Bullying Experiences and Resilience in LGBTQ Youth

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BULLYING EXPERIENCES AND RESILIENCE IN LGBTQ YOUTH

by

Melinda McCormick

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Sociology Western Michigan University December 2016

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Many young LGBTQ people are experiencing bullying which can lead to increased risk of suicide, drug abuse, and depression, as well as an increased risk of out-of-home placements in either foster care or homeless shelters. As a result of this, LGBTQ young adults are often framed as being at risk. Although this has been helpful in the past in order to raise awareness of the challenges experienced by LGBTQ young people, there is also evidence that they show resilience in response to those challenges. In order to advance the social work value of being strengths-based, this research looked for examples of resilience in the lives of these young people. Research was undertaken to determine what types of bullying these young people have experienced, how the bullying impacted them, and how they were able to cope with the bullying they experienced.

LGBTQ young adults aged 18-29 were recruited through LGBTQ service agencies, LGBTQ publication advertising and through social media in southern Michigan for individual interviews regarding their experiences of bullying. Additional participants were found through snowball sampling. Twenty-four young adults of multiple gender and sexual identities participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews that were audio-recorded. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes.
Much of the bullying described by participants is consistent with the school climate data collected by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, or GLSEN. In addition, several participants reported physical assaults, as well as sexual assaults on or near school property. One unanticipated finding was that several of the respondents (9/24, or 37.5%) identified that their worst bullying had come from their parents, who objected to their children’s identities based upon their religious beliefs. Although research exists which addresses family acceptance or rejection, it is not normally found in bullying literature. Surprisingly, the participants in this research identified that they continue to be bullied beyond their school years, as young adults, suggesting that conceptions of bullying may need to be adjusted to include years beyond school. The second major finding was that many of the participants identified that they had grown from having been bullied, and they showed signs of having experienced post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is a psychological concept that has not been studied much in social work to date. PTG explains the resilience shown by the LGBTQ young adults in this study.

From this work, four major themes have been revealed. The first is that resilience is an important component to the success of these participants. Second, the importance of supportive relationships emerges from the narratives of these young adults, in terms of helping them survive and thrive. The third theme is the precarity of safety in the lives of these participants. The world in which they live is frequently unsafe for them because of the limited public understanding of sexual and gender minorities. They are at risk not because of who they are, but because of cultural messages about what their identities mean in society. Finally, in spite of the hostile climate in which they live, these participants have shown posttraumatic growth.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the members of her committee for their commitment to improving her work. Most importantly, however, the author wishes to thank the participants in this research for their honesty and courage, and for their willingness to share their own stories in hopes of improving the lives of other queer youth.

Melinda McCormick
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CHAPTER 1
THE PROBLEM

In the United States today, LGBT youth do not feel safe in school (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2012). These young people struggle with being verbally harassed and physically assaulted on a regular basis, to the extent that they sometimes stop coming to school because they do not feel safe. Alarmingly, most of these young people do not report the harassment, in large part because they do not feel as though the adults in the school setting will be supportive of them. To be sure, the most recent National School Climate Survey from the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that only 27% of adolescents who reported harassment to school authorities received any response from staff (GLSEN, 2013, p. 2).

GLSEN has been researching school climate and the safety of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth since 1999. The organization conducts nationwide surveys of young people to assess the quality of their school experiences, in particular how safe LGBT youth feel in school, and how they are impacted by different types of harassment or bullying. Describing the experiences of LGBT youth in Michigan schools, in particular, GLSEN (2013) notes that 95% felt deliberately excluded or “left out” by peers; 88% had mean rumors or lies told about them; 65% experienced electronic harassment or “cyberbullying”; 55% were sexually harassed; and 51% had property (e.g., car, clothing, or books) deliberately damaged and/or stolen. (p. 1)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also refer to the experiences of LGBT students, noting that negative attitudes toward LGBT people can put them at increased risk for experiences with violence including “behaviors such as bullying, teasing, harassment, physical assault, and suicide-related behaviors” (CDC, 2011, para 2). In their most recent
research, conducted from April to August of 2011, GLSEN (2012) polled 8,584 students between the ages of 13 and 20 from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, representing 3,224 school districts, and found that for the first time there had been a slight decrease in the amount of harassment experienced by LGBT youth. They also noted, however, that young people in the South and the Midwest report more harassment than those in the North and the West, and that young people in rural areas suffer more harassment than those in more suburban and urban areas.

As such, states like Michigan are considered an area of continuing risk for LGBT youth in schools. As shown in the GLSEN School Climate in Michigan State Snapshot, “Many LGBT students in Michigan did not have access to important school resources, such as having a curriculum that is inclusive of LGBT people, history, or events, and were not protected by comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment school policies” (GLSEN, 2013, p. 1). Further, in Michigan schools, 82% of LGBT youth reported being verbally harassed about their sexual orientation and 68% reported being verbally harassed for their gender expression. Physical harassment, such as pushing or shoving, was experienced by 39% of youth based on their sexual orientation and 28% based on their gender expression. A full 21% of LGBT youth reported physical assaults based on their sexual orientation, and 15% reported physical assault based on their gender expression (GLSEN, 2013). Clearly school in Michigan is an unsafe place for youth identifying as LGBT, or for youth who express their gender in ways that are perceived as being outside of the norm.

One particularly troubling effect of this type of bullying and harassment of young people involves self-harm and suicide. In Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2013, one of the locations in which data for this dissertation were collected, 13-year-old Isabella Bruinekool, a middle school honor roll student, committed suicide because she was being bullied. Her mother reported that Bella
was struggling with her sexuality and her weight. She went to the media after her daughter’s suicide to raise awareness of the issue, and she focused upon the damaging consequences of the judgment her daughter experienced from her peers. As she stated, “It wasn't bullying, it was a stronger thing they were doing. . . . They never backed down. You have to back down” (“Mother Hopes,” 2013). This mother’s comments refer to the persistence of bullying in the lives of young people who are surrounded by their personal technology and social media. The ubiquitous nature of these forms of social media makes bullying and other forms of harassment hard for young people to avoid today.

Isabella’s case was not an isolated one. On the national level around the same time period, a number of suicides by young people were reported by U.S. media as part of what was believed to be a sudden uptick in teenage suicide incidents. In September of 2010 alone, five young men, Asher Brown, Tyler Clementi, Raymond Chase, Seth Walsh, and Billy Lucas, ended their lives. Each death was linked (or believed to be linked) “to personal and societal refusal to accept that they were gay.” In the vast majority of cases, the youth who committed suicide either identified as LGBT or were perceived to be LGBT by their peers (“End Suicides,” 2010).

In a society like ours, which values individuality and personal freedoms, there is something very wrong about young people taking their lives because of bullying due to their actual or perceived sexuality. At the same time, however, many LGBT youth do not choose to take their lives. Instead, they become functional adults in society, despite the predominantly critical messages of their environments regarding sexuality. What do these young people do differently? How do they frame their experiences with bullying in such a way that they are able to move forward in life? This dissertation reports on the findings of face-to-face semi-structured
interviews with 24 young LGBTQ\(^1\) adults in Michigan. The objective was to gain an understanding of what their experiences of bullying means to them in their lives.

**Research Questions**

In approaching the subject of bullying and LGBTQ youth, I addressed several overarching research questions. These questions emerge from existing research on bullying.

1. What was the nature of bullying experienced by LGBTQ youth?
2. How does bullying impact these LGBTQ youth?
3. How do LGBTQ youth deal with bullying?

**Background**

Being bullied by peers has been identified as a significant factor in the deleterious well-being of young LGBTQ. The first step in understanding what is going on is to define what constitutes bullying. A pioneer in the field of bullying, Olweus (1993, quoted in Olweus & Limber, 2010), provides the following definition: “A student is being bullied or victimized when

\[^1\] In the LGBTQ community, the Q is very important. The Q stands for either “queer” or “questioning.” Queer in this context is usually a political statement of sorts, coming out of queer theory, which aims to muddy the waters of predominant gender binaries. Queer can mean many things. Stryker (2008) notes that it is a way of showing “opposition to heterosexual social norms” that do not necessarily mean one is gay (p. 20). As such, queer can be considered an umbrella term, a catch all for those who do not conform to sexuality and gender norms in society, as well as those who have political reasons for doing so. The other q-word, questioning, is also important. There are many youth who do not identify in terms of their gender or sexuality, but who rather struggle with their sexual and gender identities. Some research shows these youth to be particularly vulnerable to harassment and bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). In order for my research to be properly placed within the context of the LGBTQ community, therefore, I will be using LGBTQ throughout this dissertation. Instances of other descriptors refer to the works being cited.
he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 9).

This is a fairly straightforward definition, and others have built upon this over time to include more aspects of bullying which deserve consideration. For example, Nansel and colleagues (2001) at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development define bullying as a specific type of aggression in which (1) the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, (2) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and (3) there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one. This asymmetry of power may be physical or psychological, and the aggressive behavior may be verbal (e.g., name-calling, threats), physical (e.g., hitting), or psychological (e.g., rumors, shunning/exclusion). (p. 2)

This definition expands upon Olweus’ original definition by including aggression, the intentions of those who are committing the acts, and acknowledging the importance of power differentials between perpetrators and victims.

To take this further, Rivers (2011) identified common factors within bullying contexts, based on research on homophobic bullying. These include: (1) a consistent pattern of victimization; (2) an intention by the perpetrator to inflict injury or discomfort; and (3) an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. He further describes bullying as including teasing, name-calling, group exclusion, hitting, kicking, and punching. Moreover, Rivers posits that homophobic bullying involves activities targeted at actual or perceived sexual orientation, which commonly includes being called names, teased, and hit or kicked.

Another renowned expert, Messerschmidt (2011), defines a bully as “one who unilaterally engages in harmful, offensive, and/or intimidating conduct against another who is physically, mentally, and/or socially weaker than she or he” (p. 204). He categorizes bullying into three types: verbal, which includes name calling, humiliation, mocking, and being insulted;
physical, which he defines as hitting, shoving, kicking, or otherwise being beating up; and social, which involves practicing exclusion, gossiping, or spreading rumors about someone.

