others felt allowed to do the same. Over time, listening to other stories helped you realize how
Individual Depiction: Eamon

much social privilege you had from your upbringing. Although you are hesitant to talk on the panel about the specifics of your privilege, you recognize the responsibility that comes with it and the importance of using the power of privilege for social change.

Generally you didn’t experience any safety concerns as a panelist. After years of practice you feel comfortable handling anything an audience may throw your way. You are able to separate yourself from someone’s views, i.e., you don’t take someone’s negative views on homosexuals as an attack on you personally. You recognize differences in audiences based on the setting. For instance, residence hall audiences felt “cushy” since people attended by choice and likely were already allies. On the other hand, audiences in a classroom setting were “hard” since people were required to attend. You feel that education is more likely to take place in such a setting specifically because of this lack of choice and because there are likely people in the audience who know little or nothing about LGBT people. The most difficult audience so far was a local police department where you felt somewhat intimidated by an unreceptive audience that was armed with guns and were members of a societal group that has a long history of negative treatment of LGBT folks. This panel was also set up differently from others since it was more of a training session for the audience and it focused on transgender issues. You view the inclusion of transgender folks and their concerns on panels as a positive indicator of social change and affirmation of political activism.
Appendix H.vi

Fredo
Individual Depiction: Fredo

Participating on LGB classroom panels has been a positive and affirming experience for you resulting in a deeper connection and understanding of your own coming out experience.

As a member of a student LGBTA group on your campus, you received a recruiting letter from the organizers of the panel program. You thought it would be an interesting experience, so you decided to take part. As a first-generation college student, taking an active role in your education is highly important to you and you felt that participating on the panels would be both educational and a way for you to become an educator. You believe that everyone is an educator no matter what they choose to do in life and it is important for folks to live up to that responsibility. In addition to your own experiences, the information you use in your role as educator comes from your personal interactions with other gay men, particularly older gay men who relate a historical perspective through the stories they share. This type of first person education was instrumental in your decision to participate on panels to share your story as a means of educating others. You strongly believe that a more educated generation will make a difference in the future for LGB people.

For the most part your panel experiences have been positive and affirming. You get a high just doing a panel. You feel like you can do panels until the day you die since there are always new challenges and opportunities with the work. However, there are some downsides. The work can be emotionally draining and you encounter a lot of negative attitudes and ideas out in the world. Despite this, you feel there is much more to gain than to lose. You deal with discomfort by focusing on the hope of reaching
Individual Depiction: Fredo

someone and changing their life. The idea that you are helping to make progress for people and that people are actually taking in what you have to say empowers you and gives you true enthusiasm to continue on.

The first time you participated on a panel you experienced a fair amount of anxiety. You found it difficult to make eye contact with the audience. With more experience you became more comfortable as you realized that you were not alone and that you were just one part of a bigger event. You learned not to be afraid and to just dive in. If you didn’t feel comfortable providing details of an experience or answering a question, you just kept to yourself. As time went on you found yourself sharing more and more. Today you feel like the panel experience has helped make you a more open person who is not afraid to share his story and reflections with groups or individuals.

You say that telling your story is like describing a movie and that with each retelling the pictures come into sharper focus. Telling your story again and again provides both distance that allows you to examine the past through a lens of new learning and life experience and closeness that brings a level of emotionality necessary to connect with the audience. Retelling your story helps you to stay connected with your roots and to remember things about your experience that you either forgot or repressed because they were too painful. You state that paradoxically you can remain calm and tell your story in the midst of raw emotion because you are telling a story about your past self who is a very different person than your present self who is telling the story. The more you tell your story, the more it evolves. The events don’t change, but your understanding of them does as does the meaning you make from events. You have learned that your story
Individual Depiction: Fredo

involves you and your sister and your mother and that by seeing things from multiple perspectives you gain a greater understanding of yourself. You like the way your story comes alive for you when you tell it and feel that it is good for your soul to tell it.

Listening to others tell their stories has helped you gain insight into your own experiences and made you feel connected with them as you related to aspects of their experiences. Hearing the stories of others gave you a sense of affirmation and community, like you were all working towards the same goal and would have each others’ backs. It also helped you learn to tell your story in a more expressive manner.