These different definitions of bullying show some overlap, but also allude to the complexity of the concept. Who decides if a pattern of victimization is present, and what does that look like? How does one determine the intentions of a person if they are not obvious or forthcoming about them? And, how does one determine if power imbalances exist, especially if one has not developed a consciousness of power relations between people? In this dissertation, I drew from all of these definitions of bullying, and also asked my participants to share their own definitions of bullying, to determine if anything else relevant emerged from their experiences.

One thing to note about the descriptions above is that some of them focus more on the use of the term “bullying” than others. In the case of the research from GLSEN, for example, the term bullying is less used, and more focus is placed upon the types of behaviors experienced by LGBTQ youth. This deserves some consideration. Given the importance of framing in discussions, I wonder if readers respond differently to the word “bullying” than they do to words like “harassment” and “assault.” Logically, it would seem so, given that bullying is something we associate with childhood and youth, but harassment and assault are more frequently applied to relations between adults, and these terms also allude to more serious legal consequences to behavior.

**Theoretical Framework**

I approached this study through feminist standpoint theory, which holds that individuals are the most informed knowers about their own positions in life (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1998; Smith, 1987). Therefore, to learn about individual experience, one must ask the individuals themselves. Additionally, in order to be aware of the full extent of their life experiences, one
must utilize an approach that values the intersectionality of their experiences (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). As such, this work approaches individual narratives as stories that are particular to their places in time and space, as well as their multiple identities under the social categories of race, gender, gender expression, and sexuality.

There are other theoretical approaches which informed my work, such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which acknowledges that people make meaning of their experiences and then respond to those meanings in social interactions. Additionally, queer theory (Jagose, 1996) impacted my work, in that some of the participants created narratives that question and complicate the categories in which they have been placed by society. All of these will be more deeply explored in the methodology chapter of this dissertation. To some extent, my exploration of this substantive matter is done to highlight the voices of LGBTQ youth. This is not to suggest that LGBTQ youth are agentless, but that much remains to be understood within current literature regarding their particular experiences with adolescent bullying. As such, my objective was to acknowledge their particular experiences in life, while considering the ways in which they have made meaning of these experiences and used them to build lives for themselves.

**Significance of the Study**

Research has traditionally focused on LGBTQ young people as an at-risk population for many years (Centers for Disease Control, 2011; Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal, 2006; Gibson, 1989; GLSEN, 2012; Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Perry, 2009; Ploderl & Fartacek, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Certainly such a focus has been important since LGBTQ youth have largely been neglected in the literature, commonly being lumped into the larger category of adolescents without acknowledging their differences in life experiences due to their alternative sexualities or gender identities. Recognition of the particular risk factors in
LGBTQ youth face is critically important in the process of acknowledging their existence and addressing the social inequities they experience. However, it is also important to move beyond this approach, which has the potential of limiting the range of discourse. Savin-Williams (2006), in particular, has called for scholars to move past the focus on risk and begin viewing LGBTQ youth as capable of healthy life outcomes.

In the field of social work, practitioners are encouraged to use a “strengths perspective” when working with clients (Saleebey, 1996). “The strengths perspective demands a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities. All must be seen in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes,” (Saleebey, 1996, p. 297). This dissertation employs such a perspective in addressing LGBTQ youth, as there is more to these young people than the risks they face in being themselves in a frequently unwelcoming and hostile social environment. Following the work of Savin-Williams (2006) and Ryan (2009), I focus on their resilience, adding to an emerging discourse in which LGBTQ youth and young adults are viewed as resourceful individuals who are capable of achieving positive life outcomes.

In the chapters to follow, I will explore the literature on youth and bullying, as well as literature particular to LGBTQ youth and bullying. After that, I will address my methods and reasoning behind my research choices, and I will explore the particulars of my sample. Chapter 4-6 will be devoted to answering my research questions, and I will conclude with an exploration of the findings of my work.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of Bullying

For scholars who study bullying, there are many ways to approach the topic. Some of these approaches are based in psychological theories of development, that focus on the life-cycle stages of youth involved in bullying and on adolescence itself as a factor contributing to bullying (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Mata, Ghavami, & Witting, 2010). There are others who look at the context of middle school and try to determine why bullying is so prevalent at this particular point in young people’s lives (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Poteat, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). These studies often focus on psychological development theories and identity development of young people at this age.

Some approaches to bullying in the literature consider the salience of the roles of bully and victim, with researchers attempting to determine what types of characteristics would place someone in either category (Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007). Interestingly, there are scholars who focus on programs that offer skills training to victims to help them avoid further bullying, similar to rape protection approaches that place responsibility on individuals to protect themselves from victimization. Such approaches have the potential of blaming victims for the harm perpetrated against them by others, locating the problem at an individual level. Such is not the direction of my study.

Some scholars have studied victims of bullying and found that those who are most at risk are what they name “polyvictims,” or those who are multiply victimized (Felix, Furlong, &
Austin, 2009). These students are victimized for reasons of race, gender, sexuality, disability or other markers, and are bullied based upon bias around more than one of these markers at a time. These students show poor outcomes on indicators of well-being. The authors noted that polyvictims who perceive being bullied due to gender expression or perceptions of sexual orientation appear to be at highest risk, which informs the issue of bullying in LGBTQ youth, in particular.

There are also scholars who look at school transitions, as some children face less bullying after they transition to high school from middle school, for example, partly due to changes in relationships (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Others look at the particular characteristics of bullying in rural areas versus urban areas (GLSEN, 2012; Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994). Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994), for example, found that bullying among the students from small Midwestern towns was often viewed as making victims tougher, teaching victims about acceptable group behaviors, or was perceived as something the victims brought on themselves, which brings to mind Hall’s (1902) early research on adolescent development (discussed in detail later within this chapter).

Others look at connections between social dominance theory and bullying (Mata et al., 2010; Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007), noting that bullies seek power and control over others, and to maintain such power arrangements. Interestingly, there is also research which looks at correlations between bullying, homophobic teasing, and sexual violence perpetration (Espelage et al., 2012). Espelage and colleagues (2012) suggest the existence of a pathway beginning in middle school which starts with bullying, then moves to gendered harassment and aggression in the form of homophobic teasing and sexual harassment.
The underlying message or focus of bullying, however, concerns ideas of prejudice or bias of some sort, and involves active “Othering” of peers who are, or are perceived to be, different from the norm. Once people are turned into Others, it is possible to bully them because they are seen as less than human, or objectified. De Beauvoir (1976) introduced the idea of woman as “Other” in *The Second Sex* (p. xxi). Since then, othering has come to describe many different scenarios in which pairs of dualities come to define who is valued and who is devalued, such as in cases of race, gender, and in this research project, sexuality (Collins, 1990). In this case, non-heterosexuals are turned into “Others,” which then positions them as less than heterosexuals and subjects them to what Perry (2009) refers to as “cultural permission to hate” (p. 429).

Allport’s (1954/1979) work on prejudice and Stouffer’s (1992/2009) work on tolerance inform this discussion of othering, since prejudice is behind othering, and tolerance of difference is implicated in societal acceptance. Stouffer defined tolerance through the measurement of people’s willingness to grant others civil rights. Prejudice is a common topic in work on bullying, and it applies to differences in race (Duncan, 1999), class (Duncan, 1999; Klein, 2012), and sexuality (Duncan, 1999; GLSEN, 2012; Klein, 2012; Mata et al., 2010; Messerschmidt, 2000, 2011; Payne, 2010), as well as gendered expression (Duncan, 1999; GLSEN, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2012; Young & Sweeting, 2004). When research on bullying is related specifically to LGBTQ youth, these types of prejudice are often referred to as homophobic (Birkett et al., 2009; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Poteat, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007; Poteat et al., 2007). In the context of this project, homophobic bullying leads to the specific study of bullying of LGBTQ youth.
Bullying of LGBTQ Youth

When scholars approach the study of LGBTQ bullying through a lens of homophobia, they research what effect homophobia has upon LGBTQ youth or young adults and what types of prejudice it may produce (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Espelage et al., 2012; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Kim, 2007; Mata et al., 2010; Poteat, 2007; Poteat, 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Poteat et al., 2007; Rivers, 2011). Some of the effects they find have to do with living in rural areas, being part of a middle school or high school culture, and the ways in which young people express their gender, as discussed previously.

Stress theories. Other scholars focus more upon stress theories and how being LGBTQ in a heteronormative society can cause stress which interferes with well-being (Aneshensel, 1992; Meyer, 2003, 2010; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). More specifically, Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2010) holds that members of minority groups are multiply disadvantaged in society and these disadvantages bring subsequent interpersonal and systemic pressures. Meyer proposed that the unique stress experienced by minorities causes mental health problems and results in individuals in these groups having higher rates of mental disorders. Meyer (2003) has also noted that “minor discrimination events,” which are pervasive and sometimes described as “everyday discrimination” (p. 263, citing Williams, Spencer, & Jackson, 1999), have a different significance over time and that their effects are cumulative. This is similar to Sue’s (Sue et al., 2007, cited in Sue, 2010) concept of micro-aggressions, which he defines as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 5). Micro-aggressions have longer-term impacts on the health and well-being of those who experience
them consistently over time (Sue, 2010), similar to the findings of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003, 2010).

Klonoff and Landrine (1995) have noted that heterosexist events have a greater negative impact than do other life events on psychological and physical health because they are “inherently demeaning, degrading, and highly personal; they are attacks upon and negative responses to something essential about the self that cannot be changed” (p. 442). Due to the deep-seated nature of these attacks and the inability to change one’s self or sexuality in order to meet societal pressures, these types of events have the potential for long-ranging consequences.