You felt that the panel training was helpful, but couldn’t really prepare you for the live experience. During training you worked with new and experienced panelists. You reviewed a pamphlet describing the program and listened to an explanation of how panels worked. You also took part in an activity that simulated a panel experience and then received constructive feedback on your performance. Mostly you feel that you can only learn about panels by doing panels.

Generally you have had good experiences with the audience. No matter who is in the audience – high school students, college students, or faculty – you feel that you are able to make a connection by being genuine with your emotions. You judge your connection by body language and facial expressions. No matter the size of the audience you feel you are accomplishing something even if you only reach one person. You enjoy the experience of seeing the light dawn on someone who has a sudden new awareness or understanding because of something you said.
Individual Depiction: Fredo

This experience has changed you in many ways, but mostly by making you a more open person in your everyday life. You feel like you can do anything now that you have overcome the hurdle of coming out and that you keep coming out publicly each time you do a panel. You’re also surprised that you are now able to speak in front of an audience without your voice shaking and you are comfortable making eye contact with the audience now. Looking back on the experience so far, you feel that you have bettered yourself. The positive energy that you get from doing panels helps you cope with other aspects of your life. You don’t foresee a time when you won’t want to be engaged in such affirming and positive work.
Appendix H.vii

Garde
Individual Depiction: Garde

Participating on LGB speakers’ panels has been a consistently positive experience for you, helping you to explore and strengthen your individual identity as well as your place in the gay community. You identified three essential aspects to your panel experience. First, it allows you to educate and raise awareness on LGB concerns and issues by providing correct, factual information highlighted by lived experience. Another important aspect is the opportunity to explore your individual identity and your fit in the gay community. Finally, participating on panels allows you to forge bonds with other panelists to create a strong, visible community on your campus.

You arrived on campus starved for a gay community and looking to meet other gay people. You met some people in a student group who were involved in panels and thought it would be a fun thing to try. The first panel that you did was in a residence hall amidst a very accepting and affirming community. You became so excited about doing panels that sometimes you would skip class in order to take part. After four years you still jump at the chance to do panels and still find it to be a rewarding and affirming experience. Participating on panels feels like a good fit for you since you are a storyteller at heart. Also, you plan to be a teacher and feel that the experience is good practice for being in the classroom.

Before taking part in your first panel you took part in a training program. During the session you discussed the ground rules for doing a panel, talked about how to answer questions from the audience, completed a worksheet to develop a story for the panel, and you practiced telling stories. You feel that the ground rules are important since it can be an emotional situation that needs some structure to protect individuals. The worksheets
Individual Depiction: Garde

are used to guide development of a concise story that fits within the allotted time. Ultimately people tell the story they want to, but the training session helps them trim it down to the significant events they wish to share. You have been using the same worksheet for years, but it has been the practice of telling your story over and over again that has helped you hone it for panel use. You feel that the training sessions are getting more elaborate each year, but that the program organizers do a good job of learning from past mistakes to make improvements.

You experience many personal benefits from being on a panel. It helps you work through things that you need to work through or are trying to work through. It gives you a chance to talk about things that are on your mind. And it improves your ability to be firm in your identity and to understand who you are. You feel like you went through a “second coming out” in college and that being a panelist was an integral part of that process. When you came out as a sophomore in high school you didn’t have any gay friends, although you suspected that some of your teachers were gay. Although you generally experienced acceptance from family and friends, you did not have a sense of community or any visible gay role models. Even when you started doing panels you felt like an outsider in gay community. Over the years, participating on panels has helped you reach new a understanding about your experiences, your feelings, and your identity. You also feel like you have a place in the gay community. You feel that being a panel member gives you permission to explore who you are. You believe that people need permission to do this because we are constrained by how others define us. You don’t consider your self-exploration or your coming out process over yet, but you believe that
Individual Depiction: Garde

your involvement with the panels has been significant in getting you to where you are today.

You enjoy telling your story and feel as if everyone’s story, whether it is dramatic or relatively uneventful, is important because they speak to different segments of the audience. You believe it is important for people to understand that there are many facets to the gay community. With practice your story and your storytelling has evolved over the years. Although your story hasn’t really changed, you feel that you tell it in a more coherent manner. Also, after listening to the stories others tell on the panel, you may emphasize or leave out elements in your story in order to present the audience with a more complete understanding of the coming experience. You have a sense for what the “core” elements of a coming out experience are and if you feel that the stories told on the panel are missing some of these elements you “fill in the blanks” with your story or with your answers during the question-and-answer period. You believe stories are important because people are more able to identify with lived experience than facts and figures. Weaving answers to questions into stories and relating them to individual experiences makes the presentation more interesting and effective.

Telling your story over and over again has brought you new insight into your identity and experience, as has listening to the stories that others tell. You describe the experience of telling your story as having helped you to reconcile who you want to be with who you are. You had an idea that you could be queer and not be part of the gay community. Eventually you found that this ideal did not match with your experience. You were experiencing homophobia and dissonance in your life, so you decided to give
Individual Depiction: Garde

yourself permission to explore ways to become part of the gay community. Joining the panel program was a way for you to become active in the gay community on campus. Sharing your story was a way to explore your fit in the community and helped you establish some common ground. Listening to the stories of others has been an amazing experience that makes you feel connected with others. You discovered that there are some universal experiences that all panelists share. Discovering that your story shared elements of others’ stories provided a sense of legitimacy to your experience that you found affirming and freeing.

Your experiences with the audience have generally been positive. You identify yourself as something of an “attention hound”, but a lot of your satisfaction stems from knowing that you are helping others and not the fact people are attending to you. Although you feel like your story is pretty much in the public domain after all this time, you recall feeling scared about what others might think of you or the possible consequences of taking part on a panel. You spent some time thinking about whether it was appropriate activity for you, but your first panel experience was overwhelmingly positive, so you plunged right in. Audience reaction will affect how you tell your story. You feel a responsibility to keep the audience engaged, so you might play things up to get their attention. Initially you felt offended if someone wasn’t paying attention, but now you know that even if you reach only one member of the audience it’s worth it. You find that the questions from the audience are becoming more complex. Rather than asking the typical questions like “how did your parents react”, audience members are more interested now in politics or research studies, which requires a depth of knowledge.
Individual Depiction: Garde

You feel a responsibility to be an expert, but that’s okay because you view yourself as a “gay almanac”. You are excited to answer questions about gay history or take on social issues, but you are also careful to let others on the panel have their say. You enjoy the question-and-answer portion of the panel and find that the negative folks are becoming outnumbered by the curious ones.

Taking part on panels has been a significant force for growth and development in your life. You believe it is a worthwhile activity, but perhaps not something everyone should do. You believe that folks have to be at a certain stage of their personal development in order to take part and truly benefit from the experience. There may come a time when your own development is such that doing panels is no longer a fit for you, but for right now speaking on panels continues to open up new possibilities for growth and learning about yourself and your community.
Appendix H.viii

Hiro
Individual Depiction: Hiro

Participating on LGB speakers’ panels was an affirming and positive experience that first and foremost provided you a sense of giving back to the community and made you feel like you were making a difference in people’s lives. The panel work also gave you a sense of connection with the LGB community that you hadn’t felt before. Belonging to a community was important to you and in some ways the panel work helped fill the void you felt in your life after leaving your church. You think of yourself as a storyteller, so this work was a good fit for you. Telling your story was “like sharing the good news” and gave you a chance to speak freely and unashamedly from your heart.

Growing up in a Christian, church-going household was both a source of strength and a trial for you. Sharing Jesus Christ and the love of the church community was a big part of your life and your identity, as well as something you enjoyed. However, as you began to realize that you were gay, reconciling this aspect of your identity with the church’s teaching that homosexuality is a sin resulted in a long and tiresome struggle that had you contemplating suicide at various times. You eventually found the strength to separate yourself from your church community and to live your life as God made you.