Aneshensel (1992) refers to these types of stressors as consequences of social organization. Such consequences result in people being either excluded from full participation in the social system or their participation not having expected returns. Aneshensel noted that “violation of role proscriptions . . . renders social interactions unreliable” (pp. 33-34), and jeopardizes the functioning of the system as well as the need for satisfaction and goal attainment of those involved in the system. Given that LGBTQ youth are perceived as violating role proscriptions due to their sexual minority status, it is easy to see that they may experience these types of social stress in their everyday lives. Further, Robinson and Espelage (2012) hypothesize that “stigmatizing, macro-level messages that youth receive about sexual minorities (e.g., they are unwanted, they are different)” (p. 316) may contribute to the elevated suicide risk of LGBTQ youth.

**Gender theories.** Another relevant area of study concerns the impact of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), or cultural masculinity imperatives, upon the lives of young people. Many scholars have studied the effects of masculinity imperatives (Blazina, Pisecco, Cordova, & Settle, 2007; Duncan, 1999; Klein, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2000,
2011; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Richmond & Levant, 2003; Ringrose & Renold, 2009; Ueno & McWilliams, 2010; Young & Sweeting, 2004). This is most frequently seen in cases where young people are bullied for not meeting gendered expectations of the culture in which they live. In much of the research on victims of bullying, this comes to the forefront. Societal messages about gender performance and expression have an impact upon bullying of LGBTQ youth as well as those who do not identify as such, but who are perceived to be LGBTQ (Klein, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2009; Ueno & McWilliams, 2010), showing that one does not have to be LGBTQ to be harmed by societal messages about gender performance.

**Suicide risk in LGBTQ youth.** A sector of research exists that looks at suicide risk in LGBTQ youth as well (Gibson, 1989; Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006; Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Ploderl & Fartacek, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011, 2012; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Much of this has work focuses on the types of stressors they have to deal with because of their non-normative sexuality. Gibson (1989) describes the problem as stemming from “a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals while failing to recognize that a substantial number of its youth has a gay or lesbian orientation” (p. 3.110). Gibson names many suicide risk factors for LGBTQ youth, such as society’s hostility, poor self-esteem, family problems, religion, school, social isolation, and ineffective professional help. Ryan (2009) focused on family rejection, and found that young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection were more than eight times as likely to report attempting suicide. Other researchers (Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Ploderl & Fartacek (2009) found that a history of some type of victimization for identifying or being perceived as LGBTQ was also an indicator of increased risk of suicide.
Earlier in this project, I referred to GLSEN’s (2012) research on school safety for LGBT youth. Others have also studied school safety, especially in terms of suicidality of LGBTQ adolescents, in part because young people’s social worlds are centered in school contexts (Gibson, 1989; Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Ploderl & Fartacek, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011, 2012). School is frequently where LGBTQ victimization happens (GLSEN, 2012), and a significant proportion of adolescents’ lives are spent in the school setting. Feeling unsafe and unsupported at school can be suicide risk indicators for LGBTQ youth (Liu & Mustanski, 2012).

Although the force of religion in society is recognized within bullying scholarship, it is not always a focal point. Gibson’s (1989) work is one of the few studies to highlight the problematic nature of religious depictions of homosexuality as sinful for young people who may already be struggling with their sexuality, and for families, who turn to the church for advice in proper childrearing practices. The stance of the church can put young people in untenable positions, in which they are forced to choose between being themselves and going along with the beliefs of their faith, leaving them conflicted and uncertain. Not surprisingly, Gibson found that this type of internal conflict can increase suicide risk for LGBTQ young people.

Constructions of Youth and Youth Development

In order to properly explore the topic of bullying and LGBTQ youth, it is necessary to have some understanding of their lives today. There is much literature on the topic that is worth exploration and is related to experiences of bullying for LGBTQ youth. The lives of young people are very complex, and Tilleczek (2011), in her work in youth studies, noted that it is particularly important to understand the contexts and experiences of young people. As such, it is important to review the literature on the construction of youth and youth development.
Literature on adolescence in the United States focuses upon the transitional state from childhood to adulthood as a period of “storm and stress” (Hall, 1902). The behaviors of youth in this phase are described as “tumultuous or risky” (Talburt, 2004, p. 117). This builds upon a long history in America of a psychological focus on young people and what, presumably, is required for them to grow into proper citizens, as illustrated by the work of G. Stanley Hall (Filax, 2006; Romesburg, 2008). Hall (1902), a psychologist in turn of the century America, applied social evolutionary theory to the development of children with a goal of forming them into democratic citizens. He created a popular discourse about youth development and adolescence, framing American thinking about adolescence as a time of vulnerability and opportunities for character development that required proper discipline. In his view this included “three primary controlling and normalizing means: mockery, peer violence, and intergenerational . . . support and scrutiny” (Romesburg, 2008, p. 428). As part of his theory, Hall advocated hostility toward gender transgressions as natural and socially worthwhile pursuits, and he thus framed the act of bullying as a mechanism for creating good citizens. Hall’s thinking has deeply influenced current conceptions of bullying as a normal part of growing up and the idea of adolescence being a dangerous time, in general.

The work of Hall and other psychologists of the time show the linking of proper gender role expectations and behaviors in America, as compliance with gender and sexual normativity became a marker of successful adjustment into adulthood (Romesburg, 2008). This discourse of good citizenship was used to justify the marginalization of those who failed to meet gender and sexual requirements, and successful maturation came to be defined through “increasingly delineated gender roles for adolescent boys and girls as well as parental and expert attentiveness to the danger of youth sexual misdirection” (Romesburg, 2008, p. 430).
This discussion is useful in setting a background for the understanding of youth, gender, and sexual expression in the American context. Hall’s work and influence set the stage for Americans to believe that adolescence is a time of trouble for young people. Further, Hall’s work implies that in order for adolescence to be navigated successfully, and for youth to become good citizens, bullying may be a necessary part of socialization. Current scholars in youth studies, however, think there are other viewpoints that can be considered in developing an understanding of what young people experience.

Tilleczek (2011), a scholar of contemporary youth studies, credits the work of Hall and others with creating a social myth about adolescence. Tilleczek states that adolescence is not necessarily “stormy, stressful, and risky” (p. 22), noting that that risk, in itself, can offer benefits for youth development. She notes that Hall’s work was directly related to norms of the time, which were concerned with conformity, passivity, and anti-intellectuality, and she states that knowledge of cultural contexts are important to youth studies. She calls for conducting a broader analysis of the environments and contexts within which young people live, as well as noting the influence of social institutions in how youth perceive notions of self, gender, and sexual expression within cultural discourse.

One theory used to explore the larger social context in which youths currently live is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, which is a staple of the social work tradition, and which Tilleczek uses as a framework for her approach to youth studies. In Bronfenbrenner’s model, human behavior consists of individuals interacting with their environments, which are modeled as a nested set of concentric circles that lead from the individual, to the family, to the community, and to the larger social context (Van Hook, 2008). Bronfenbrenner referred to these as microsystems, mesosystems, macrosystems, and ecosystems. All choices made by people
have to be understood within the greater contexts in which they live and interact, according to the ecological model.

Tilleczek (2011) describes a modified ecological model that offers a means of studying youth experiences within social contexts. With a focus on youth activities in different settings, such as home and the classroom, as well as interactions with larger social forces such as the impact of social class, poverty, ethnicity, identity, and age. Tilleczek focuses upon the social relationships within the multiple settings in which young people are engaged. In doing so she examines the social contexts in which they are living, with concerted attention toward the factors that influence their thoughts and behaviors. In effect, Tilleczek applies Bronfenbrenner’s original ecological theory to the lives of young people and asks scholars to create a fuller and more complex picture of youth lives. She asserts that this will make for better scholarship and will move beyond the work of Hall in terms of understanding the lives of young people. There is one final way in which Tilleczek moves the work on youth forward, and that concerns the important concepts of risk and resilience.

Risk. Importantly, Tilleczek (2011) makes a distinction between notions of youth themselves being labeled as at risk and the recognition that they find themselves in risky situations. In any experience of risk, she notes, there are ways in which people can make decisions as well, and young people have the ability to act and resist as well as to conform. Tilleczek draws upon the work of Ungar (2008) on risk and resilience to understand young lives. Ungar defines risk factors as “any individual, family, community, institutional or cultural force that threatens a child’s normal development” (p. 2), but he notes the importance of acknowledging that risk is something that may or may not occur. Ungar further notes that risk factors interact with strengths exhibited by children, and he sees risk factors as “one part of an
interactional process in which its meaning and impact is determined in combination with the assets available to a child” (p. 6). In other words, risk does not happen in a vacuum, and young people have assets that they can use when faced with risky situations. This goes against popular discourse on youth in American culture, in which adolescence itself as framed as a time of risk, and studies of LGBTQ young people, in particular, which focus on them as an at-risk population.

**Resilience.** The other side of risk is resilience, which is the emergence or persistence of strengths in young people which allow them to successfully navigate risky experiences (Ungar, 2008). Sometimes resilience is seen as an internal trait of an individual, or something that one needs to develop in order to be successful in life (Cover, 2012). For others, resilience simply refers to the ability of some individuals to have positive outcomes in life despite certain types of experiences that may have predisposed them to poor outcomes (Rutter, 2006).

In his continuing study of the concept, Ungar (2011b) has found that resilience refers to two types of strengths: one which highlights the capacity of individuals to find the resources that sustain their well-being, and the second which highlights their capacity to negotiate for the resources to “be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways” (p. 10). Ungar focuses on the importance of the contexts in which young people live, as contexts determine what resources are available to young people. Sometimes the resources available to young people may not be identified as such by those not living within their environments. Ungar gives an example of a young girl who argues and throws tantrums in class, but reframes her behavior as exhibiting “hidden resilience” because she is using the tools that are available to her to meet her needs. In this way, hidden resilience refers to maladaptive coping behaviors chosen by children with few resources upon which to draw. Such children use what is available to them in a quest to get their needs met, even if it may not meet societally approved ways of behavior.
This description addresses the multi-faceted nature of resilience, in that it is not just about people and who they are, but also about the contexts and the types of resources provided by the environments in which they live and interact. Importantly, resilience describes strengths of those who are exposed to risks. These risks, however, can sometimes be larger societal factors, such as poverty, racism, homophobia, or exposure to violence (Ungar, 2013). Given this background, Tilleczek’s (2011) approach makes sense in terms of studying young people’s lives and how and where resilience may come into play, since she recognizes the complexity of young lives and the many different layers of social experience that may contribute to their abilities to deal with risk. This framework will be helpful in looking at LGBTQ youth and their experiences, since they are often framed as an at-risk group.