Indeed, one of the factors that motivated you to become a panelist was a need to find something to be as passionate about as you had been passionate about church. You discovered the panel program at your university as an undergraduate student in a holistic health class. Your passion was sparked as you witnessed the panel participants being challenged or “bible-thumped” by self-proclaimed Christians in the audience. Although you felt the panelist’s handled themselves well, you felt a strong desire to speak out and defend them. You managed to remain quiet for the class, but decided right then and there...
that this program was something you wanted to participate in. As someone raised as a
Christian, you felt you had a responsibility and the knowledge to both spread a more
positive message about the love of Jesus as well as take on the narrow-minded
challengers using the Bible as a weapon against gay people. Overall the panel experience
brought you a “grand scale of fulfillment”, but you remain a little disappointed that
despite the dozens of panels you participated on you never had an audience that raised a
Bible challenge like that first one you experienced.

After joining the panel program you participated in a one-day training session. The
session consisted mainly of reviewing a manual, watching a video, and practice
answering audience questions. The training focused mostly on providing you
background knowledge and techniques for answering questions and handling difficult
audience members. The intent seemed to be providing a common ground for addressing
and talking about issues and concerns for the LGBT community in a consistent and
correct way. The trainer advised folks not to wear things that would make you look
“flamey” because they want to send a message that “we’re normal people too.” You
found this message offensive and suspect, as if they were telling people to not be who
they are.

During training you also spent some time developing your coming out story for
the panel and practice telling the story in front of the trainers and other trainees. You
found it interesting but difficult to write your own story. You think of yourself as a good
writer, but also “long-winded” so condensing your story to fit the 6 minute panel limit
was a challenge. You ended up constructing a story that consisted of the pivotal
Individual Depiction: Hiro

moments in your coming out experience. Although brief, you feel that the story you tell on the panel describes the essence of your experiences. Your intention for telling your story is to talk about your experiences and feelings in such a way that people will understand that you and other gay folk are just human beings like every other human being and that we should all find a way “to just love each other like God wants us to”.

You describe your story as being on the dramatic end of the coming out continuum, but not every story is about “gay drama”. It’s important to share all types of coming out experiences so that the audience understands that the coming out experience doesn’t always fit the stereotype of suicide and sorrow. It was just that idea, that being gay was something sad, that held you back in your own coming out process. One of the unexpected bonuses of being on a panel was the sense of community and affirmation engendered by the experience. On one hand you compared the experience of sharing and hearing others’ stories to the saying “misery loves company” and appreciated the sense of belonging hearing that others had experienced similar events and feelings as you. On the other, it was sometimes hurtful to hear that others never experienced the challenges and obstacles in coming out that you had. However, in every story you heard an underlying theme of oppression, which you feel is the glue that binds the gay community together.

All-in-all, you never regretted sharing your story. It always made you happy to be able to share, although you felt nervous being on the panel. As a theatre major, you had experienced stage fright, but you did not expect similar feelings in a more informal atmosphere. You attributed your anxiety to concerns that you might leave out something important in your story, something that would connect for someone in the audience and
Individual Depiction: Hiro

perhaps make a difference for them or someone in their life. You endeavored to tell the same story each time and if you forgot to mention a particular point you would try to address it during the question-and-answer period. The only time your story varied was during your first few panels when you tried to tell a joke that never seemed to work. Sometimes you found yourself talking about something that you hadn’t actually thought about in a while and you found this helpful for self reflection on your experience.

Another satisfying aspect of the panel experience was just being around other gay people. You feel that gay people are your people and experienced an overwhelming sense of happiness just being around them. This was a new feeling for you since for a long time you didn’t want to accept being gay or accept all the negative, stereotypical attributes associated with being gay that didn’t seem to fit for you as a person, e.g., promiscuity. Participating on panels helped you understand that maybe you don’t need labels anymore and certainly not the boxes that labels put people in. You identify as queer as a way of recognizing the fluid and complex nature of identity. You see yourself as unique, being an individual of mixed race who has been mistaken for being Latin and Asian. You sometimes feel like you are every man because you fit into so many different groups. You identify as biracial, Black and White, a minority within a minority and sometimes experience confusion and frustration being a member of multiple communities. You are particularly pained by the fact the worst oppression towards your gay identity comes from the Black community, a community that has experienced oppression for centuries. You expected Black audience members to be more prone to challenging you directly and to use the Bible as an excuse for hate, but to your surprise
Individual Depiction: Hiro

you mainly ask questions about your experience rather than doling out judgment.