To fully understand the experiences of youth, according to the lenses of ecological theory, youth studies, and studies of resilience, then, awareness of the contexts in which young people live and interact are important. Additionally, the larger social contexts that influence young people’s thoughts about their sense of self, gender, sexual expression, and religion, need to be considered.

**Contexts, or the Worlds of Young People**

Young people today are growing up a world in which they are inundated by messages and imagery of all kinds through the various sources of media regularly available to them. Media offer textual and visual messages about life and values that may not be fully appreciated by young people. However media studies show (Bordo, 1993; Schiller, 1989) that these messages are having an impact upon their development, particularly regarding what is of value, who is of value, what it means to be gendered in our society, and what it means to be a sexual being. As children enter adolescence, they typically being trying to figure out for themselves who they are,
who they want to be, and how they want to present themselves to their peers in order to form relationships and gain social status.

One great difference between the lives of young people today and that of previous generations has to do with access to different forms of technology. The majority of young people today grow up in homes with cable or satellite television which offers hundreds of channels of programming 24 hours per day, as well as public spaces which offer access to programming in the form of advertising, sportscasts, and other types of media. Additionally, many homes offer internet access through personal technological devices, such as tablets, laptop computers, and smartphones.

For a lot of young people today, these pieces of technology, especially smartphones, begin to feel as if they are a part of them (Carter, Thatcher, Applefield & Mcalpine, 2011; McMillan & Morrison, 2006). Whereas those of us from different generations are more accustomed to having some distance from our technology, today’s youth are becoming attached to their smartphones in such a way that they often become anxious when they are without them (Cheever, Rosen, Carrier, & Chavez, 2014). They have had this type of technology readily available and on hand for a significant amount of their lives. Many parents give their adolescent children smartphones in middle school or high school, and this opens up their social worlds and changes their social networking practices. According to the Pew Research Center (2006), at the time of their latest survey, 74% of Americans owned cell phones, and 49% of them said it was a “necessity” (Pew Research Center, 2006, Table 3). Among those aged 18-29, 57% said cell phones were necessities (Pew Research Center, 2006, Table 5).

To this point, young people often sleep with their phones and text their friends constantly throughout the day. Many also socialize through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, among
others. These can be great social tools, as they allow young people to feel connected to their friends and have experiences of virtual community, since they may not always be together. On the other hand, the ubiquity of these forms of social media can be used in very negative ways for cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying, or “electronic aggression” (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2009), is noteworthy in the context of this work. Bullies often use online tactics to torment their victims in ways unfamiliar to those of us from different generations. Whereas many people of previous generations could go home after school and find some respite from bullying, young people today can be hounded by them throughout the day regardless of where they are through an infiltration of social networks. A common element of cyberbullying involves spreading malicious gossip or demonizing their targets through incriminating photos or videos posted to public sites like YouTube. Indeed, some of the cases of youth suicide mentioned earlier were clearly influenced by cyberbullying behaviors (Tyler Clementi.org, n.d.). So while technology is an important tool for young people’s socializing, it can also be used against them. Attention to such increases in the reliance on and influence of media, as well as social networking, have indeed become important aspects of scholarship on youth cultures (Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995; Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002).

Gender

Some of the cultural messages, via social network, the media, and other outlets, sent to young people concern gender expectations. Gender is defined most commonly as the “cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological division between male and female” according to Connell (2009, p. 9). Lorber (2007) describes gender as the differences between women and men which “are produced through social practices that encourage boys and girls to
use their bodies and minds differently and with different relative social values” (p. 2). Both Lorber and Connell state that gender serves to structure our relationships in society. However, Connell also points out that gender is multi-dimensional, in that it is about identity work, power, and sexuality simultaneously. To talk about gender means to also talk about “relationships, boundaries, practices, identities and images that are actively created in social processes” (p. 30), and these change over time. Likewise, Lorber adds that it serves to “construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group” (p. 62).

The subordinate position of women in relationship to men in society has been described as “hegemonic masculinity” by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), which represents “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue” (p. 832). Within this model, masculinities are recognized as being hierarchical in nature, wherein some forms of masculinity are accorded more power than others, with non-dominant masculinities holding less power and femininities holding the least power. Although these models have long served as a basis for research on gender, understandings of gender and sexuality are evolving. West and Zimmerman (1987) have discussed gender as “a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (p. 125). They believe that gender is something that we do—a behavioral display to show how we identify. “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category” (p. 146). On the other hand, if we do not do gender appropriately, “we as individuals . . . may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)” (p. 146).

Butler (1988, 1990/1997) has argued that gender is not a static condition of one’s body or identity, but is a choice one makes on a daily basis in terms of how to present oneself. Butler
refers to her concept of gender as “performativity.” Gender, in Butler’s view, is not a given, but is rather an everyday performance which serves to uphold societal ideals of gender. More recent discussions of gender have moved toward a model of gender difference across a spectrum, and most recently, gender has been conceived of as fluid. For example, Fusion, “the media brand for a young, diverse and inclusive world,” (What is Fusion? n.d., para. 1) recently conducted a “Massive Millennial Poll,” of 1000 respondents aged 18-34 and determined that “half of all Millennials believe that gender exists on a spectrum, and shouldn’t be limited to the categories of male and female” (Rivas, 2015, para.1). In partial response to such research and in accord to user requests, Facebook recently changed its gender options, adding a “custom” option in 2015 that provides 58 gender choices, as well as a “fill-in-the-blank” option, for those who use non-binary gender identifiers (Giang, 2015, para. 4).

The recognition of these changers to how we conceive of gender has progressed to the point that it is being recognized in the field of medicine. To this point, Mayer et al. (2008) discussed the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity, stating that sexual and gender identity are characterized by fluidity and change, as many individuals who report same-sex behavior identify as heterosexual and others consider themselves to be alternately heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual (or some other variation in pattern), and as self-perception changes over time. (p. 990)

Mayer and colleagues further noted that awareness of same-sex attraction is happening earlier in life than ever before. Such findings obviously stand in direct opposition to the prevailing understanding of gender as a binary, and it is noteworthy that it is now being discussed by physicians. More importantly, however, young people’s understandings of gender and identity reflect this fluidity.

Although ideas of gender are shifting, models of femininity and masculinity impact young people in terms of their development through adolescence. Gender messages begin at
birth, if not before, and influence most interactions of children up through their emerging adulthood (Messerschmidt, 2012). These messages have particular impact upon young people when their peers and those in their social worlds start to police their gendered behavior, letting them know they are not meeting acceptable social standards of gender comportment (Duncan, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2012; Risman & Seale, 2010). Gender comportment refers to the ways in which people live their gender, through their style of dress, their manner of speaking, and the ways they carry themselves (Stryker, 2008). Sometimes this is also referred to as gender expression, which studies have shown has an impact upon young people in terms of being bullied.

**Gender expression.** Gender expression, for many young people, is part of identity development. For example, referring to a study of young boys in London, Connell (2009) notes that

> diversity in the boys’ lives exists in tension with ‘canonical narratives’ of masculinity, i.e. a hegemonic pattern (an admired physical toughness, sports skills, heterosexuality), which all boys acknowledge but most do not fully inhabit. Rather, their adolescence is marked by a complex negotiation with the hegemonic definition of gender, in which they may criticize some versions of masculinity as *too* tough, while rejecting others as effeminate. (p. 100, italics in original)

Connell also discusses how young people learn “gender competence,” or how to negotiate, adopt a gender identity, and “produce gender performance” (p. 100). Young people learn how to distance themselves from a given gender identity, as they fail to match gender ideals of beauty, skill, and achievement. For example, Richardson’s (2010) work discussed the importance of “dis-identification,” or ways that young men construct methods to affirm their masculinity and distance themselves from femininity (p. 740). Therefore, although there are multiple explorations of the meaning of gender, young people end up negotiating their own gender decisions. They do this based in part upon the images and messages about gender they
receive from the greater society as well as upon the feedback from their peers, as seen in the research of Risman and Seale (2010).

As children move through levels of schooling, the salience of gender becomes more important in the formation of relationships, which is especially evident in middle school when puberty begins (Duncan, 1999). Risman and Seale’s (2010) research on middle school students focused on how they experience gender. They found that for girls, gender expectations are much less rigid than they used to be, seeing some evidence of earlier work by Carol Gilligan (1993), Mary Pipher (2005), and others around fostering girls’ success. Surprisingly, Risman and Seale found that although girls are much freer in their gendered choices, those who are “too girly” have come under critique. The girls with whom they spoke did not want to be perceived as too girly, as that was a cause for ridicule from their peers. In terms of being able to compete with boys scholastically and in other arenas, however, girls seem to have internalized the message that they can succeed.

Risman and Seale (2010) also found, however, that boys are dealing with much stricter gender role expectations. Boys are being policed for their gendered behaviors on a daily basis, and the threat of feminization or being “gay” holds much power in their lives. It appears that as girls’ worlds have opened up, boys’ worlds may be shrinking. Some of this shrinking is seen in the “fag” discourse present in many school settings (Pascoe, 2005, 2012), through which young men police one another’s masculinity. In Pascoe’s work, this was evident in the use of the term “fag.” Young men used this term on a regular basis to let their peers know their gender performances were not manly enough. Young students are not always able to make distinctions between gender expression and sexuality, and Risman and Seale note that this confusion “feeds into the fear boys have about crossing gender boundaries” (p. 354), and leads boys to equate
gender nonconformity with being gay. Risman and Seale found that “branding nonconformists as gay in this middle school context constitutes a primary form of regulation as well as harassment,” as being called gay is the worst insult and “the most effective way to shame another student” (p. 356). At this point in youth development, some conflation of sexuality and gender expression becomes evident.