Although you have also experienced oppression from Whites, you feel more comfortable in front of a White audience than a Black audience and usually scan the audience to see if there are Black folks present. Often you experienced pressure to provide the “Black perspective” on the panels, which was strange since you don’t identify with society’s idea of the black experience, e.g., growing up “in a ‘hood”.

Generally, your experience with audiences has been positive. You feel that they are attentive and caring. It is gratifying when an audience member asks a question that demonstrates they are actually listening to your story. On occasion you have experienced disappointment that folks don’t ask more difficult questions, especially when you have an audience of graduate students or faculty members are present. You believe that sometimes people don’t ask questions because they don’t want to appear ignorant in front of their peers or advisors. Although you are sharing your feelings about your coming out experience with the audience, you refrain from showing your emotions on the panel. One time you spoke on a panel following a particularly emotional therapy session and found your emotional barriers slipping. You found yourself speaking from a place where your story was more connected to your raw feelings and began to understand how emotional the panel experience can be if you allow yourself to be vulnerable. For the first time you had a sense of sharing something very private in a public manner and experienced some discomfort dredging up the past, however as time went on you found that telling your story and sharing your feelings was a healing experience.
Individual Depiction: Hiro

Essentially, the panel experience was very positive. It gave you a sense that you were doing something positive for yourself, for the gay community, and for others who might experience a personal change from hearing your story. You enjoyed interacting with the audience and receiving feedback in the form of evaluations, which were like a reward. You always felt safe doing a panel and felt your campus was a mostly accepting place for LGB folks. It took a lot of personal strength to put your story and your self out there on a panel, but you felt strengthened by the act as well. You have no regrets about the experience and believe that it helped you to who you are today.
Appendix H.ix

Ismail
Individual Depiction: Ismail

You have been participating on panels for over a year now. You became interested in taking part while working in the LGBT office on campus. Some of your duties related to the panel program and you thought it would be interesting to participate. You attended a training program that consisted of 20 hours spread over three days. The training focused primarily on developing a story to be told on the panel; learning a specific method for responding to audience questions; and taking part in a practice panel. You enjoyed the training and feel that it would be beneficial for anyone to go through it, even if they don’t plan to be on a panel.

You described developing your story for the panel as a refining process that helped you to craft an effective yet comprehensive story that could be told in the five minutes allotted to speakers on the panel. Trainers helped you to understand that every story is different and that stories will continue to evolve and change as you gain new insights and have new experiences, which you have since found to be true. You feel that the trainers merely guided the development of your story and that the only true constraint in the process was keeping the story to five minutes. You felt free to tell your own story in your own way. The trainers talked about the emotional nature of panel work and helped you discover and understand what types of stories or questions might trigger an emotional response from you. You were told that the panels were not a place to work out personal concerns or issues. After taking part in a few panels, you understand how it could be a therapeutic experience, but that is not something you have experienced.

As a final step before participating on panels you were required to observe an actual panel. Through observation you learned that the experience wasn’t going to be as
Ismail

scary as you feared and that you didn’t have to worry about following everything they taught you in training. You observed panelists using techniques taught in training, but adapting them to the panel situation and incorporating their personal style. You believe it is important to find your own voice and not just do what you are told.

You recall having a positive experience doing your first panel. Your favorite part of the panels is the question-and-answer session, but you don’t think either the story telling or the question and answers is more important than the other. Although you hear many of the same questions at each panel there is an element of the unknown allowing the audience to ask any question that you find exciting. Panel guidelines allow members to refuse answering a question if it makes them uncomfortable, but you have never been on a panel where that has happened. Audience questions have given you a better understanding of the kinds of topics a general university-aged population is interested in.

Sometimes you find yourself working out your own opinions on matters as you answer a question. You believe it takes a certain type of personality and a willingness to be open in order to be a panel participant. This experience has taught you that you like public speaking more than you ever thought you would.

You believe that the major purpose of the panel is to put a face to on the concept of what it is to be an LGBT person. Panelists tell coming out stories in order for others to understand that they are real people living a real life facing real issues and concerns. You are working to impart knowledge and experience in some way that will make a difference for the audience members and the people in their lives. Some groups seem to get more from the coming out stories, while others seem to get more from the question and answer
individual Depiction: Ismail

Session. This may have to do with group size or constituents. You find that larger groups tend to ask more questions than smaller groups. You feel that people in small groups are less willing to take a risk or expose themselves in front of peers than folks in large groups. You have done panels for groups ranging from 10 to 400 and typically you know who your audience will be. Audience members sometimes affect the focus of your story. For instance, you once did a panel for 7th and 8th graders, so you opted to focus more on your middle and high school experiences to make your story more relatable.

For you, the purpose of telling coming out stories is to illustrate for others what it is like being LGBT in a heteronormative world. Coming out stories are emblematic of the queer experience and particular to the queer community. Sharing stories helps create common ground between the participants and with the audience. You share both events and feelings in your story. The experience of telling your story has never been particularly emotional for you. You enjoy telling your story and have a script that you stick to, but you have noticed that others will change their stories depending on what aspect of the experience they wish to emphasize or what may be occurring in their life at the moment. Although your story hasn’t changed – your past is your past after all – your perspective on your story has. The experience of telling your story over and over again has given you an opportunity to examine events through the lens of learning and life experience, which has given you new insight and understanding into your coming out process.

Although you indicated no sense of distance or dissonance with your story, in some ways it has crystallized in your mind as ‘MY STORY’, as an object that you can
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pull out and share and then put away when you are done. The experience of sharing your story now makes it part of the lived experience of others and your story has reified into something that is still part of you but in some ways separate. Although your thoughts and ideas about sexual orientation and identity have changed since formulating your story, as it becomes more crystallized it seems difficult to incorporate additional aspects of your identity or new learning into the story. You feel it may be time to “overhaul” your story to include these elements, thereby “retooling” your story for use on the panel.

Participating on panels is a way for you find community on campus. As a member of an oppressed group, you feel it is necessary to be active creating awareness and change. One of the reasons you decided to attend your current institution was to find an active queer community. Although you find the campus and community LGBT positive, you have experienced frustration and disappointment with the student groups on campus that are personality driven and homogeneous. You feel that the queer community is mired in an “identitarian” model of activism that focuses only on gay identity. Your identity politics have changed since coming to college and you aren’t comfortable the class politics and race policies at your school.

Being a panelist is now part of your identity. It is a rewarding experience that has provided you insight into yourself, your experiences, and your community. It makes you feel connected with others through the common experience of sharing stories and debriefing the experience afterwards.
Appendix H.x

Jude
Individual Depiction: Jude

Participating on LGB speakers’ panels has been an affirming experience that provides you both a sense of place in the gay community and the satisfaction of knowing you may be making a difference in someone’s life. Over the past three years you have enjoyed taking part on panels and have never felt any regret about sharing your story or your views on the panel. Talking about aspects of your coming out experience and telling your story repeatedly has helped you to “own” your experience and to understand how fortunate you have been in comparison to others who come out and suffered the lose of family and friends from their lives.

You have participated on panels as both an undergraduate and a graduate student. You learned about the panel program during your junior years from your boyfriend who read about them on a listserv for the campus LGBT office. At first you both participated, but as his interest waned you found that you really enjoyed the attention from the audience, not from being in the spotlight, but rather from a sense of being able to make a difference for people. Many of the panels you take part in are “Guess the Straight Person” panels where the audience asks panel members questions aimed at singling out the straight person on the panel. Typically you get a lot of votes for being straight, which gives you mixed feelings. On the one hand, you like the idea of shocking the audience when you identify yourself as gay. On the other hand, you aren’t proud of the fact that you fool people into thinking you are straight because you are proud of being gay. While you experience a lot of disbelief from folks in your life when presented the truth about your sexual orientation, that fact that people don’t perceive you as gay and you can so easily fool them on panels result in feelings of confusion and frustration that you aren’t
Individual Depiction: Jude