Indeed, Duncan (1999) performed extensive research within schools in the United Kingdom and found that gender was almost always involved in student conflicts at school, “even in interactions that bore no overt reason for the deployment of sexualized verbal abuse, language was funneled through that discourse” (p. 6). This led him to further study what he called “abusive gendered power relationships among peers: a cluster of behaviors, attitudes and material practices” that he referred to as “sexual bullying” (p. 6). He noted that incidents between boys and girls frequently devolved into language that referred to sexuality as a way of protesting young women’s choices to ignore the needs of the boys, and sometimes as a way of protesting rejection from the girls. Boys were policed in terms of either being “gay” which meant they practiced forms of subordinate masculinity, or “pervy” which meant that they showed sexual interest in males. Girls could be teased just for being girls, but Duncan noted that the teasing girls experienced increased if they showed characteristics of non-dominant ethnicity, an important aspect of intersectionality which I address below.

Girls are also targeted for bullying because of their developing bodies. This manifests either in being made fun of visible bodily changes or through attacks on concealed areas of the body (e.g., naming them smelly, misshapen, or otherwise abnormal). Such tactics point to the importance of bodily forms in the negotiation of gender. According to Duncan (1999), this type of bullying adds “emotional cost to those whose bodies do not adapt” (p. 49). Girls move through
school in a climate involving “casual use of sexualized swear-words to attack perfectly ordinary and uninvolved girls” (p. 51). Duncan also noted that this behavior is so extensive that it becomes routine; all students were subjected to a pervasive discourse of normality within the school, and almost all important social interactions between students contained elements of sexualized gender conflict. He found that social ranking in the school was based upon “how well one achieved culturally constructed ideals of gender type, and where one’s position was located in the hierarchical structure” (p. 105).

Through this discussion, it becomes clear that the bodies of young people are policed on a daily basis by their peers as a way of enforcing gender conformity to hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity. This happens to all young people in schools, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, according to research. This is only part of the story, however. There are also youth who are gender nonconforming, and they experience these cultural gender norms in slightly different ways. Gender nonconformity is the term used for those who “do not assume the expected roles and characteristics of the gender associated with their biological sex” (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010, p. 1581). Gender nonconforming young people “transgress social gender norms” (Toomey et al., 2010, p. 1581)—they may or may not label themselves as “transgender.” In her work on transgender history, Stryker (2008) defines transgender as “the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities” (p. 19). The term “transgender” implies moving away from societal gender norms, or crossing the lines of existing gender norms.

There are many variations of identifiers used for gender within the LGBTQ community. “Cisgender” is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity matches the gender that they were assigned at birth (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2016). “Genderqueer” is
another common term used by those “who do not identify or express their gender within the gender binary” (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2016). This term has a political meaning as well, in that those who adopt it are doing so as a way of showing their lack of agreement with heteronormative gender roles (Stryker, 2008). There are many other terms used as well, as seen in the definitions provided by the Trans Students Educational Resources (2016) webpage. In order to discuss the lives of young people and their life experiences related to their bodies and their genders, these identities need to be recognized, especially since bullying research has found that those who exhibit gender atypical behaviors are at greater risk for bullying (Ueno & McWilliams, 2010; Young & Sweeting, 2004).

Through the work of these scholars, we see that gender and the expression of gender can have significant impact upon the social lives of young people in school; failure to meet gender norms can elicit bullying behaviors, and meeting gender norms can aid social success in school. In short, gender expression matters in the lives of young people and can have serious consequences. Another area that can have serious consequences is that of sexuality, in particular heteronormativity, or the implicit societal assumption that everyone is heterosexual.

**Sexuality**

Issues of gender conformity in adolescent development begin to increase in salience as sexuality increases in salience. This time of emerging sexual development is when gender becomes more meaningfully conflated with sexuality for young people, according to Duncan (1999). Although some gender policing occurs in elementary school, the sexualized context of such bullying is missing due to the students’ stage of development (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). As they move into the years of puberty, however, the connection becomes clearer. This is mainly seen in policing of gender behaviors by youth in which they demand gender conformity
from their peers. When peers do not respond with conformity or present themselves according to
the desired gender norms, they will be bullied for being “gay,” as referenced by Risman and
Seale (2010). In Risman and Seale’s work, as in Duncan’s (1999), the insult “gay” is used to
“deprive a boy of the status that comes with masculinity” (p. 356). Also noteworthy in Risman
and Seale’s research, students were much younger than in Duncan’s. The researchers were
subsequently were clear that “there was a total confusion between sexual preference and gender
behavior” among the middle school students they interviewed (p. 353). Antigay sentiment was
widespread, however, and the youth were intolerant of nonconformity in gender behavior among
their peers.

Sexuality impacts middle school-aged youth a bit differently Duncan (1999) uses the
term “compression” to describe how the confinement of young, sexually developing bodies into
a single physical space (middle school) can be problematic. According to Duncan, this creates
“conditions for an engulfing micro-culture of socio-sexual relationships” (p. 60). Another aspect
of sexuality involves the double standards around sexual behavior of girls and boys. Boys gain
status through sexual practice and girls “are denigrated as unclean and unworthy of male
attention” (p. 53). The environment experienced by girls included pressures from both boys and
girls to participate in sexual behavior with boys, putting them in danger of losing their
reputations as “good girls” if they do participate, or putting them in danger of being condemned
for frigidity or lesbianism if they do not. Duncan found that girls were subjected to more sexual
harassment in school than boys, and that they had little faith in the school’s ability to respond.
Klein (2012), who framed some of this type of bullying experienced by girls as “slut bashing,”
found that girls’ sexuality is being policed by almost everyone, resulting in girls seldom being
allowed “to find their own sexual identity and expression” (p. 109). At any rate, as Crawford
(2011) acknowledged in her work, adolescence brings a time of gender intensification for girls, as their bodies start to change and these changes mark a turning point in the way they are treated by others.

Meanwhile, a related study by Pascoe (2005, 2012) found that “fag discourse” in adolescence was more nuanced. Different styles of dress and physical comportment held different meanings among racial groups in the school she studied. For example, young men who were white were called “fag” for wearing certain types of clothing or paying attention to their grooming, whereas African American young men were not policed in the same way. Their style of dress and comportment was accepted as a valid expression of masculinity. Such work highlights the cultural differences that become part of the adolescent discourse about gender and sexuality and also underscores the relevance of intersectionality.

Messerschmidt’s (2000, 2012) interviews with young men and women who had been arrested for sexual assault found additional evidence regarding the dire consequences of gender policing. He found that the sexual assaults committed by youth were attempts to gain recognition from their peers as sexually valid individuals. The youth in his samples are were bullied for not meeting sexual expectations of their peers in some way, usually due to having bodies that did not meet societal standards of sexual beauty (being fat, and therefore either unmasculine or unfeminine). In order to combat the bullying, these youth created situations through which they were able to enact sexual behaviors with someone of the opposite sex that were assaultive in nature. They were able transform how they related with and through their bodies, and to see themselves as valid sexual beings on a par with their peers, through having these (non-consensual) sexual experiences. Messerschmidt (2012) refers to this as “temporarily resolving their unremitting struggle for heteromasculine/feminine recognition” (p. 124). This research
shows a variation of the impacts sexuality can have on young people in terms of bullying. Messerschmidt’s work, indeed, signifies a distinct form of bullying that has not been presented elsewhere in bullying research. It is worth mentioning, given the lengths to which young people are willing to go to achieve sexual recognition from their peers, and the potentially damaging consequences bullying can have.

Finally, I return to homophobic bullying, which is bullying that occurs due to young people being lesbian or gay (Rivers, 2011). The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has been studying school safety for LGBT students for over twenty years, and in their 2011 study they found that 81.9% were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation at school, and 63.9% were verbally harassed because of their gender expression. Additionally, 55.2% of LGBT students were harassed or threatened electronically by their peers (GLSEN, 2012, p. 5). Rivers (2011) has also identified name-calling, public ridicule, teasing, kicking (and other forms of physical assault), as well as having items stolen, having rumors started about them, being stared at, and being sexually assaulted as ways in which LGBT youth have been victimized by their peers. The implication of these studies is that simply by being LGBT, or being perceived to be so, youth are more at risk of being bullied by their peers.

To be sure, such findings are supported in the most recent of research on school violence. Klein (2012) found that youth are bullied if they are presumed or perceived to be gay by their peers. Specifically, she looked at the cases of school shootings involving young middle class white men who were perceived by their peers to be gay, even though they did not identify themselves as such. Klein found that many of the school shooters were “heterosexually identified victims of relentless gay bashing; many cited revenge against such masculinity challenges as a motivation for their shooting” (p. 6). Most of the school shooters were males who had struggled
for recognition and status among their peers, tended to be academically oriented, and were generally unsuccessful with girls, leading them to be “mercilessly teased and abused” (p. 27). In their search for recognition from their peers, the boys chose to prove their masculinity through the use of violence, the means of which they had access. Such violence granted them instant masculine recognition. In such cases, then, we see evidence of both gender and presumed sexuality as being behind the bullying experiences of young men. Certainly sexuality is an important factor to consider in adolescent bullying. Youth are targeted based on others perceptions of them as gender and/or sexually nonconforming. They are subjected to ridicule, harassment and victimization based on their body size and composition, their sexual behaviors or lack thereof, as well as their ways of expressing gender.

**Intersectional Identities**

As previously mentioned, an additional factor of critical importance to examinations of LGBTQ bullying concerns intersectionality. Intersectionality was defined early on by Crenshaw (1989) as the way race and gender, for example, create a particular intersection in the lives of African American women, such that the women are impacted by both categories of their identities in a complex manner. It is not that different forms of discrimination can be looked upon as simply additive, as is frequently done in previous studies (African American and female as distinct variables, for example) (Spelman, 1990). It is that the way one is treated for simultaneously belonging to multiple social categories produces a unique and nuanced experience. In other words, one cannot just talk about sexism or racism, as it is impossible to see either of those on its own. In order to understand the experiences of women of color, or anyone for that matter, one needs to look at the multiple identities they inhabit and understand the ways in which these identities intersect and impact how they will be treated in society (Collins, 1990).
Studies of LGBTQ youth and bullying do not address intersectionality very well (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2008; Pritchard, 2013). Pritchard advocates for a more intersectional approach to studying the lives of young people, and he criticizes two particular ways in which bullying literature fails to do so. The first concerns what he terms “flattened theories of identity” (p. 321). As young queer people of color defined themselves in Pritchard’s research, he was aware that they express a multitude of identities which show an awareness of the complexity of life. Most work on bullying, Pritchard argues, reduces the concept of identity in a way that does not speak to the complexity of real life. As such, Pritchard argues for the use of a “queer of color” critique which “draws on theories of intersectionality to explore multiple oppressions and identities in ways that do not elide the specificity of difference but resist the undertheorizing of identities by acknowledging their complexities” (p. 324). Therefore, in order to address issues of identities in young queer people, an intersectional lens must be used.

Daley, Solomon, Newman, and Mishna (2008) also call for a more intersectional approach to bullying of queer youth, stating that “the interactive relationships between systems of sexual orientation, gender, race/ethnicity, and newcomer/citizenship status, among other systems of social identity and social location” (p. 12) help account for “simultaneous and interacting experiences of sexism and racism and oppression” (p. 13, emphasis in original). This approach recognizes that the social contexts of LGBTQ youth are constructed of intersections of systems of power and oppression that “are neither mutually exclusive nor static” (p. 25). Finally, they recognize that sexual orientation is but one dimension of queer youth, and that in order to really understand their lives, we need to understand them as whole people.

In much of literature reviewed thus far, identities were not often addressed in complex ways. Research on bullying generally has a specific focus, variously worded, such as
homophobic bullying (Poteat, 2007, 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2005, 2007; Poteat et al., 2007; Rivers, 2011), gender policing (Blazina et al., 2007; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Ploderl & Fartacek, 2009; Ringrose & Renold, 2009; Risman & Seale, 2010), adolescent bullying (Espelage et al., 2000; Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011; Gibson, 1989; Nansel et al., 2001), sexual minority bullying (Mata et al., 2010; Payne, 2010), and bullying impacts such as suicide (Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006; Lui & Mustanski, 2012). Thus much prior research has been constrained in some way and not well suited for examinations of intersectionality.

Something of an exception is the work of Felix, Furlong, and Austin (2009), who found that many students were targeted for bullying due to biases around race and ethnicity, religion, gender and perceived sexual orientation, and/or disability. Their research indicated that polyvictims, or those who are victimized for more than one reason (e.g., race and sexual orientation), suffer the most in terms of their well-being and are “more likely to perceive that they are targeted due to their gender or perceived sexual orientation” (p. 1673). The authors interpreted their findings as indicating that perpetrators target others who “are not perceived as masculine or feminine enough” (p. 1692). This relates back to earlier references in this work to gender and perceived sexual orientation. Thus, these researchers pay at least some attention to multiple identity categories in the process of examining student experiences of bullying.

Similarly, Hunter and Mallon (2000) identified the complex experiences of queer youth of color, who they find suffer from “‘tricultural’ experience: they face homophobia from their respective racial or ethnic group, racism from within a predominantly white LGBT community, and a combination of the two from society at large” (Hunter & Mallon, 2000, cited in Cianciotto & Cahill, 2003, p. 17). These researchers are attempting to unpack more of the complexities of identity work and intersectionality. However, there are still calls to do more:
Recognition of this complex personhood must be the start of antibullying interventions, not an afterthought or the end of that work. This positions us to engage students in bullying as a matter of power, privilege, discrimination, and social inequalities that are *experientially fluid* given the ways identities intersect and co-construct experiences and relationships. (Pritchard, 2013, p. 341, emphasis added)

Intersectional identities, then, need to be an integral part of discussions of the lives of queer youth. If these aspects of identity are overlooked or simplified in research, the findings suffer, and ultimately according to Pritchard (2013), so do queer youth, particularly when bullying turns violent.

**Violence**

Pritchard (2013) explains the presence of violence among youth as “a reflection of youth awareness of and participation in social arrangements that reproduce power, privilege, discrimination, and domination” (p. 332). He further holds that a focus on youth identity in explorations of bullying often minimizes violence by framing it as a natural part of development. One impact of this framing is that “youth’s acts of coping and protection are misread as aggression, or more frequently, victims are blamed for acts of violence they have suffered” (p. 333), such that youth’s identities are used to blame them for the violence they experience.

Certainly it appears that violence has taken on a new meaning in the lives of young people today. A new code of behavior seems to have developed in which adolescents believe that if they are shown disrespect by anyone, they have to take action to regain that respect. Fatum and Hoyle (1998) have found that for many youth, “aggression and fighting are a way of life” (p. 29), arguing that this is a product of how youth have learned to interact with one another. Rather than interpreting a student’s response to an insult with a slap as an act of violence, for example, it is seen as an act of setting the line of tolerance and respect. In students’ minds, the response to the insult was a “viable form of conflict resolution” (p. 30)—conflict resolution involves standing
their ground even if this requires aggression. Clearly this is a view of violence that can be problematic for society, as well as these young people.

Sadly, the same conclusions have been made in other research on youth, which has recently focused more on the lives of girls. Duncan (1999) refers to the girls who resort to violence as “hard girls” (p. 92), describing them as being involved in a great deal of the “threatened, and executed, interpersonal violence which they deployed to gain status and control over the affairs of boys and girls with whom they appeared to have little connection” (p. 93). Duncan further states that girls fight almost exclusively over boys, “because boys are culturally valued in ways that girls are not” (p. 104). Klein (2012) found that girls from different economic and ethnic backgrounds felt compelled to defend their honor and had parents who told them to do what it took to stand up for themselves, similar to findings of Fatum and Hoyle (1998) and Messerschmidt (2000). Klein also found that stories of girls engaging in physical violence often mimicked those of boys, citing additional studies that show girls are committing more violence than ever before, on all levels. Further, Klein notes that girls receive cultural messages similar to those received by boys that value masculinity and through which “girls are pressured to fight, to humiliate others, and to show their dominance and power” (p. 105).

Violence, then, has become more of a way of life for young people today. They are expected to use it as a resource, and they are learning that it is a viable choice for resolving conflicts with peers. They are also learning that violence may be experienced as a response to their identities, and that sometimes using violence to protect themselves may result in forms of victim blaming. Violence is only one of many resources that young people use in navigating their lives, however. There are many other resources they require in order to thrive, some of which relate directly to whether or not violence becomes and remains a viable alternative.
Available Resources

One way to understand access to resources concerns capital. In his work on different types of capital, Bourdieu (1984) spoke of economic capital, cultural capital, and educational capital. Economic capital refers to funds, cultural capital refers to tastes developed as a result of one’s access to funds and to the other members of one’s social circles, and educational capital refers to educational attainment, as well as quality, reputation, and social leverage of institutions. Those who are the most privileged in our society have access to the greatest amount of all three types, which taken together provide a “set of actually usable resources and powers” (p. 114). A similar construct is Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus.” One’s habitus is the environment in which a person grows up and is exposed to the world. In one’s habitus, a person is framed to behave in a particular manner; these skills and outlooks on life are not considered to be learnable by those who have not grown up in similar situations, because they would require a lifetime of learning. One of the things learned here is how to speak to others and draw upon social capital (the relationships one has with other members of one’s social class) in order to improve one’s position in life.

Ungar and colleagues (2007) speak to resource access related to adolescence directly, laying out two components to resource access. The first involves a young person’s capacity to navigate his or her way to obtaining access to resources necessary to well-being. In other words, does a young person know someone who has and is able to provide access to the necessary resources, such as a parent or guardian, and does he or she feel enough agency, power, and motivation to approach the person? The second is the ability to negotiate for access to the required resources. In other words, can the young person ask to receive the required resources in ways that are culturally meaningful for him or her? This appears to echo some of Bourdieu’s
(1984) notions of habitus. To return to the overarching view of this project, do the environments in which young people live offer the resources necessary to achieve well-being?

Resources are an important part of the contexts in which adolescents live, and work on resiliency has shown that access to these resources can make a difference in the overall outcome of young people’s lives and choices. Therefore, it is important to understand what types of resources are available for youth. International youth culture scholars (Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995; Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Duncan, 1999; Thomson, 2011) have found that the economic opportunities of young people have lessened drastically compared to previous generations. As a result, many young adults live with their parents well into their young adulthood, often as a result of unemployment or underemployment. These changes have a significant impact upon the kinds of resources available to emerging adults.

The point is that access to resources for young people often comes through families. LGBTQ youth may not have such access if, as too often happens, familial relationships are severed due to their sexual or gender identities (Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal, 2006; Wilbur, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006). Family separation can occur at many points and under several circumstances for a young person. LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in both out-of-home care and foster youth populations due to family conflicts around their identities (Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal, 2006; Wilbur et al., 2006). This, coupled with the GLSEN (2012) research on LGBT youth and schools, shows that resources for these youth may not be as available as they are for others. If additional factors are considered, such as types of cultural and social capital, as well as access to employment and housing, the picture becomes more complex. Resiliency studies show that these factors can make a huge difference in a young person’s well-being; therefore, consideration of the ecology surrounding youth is
important (Ungar, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Ungar et al., 2007; Walsh, 2012, 2016). Two aspects of ecology that are particularly relevant concerns spaces they are able to occupy and places where they live.