“gay enough”. Lately you have noticed that you receive fewer votes for being the straight person on the panel. You believe this is a result of either being more comfortable now so you’re less reserved and less worried about getting votes as you are presenting a more authentic self. These types of panels have helped you to realize that you have internalized a lot of the stereotypes for what it means to be gay and that you have some work to do on your thinking about what it is to be gay. Being a panelist means you need to be committed to your gay identity and learning new things about yourself and other members of the gay community.

Thinking back on your first panel experience you recall feeling nervous, mainly because you were afraid you would say something or act in a way that would reveal you were gay. The more panels you did, the more comfortable you became. Now you find that you actually enjoy the experience of speaking in front of other people. Generally you believe the audience is open-minded and you believe telling your story can make a difference both for gay audience members who might identify with you and others who might become allies or at the very least have some new awareness about LGB folks. You have never had a negative experience with an audience, but you recall at first feeling more comfortable with a predominantly female audience. At your institution, the campus climate on LGB concerns is good and there is a strong and positive LGB community.

You never went through a formal panel training process. You just attended a sign up meeting and then attended your first panel. The panel program is becoming more formalized on your campus and the LGBT office is now providing training. You described an ideal training program as having a discussion session about what to do and
Individual Depiction: Jude

what not to do on a panel; reviewing the possible questions that might be asked as well as how to answer them; and engaging in a mock panel experience.

Only a few of the panels you have participated on followed the traditional format of telling a coming out story and then answering questions. Generally you tell your coming out story in pieces as responses to questions from the audience. Sometimes you have the opportunity to tell your coming out story in its entirety. The coming out story you tell has remained basically the same although sometimes different aspects of your experience are emphasized based on the questions the audience asks. The only major change is that since beginning the panel work you came out to your father. Your fear and anxiety about coming out to your father was a part of your original story that has been modified since coming out to him. You describe your coming out story as positive and uneventful since you had a “pretty easy” coming out experience. Listening to others who tell more dramatic stories of hardship and loss makes you feel grateful for the support and acceptance you experienced while coming out. This experience also reminds you that there is still a lot of ill will towards gay people out there and provides you with a resolve to continue making a difference by doing panels.

Telling your story repeatedly on panels helps you stay connected with your past and the journey to who you are today. It also reflects a realization you gained from the panel experience, which is that you come out over and over again. Each time you take part in a panel you are coming out to people, just as you come out to each new person you meet in life. It is a continual process. While you have a sense that it is rather strange to be sharing the personal details of your life with strangers, you are comfortable with
Individual Depiction: Jude

and proud of who you are, so you can be public with your life to the degree of being on a panel, but you don’t see yourself out on the frontlines marching or campaigning for gay rights.

Two essential aspects of your panel experience are the ability to educate the satisfaction of helping others. However it seems that the most important aspect for you is the sense of connection you now feel with the gay community. One piece of this connection comes from simply taking part in an activity with other gay folks. You don’t go to clubs or bars or really participate in other activities in the gay community. Having the chance to meet other gay people and work with them on the panel makes you feel like you are part of the larger gay community. The experience has also helped you to see that the community is more than just clubbing and you are beginning to see other ways to connect with gay people. On a more intellectual and historical level, you have a sense that you are continuing important work started by gay activists on college campuses decades ago. You wrote an undergraduate thesis about gay life on college campuses and discovered that panels like the ones you do have been happening on college campuses since the 1970’s. Even though you realize the work was more controversial and difficult back then, you take pride in the fact that you are doing your part to continue an important educational and community tradition.

Taking part in panels has become an important part of your identity as a gay man. The experience keeps you connected with your personal history as well as the past of the gay community. Being on panels provides a connection with the gay community that you
Individual Depiction: Jude

don’t generally experience. It is an affirming experience that gives you new insight into yourself and satisfies your sense of responsibility to help others.