**Spaces and Places**

One issue that has become clear in research on youth and bullying is that geographic location makes a difference. The most recent GLSEN (2013) research, as reported above, indicates that “LGBT students in rural areas and small towns were less safe in school than students in urban and suburban areas” (p. 22), and those students who lived in the South or the Midwest were more likely to experience victimization than were those located in the North or the Northwest regions of the United States. The influence of a rural context on bullying has been studied by many researchers (Farmer et al., 2011; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Gray, 2009). Gottschalk and Newton, in particular, attribute some of this to narrow concepts of acceptable masculinity as well as a level of rigidity in behavior norms. In country settings, they found less tolerance of difference, in general. The influences of hypermasculinity, conservatism, and certain religious beliefs “can create a climate for lesbians and gay men in particular that, at best is unwelcoming and, at worst, dangerous” (p. 158).

Gray (2009) studied LGBTQ youth living in rural contexts as well, finding that they had to work harder to find ways in which to express themselves and their sexuality given the confines of their rural settings. Gray focused on the importance of the internet in gaining access to information about being LGBTQ and as a way to find a community, albeit virtual, when one was not otherwise available. The youth in her study were purposeful in their choices around when and when not to be open about themselves, given that their safety could be at risk. The youth accepted this, speaking of ways that they were able to express themselves at other times and
places in an ongoing effort to feel safe in their identities. They in effect practiced impression management. To some extent, maintaining relationships with the members of their larger (geographic) communities was critical so as to maintain access to resources. Again, this sometimes resulted in little or very selective sharing of sexual identity. Some did manage to share certain available media with significant people in their lives as a method of fostering better understanding of who they were. Indeed, Gray notes, “rural queer kids must address the same cultural and political demands for LGBT visibility while balancing the logistical needs to fit in and conform to the familiarity that structures rural life” (p. 168).

Another potential impact of place comes from the political climate in which young people live. Filax (2006), in her study of queer youth in Canada, examined the context of the geographic area in terms of the political climate and the content in local media, which in her study had an overtly anti-gay stance. She focused on the power of gender discourses and how they work to build an assumption that gendered bodies and normative (hetero)sexualities always go together, such that persons assigned a female gender at birth would be attracted to males and vice versa. By studying local media, she noted that ultra-conservative discourses were working to construct homosexuals as “unintelligible” “discomfiting Others,” who are then marginalized (p. 33). The result of this type of discourse is that queer youth “get the message they should not exist, which is writ large everywhere” (p. 55).

Earlier, I discussed international youth culture scholarship, which highlighted some of the issues with youth spaces, in part by noting the importance of “scenes” (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004), as a space for youth to do identity work. Other theorists have looked at the importance of places for young people as well, noting that the existence of such places give youth ways to help create a narrative of who they are and how they want to appear in the world (Nayak & Kahily,
2008). Bloustein (2007) studies ways in which young people use their engagement with media to create new spaces and sometimes new cultures and communities for themselves, which he refers to as “participatory community” (p. 456). What emerges from this discussion is the notion that spaces are very important for youth development, and that aspects of identity creation come forward in new ways through the use of available spaces and places.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Obviously, the lives of young LGBTQ people today are very complex. Not only are they trying to discover who they are and create lives for themselves, but they are doing so within contexts where their gender and gender performances, their sexuality, and sometimes their race or social class positions are contested. Additionally, they are learning that violence has a place in their lives, whether or not they want it to. They are trying to find places to be themselves, spaces they can call their own, and they are trying to gain access to the resources they need to grow into healthy adults. In such a widely populated field of information on young people and their lives, as well as their struggles, it can be difficult to narrow the field of inquiry in order to place one’s own research agenda. For the purposes of my research, I was particularly interested in the experiences of bullying of LGBTQ young people in and around southern Michigan. After elaborating on the methodology used in this study in the next chapter, I will explore their narratives, with the insight provided through the literature review presented here, throughout Chapters 4-6. In these chapters I will focus on my research participants’ experiences of bullying, how they coped with it, and the ways in which bullying has impacted them.

Through these efforts, I add to the literature on the experiences of young people growing up in a climate that is frequently hostile and exclusionary due to particular aspects of their identities. This work contributes to understandings of how young people manage their identities
(as well as survive, and thankfully thrive in many cases), in spite of bullying. A key aspect of this project will be exploring and expanding upon notions of resilience. To this end, I sought to add to youth studies following the epistemological approach endorsed by Tilleczek (2011):

There is real value in rigorous study of young people. The ways in which they are actively negotiating their social lives—and not just how adults have constructed life for them—are critical to the study of youth. This aspect of youth studies is often ignored. (p. 30)
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Position as a Researcher

When the spate of LGBTQ youth suicides were publicized in the media in 2010, I had been working with the Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center for five years as a volunteer coordinator of the youth support group. In this position, I interacted with LGBTQ youth on a regular basis at weekly meetings, and I saw first-hand the types of issues they faced in their lives as a result of their sexual and gender minority status. Parental rejection was a common concern, as was rejection and harassment from peers, the public, and teachers. At the same time, however, these were passionate and vibrant young people who were enjoying life and trying to discover themselves and the world around them. I enjoyed them and their company, and I could not bear to think of any of them being in so much pain that they would contemplate suicide. I was familiar with the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and their work on school safety for LGBTQ youth. I decided I needed to be part of the anti-bullying movement.

In this context, I began developing and conducting trainings for human service providers, especially social workers, since I am an LMSW. I presented on working with LGBTQ youth at Western Michigan University’s School of Social Work, as well as state-wide conferences for the Michigan Association of School Social Workers (MASSW). I also became part of a grassroots organization in Kalamazoo, Family Acceptance of Children and Teens, or FACT, which worked to bring Dr. Caitlyn Ryan to Kalamazoo to present on the impact of family acceptance and rejection of LGBTQ youth. After Dr. Ryan’s visit, the group developed its own materials and
staffed tables at community events in order to share the research findings with families in hope of reducing the negative impact of rejection on LGBTQ young people’s lives. In short, I have been an active advocate for LGBTQ youth for some time.

I also have a Master’s degree in Divinity, which I obtained after a life-changing event with a friend after my undergraduate career. When my friend’s minister found out that he was gay, the minister sent him a letter telling him he was going to hell and that he was no longer welcome at church. I was so appalled that a person of God would do this to a young man that I decided to pursue a degree that would allow me to become a minister who would be welcoming of LGBTQ people. I experienced great cognitive dissonance at the thought of a minister doing something so hateful, and I changed my life trajectory because of that experience. My work with LGBTQ youth since that time has deeply impacted my approach to life, and I continue to move forward in hopes of making their lives easier and more fulfilling.

This research project was undertaken as a way to explore the actual experiences of respondents in school and as a way to give them greater voice in their journeys. Sometimes, the most significant impacts of my public presentations come from stories from youth themselves, either in person as part of a discussion panel, or through video recordings and quotations. People in the audience react more strongly to stories in these settings. This dissertation is something of an extension of such experiences with firsthand accounts. In this research, I share the ways a sample of young GLBTQ adults were treated by school peers and personnel, as well as their families.

**Methodological Approach**

There are several methodological schools of thought that inform my approach to this project. At the most basic level, I use a phenomenological approach. According to Moustakas
(1994), the aim of phenomenology “is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Researchers relying on this approach use descriptions of experiences in an attempt to uncover the essence of the experiences for the respondents. Since I am interested in exploring how young adult LGBTQ people have made meaning from their experiences of bullying, the way in which to approach this issue was to allow their voices to take precedence.

Since I was also interested in analyzing the data beyond descriptive accounts, I used a symbolic interactionist approach to the data analysis. Symbolic interactionism is an approach to the study of “human group life and human conduct,” according to Blumer (1969, p. 1). The basic premise of symbolic interactionism is that humans act in life based on the meanings they give to events, and much of this meaning develops out of interactions with others. Therefore, meanings are products of social interactions. Accordingly, “social interaction is a formative process” in that people are “directing, checking, bending and transforming their lines of action in the light of what they encounter in the actions of others” (p. 53). In order to understand people’s choices and behaviors, we must understand the meanings they give to those behaviors and the contexts in which those behaviors make sense for them. In essence, we need to see through their eyes to understand why they behave as they do.

Berg (2007) describes this as a more “general interpretive orientation” in which data are organized and reduced “in order to uncover patterns of human activity, action, and meaning” (p. 304). This approach allowed me to look at how the young people acted in response to their experiences and to discover what meaning they placed on those experiences and actions. However, Denzin (2007) has a rather different take on performing interactionist research, stating that interactionist researchers
study the intersections of interaction, biography, and social structure in particular historical moments. Interactional experience is assumed to be organized in terms of the motives and accounts that persons give themselves for acting. These accounts are learned from others, as well as from the popular culture. (p. 20)

According to Denzin, interactionists are particularly concerned with “stigmatized identities” and “those persons who occupy powerless positions in contemporary society” (p. 20). In this, then, symbolic interactionists are similar to feminist social scientists, who seek to highlight the voices of those who may not have the opportunities to speak their life experiences in public forums.

A feminist approach to research requires some guidance, such as the principles put forth by Fonow and Cook (2005) which state that researchers must (1) be aware of gender’s significance in their work, (2) help raise consciousness around social issues, (3) consider ethical implications of research and the potential for research practices to exploit respondents, (4) use their work to advance women’s empowerment, and (5) practice their work in a reflexive manner in which they are constantly regarding themselves as part of the process. Kemp and Squires (1997), have a broader approach to feminist scholarly work however. They focus directly on the “overtly political nature” of such work and the “commitment to material and social change” (p. 4). Additionally, they acknowledge the importance of celebrating difference, recognizing “otherness,” and acknowledging the “multiplicity of feminisms” (p. 4). They further ask, “Who speaks, in the name of whom, and in what voice?” (p. 13).

These questions and focuses demand a level of self-reflexivity and a commitment to both intersectionality and social change, which I have and will continue to strive for in my work. They also demand an awareness of power structures within society and a commitment to hear the voices of those in different positions within the hierarchy, in this case, the voices of young people who identify as LGBTQ. Although my work does not directly address women’s empowerment, it does address that of lesbian or transgender women, as their voices have been
marginalized and may be brought to light through this research project. It also addresses the lives of other stigmatized populations, in that many LGBTQ youth deal with different levels of stigma related to their presentation of self and their gender choices as well as their sexuality. In this way, my project may rightfully be considered as being informed by feminism.

Another influential aspect of feminist research that impacted my work is feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory, as developed by Smith (1987), Harding (1987), and Hartsock (1998), argues that respondents speak from their particular standpoints in space and time, and that these standpoints offer unique perspectives on experience. This argument was initially posed in response to the positivistic movement in social science research, through which men assumed the ability to speak universally for all. Other feminist thinkers, like Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (1990), have argued that women of color often come from a very distinct standpoint, since their life experiences are impacted by both racism and sexism. Thus standpoint requires an explicit focus on intersectionality.

Plummer (2005) has proposed that, following the work of Harding and Hartsock, queer theory is actually a “queer standpoint” (pp. 365-366). Warner (1992) described the focus of queer theory as looking at “ways in which texts—either literature or mass culture of language—shape sexuality” (p. 19). Therefore, the use of queer studies to look at the gender and sexuality messages received by young people in society seemed appropriate as well. Plummer also advocates for using a mixed approach to research:

Contemporary humanistic method enters the social worlds of different “others” to work a catharsis of comprehension. It juxtaposes differences and complexities with similarities and harmonies. It recognizes the multiple possible worlds of social research . . . it also finds multiple ways of presenting the “data,” and it acknowledges that a social science of any consequence must be located in the political and moral dramas of its time. One of those political and moral dramas is “queer.” (p. 371)
Methodologically, this is a demanding exercise. Approaching my research through such a range of perspectives required a level of self-reflexivity that was challenging. However, of course, there seemed no other reasonable alternative. I aimed to understand the experiences of LGBTQ youth and the meanings they placed upon their experiences. I aimed to understand them from their own standpoints, and I aimed to approach this project using feminist theoretical tenets in order to share their particular voices and experiences. I did this by conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 24 LGBTQ-identified persons between the ages of 18 and 29 who lived in southern Michigan at the time of the research project.

Data Collection

Evolving Method

I had originally planned to conduct five to eight focus groups of six to eight people each, aged 18-24, at several different sites, giving me a sample of 30-64 participants. Focus groups have been around since the late 1930s, when social scientists began to be concerned that interviews were in some ways too artificial and driven by the researcher’s agenda (Berg, 2007). When trying to develop ways to decrease the influence of the researcher on the process, a more non-directive approach to interviewing gained popularity in group work. Merton is credited with the development of focus group studies during World War II, when he used them to explore morale in the U.S. military. He found that when people felt safe, comfortable, and surrounded by others like themselves, they were willing to share more about themselves and their opinions, even on sensitive topics (Krueger & Casey, 2000). According to Berg (2007) focus groups “provide access to both actual and existentially meaningful or relevant interactional experiences” (p. 149). Given this, focus groups would have met my own requirements for conducting research
to uncover the meanings young LGBTQ people found in their experiences, in a way that offered them voice and safety. Unfortunately, the project did not work out as intended.

Due to pre-existing relationships, I had arranged opportunities to conduct focus groups at the Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center (KGLRC) in Kalamazoo, Michigan and at Affirmations, an LGBTQ resource center in Ferndale, Michigan, which serves the greater Detroit area. I also contacted a LGBTQ resource center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, The Network, which hosts a youth group and I received informal permission to conduct focus groups in their facility as well. From the time of my initial informal arrangements to the time that I actually began to collect data, the leadership of all of the centers changed. Although I was able to obtain permission through the KGLRC to conduct focus groups, my attempts at recruitment of participants were unsuccessful. In the case of Affirmations, the new leadership denied my request for access. The agreement with The Network in Grand Rapids stood, however, and my first two focus groups were conducted in their facility. Unfortunately these were not so much focus groups as individual interviews.

When it was time for my first focus group at The Network, only one of eight confirmed participants showed up. My second group at The Network had a similar result. In both of these cases, then, I conducted individual interviews. The third attempt at a focus group through the KGLRC failed, with no one responding to the request despite multiple recruitment efforts. At this point, I conferred with my chair and revised my approach, switching from focus groups to individual interviews.

**Recruitment**

As mentioned, my original plan involved recruiting young LGBTQ adults between the ages of 18 and 24. My assumption was that people at this age have some distance from their high
school and middle school experiences, and may be able to speak to their bullying experiences with a bit of emotional distance, thus lowering the potential for re-traumatization or other harm. I also hoped that they may have engaged in some interpersonal development and healing since the time they were in school and/or bullied, and that this may have allowed them to frame their experiences in a way that they could not do when they were younger. These factors were important given the amount of potential risk in asking young people to disclose their bullying experiences. As my recruitment efforts continued, however, I found I had to adjust the age range in order to increase my sample size. I relied upon Arnett’s (2000, 2001) model of “emerging adulthood” as a guide, deciding that recruiting participants between 18 and 30 would be appropriate. Per Arnett, this age range reflects a period of time when young people in post-industrialized societies are most actively exploring their identities and learning what it is like to be on their own, or becoming emergent adults.

Prior to beginning my research, I approached the three Michigan LGBTQ agencies referenced above to request permission to conduct research in their facilities and use their existing databases to recruit participants (see Appendices E & F). I requested that the agencies share the recruitment materials I provided via their social media outlets, such as Facebook, since these are often-used methods for communicating with young adults. In Appendix G I include my preliminary letter to the agencies, as well as the recruitment information I shared with the agencies. Since this method of inquiry did not garner enough participants, I also advertised the focus groups through a Michigan-based and -focused LGBTQ news source, Between the Lines. This source has both print and online news availability and includes classified advertising. I purchased a classified ad and placed a brief recruitment piece. Kindly, Between the Lines ran my ad for additional time at no added expense.
The Network in Grand Rapids did extensive outreach and follow up on my behalf and their staff communicated with me frequently via email regarding their efforts. The Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center included the information in their email newsletter and had recruitment information posted within their facility, however no responses were received. Additionally, I posted information on my own Facebook page as a way to engage friends and colleagues in promoting my research project. Some friends and colleagues shared this information on their own Facebook pages, as well. I volunteered at both the Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids area Pride celebrations in June 2014 and spoke to young people about the possibility of participating. I also sent private Facebook messages to anyone I knew that fit the expanded parameters of my research, asking if they would be interested or if they would feel comfortable asking their friends as a way of implementing some snowball sampling. Through all of these efforts, I was eventually able to interview 24 LGBTQ young adults between the ages of 18-29. These interviews took place between the months of March and September 2015.

What I learned through the recruitment process is that although the experiences of bullying may have been more distant because of the age of the potential participants, the memories and emotions surrounding the experience were not always at a distance that was perceived as safe. One of my older participants mentioned in his interview that he probably would not have been able to discuss this earlier in his life. This gave me pause, and showed me that my previous assumption about age having a buffer effect for my participants was not true in some cases. To this point, my final participant canceled on the day of the interview. He contacted me to share that the topic was too close, given his current state of vulnerability. I thanked him for letting me know, and I followed up with him a few days later to see if he needed any resources.
Such experiences underscored my growing recognition that this topic is still painful and present in the lives of many young adults.

**Individual Interviews**

As noted, the transition to individual interviews happened quite naturally, as my first two “group interviews” only had one participant each. In each of these instances, I interviewed the individual. I proceeded, with each participant’s permission, with the same schedule of questions I had planned to use with the group (see Appendix C). I started with asking them to define bullying, and then asked questions about when they first noticed it and what they perceived as the reason(s) they were targeted. I revised the schedule of questions a bit after the decision was made to pursue only individual interviews (see Appendix D). These interviews were semi-structured, in that although I had a list of questions related to bullying and their experiences, I adjusted them to create a more natural flow to the conversation. This would not have been possible had I adhered strictly to the schedule of questions (Berg, 2007; Schutt, 2006). Additionally, the semi-structured format allowed me to probe certain answers from my participants as a way of making sure that I correctly understood them (Berg, 2007). It was often the case that I had not understood their original meanings, so these probes served to clarify my understanding of their narratives.

The goal of an interview, of course, is to gain “access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Sometimes called “intensive” (Schutt, 2006, p. 309) or “depth interviewing” (Jones, 2004; Miller & Crabtree, 2004), semi-structured interviews are aimed at “understanding how particular individuals arrive at the cognitions, emotions, and values” (Miller & Crabtree, 2004, p. 200). In other words, one can focus on how people construct their own realities as well as comprehend “the meaning and significance they
give to their actions” (Jones, 2004, p. 257). This is clearly in line with the reasoning behind my initial choice of using focus groups, and so this method also fit my research goals. In fact, given the types of stories I heard from the participants as individual interviews got underway, I would say that the individual interview format was the better choice for my research project. The individual interviews allowed the participants to feel freer to share more of their actual experiences than I believe they would have been able to do in a group with multiple strangers (or even acquaintances).

Indeed, my interactions during these interviews were “personal and intimate” (Miller & Crabtree, 2004, p. 188). Jones (2004) cautions that in order to attain the level of trust required in order for participants share their experiences, they must know that “we will not use the data against them” (p. 259). We can do this, Jones states, by using our social skills “to convince others that we want to hear what they have to say, take it seriously, and are indeed hearing them” (pp. 259-260). Given the sensitive nature of the topic of my research, these social skills were especially important to establishing relationships in which the participants felt as though I was listening to them and taking them seriously, so that they would feel safe to share with me. Part of this also involved accommodating a broad range of locales for interviews. I felt this was important given the sensitive nature of the questions I asked, and as such, the location of each individual interview was determined on a case-by-case basis. The most common locations for such interviews were coffee shops and restaurants.

**Online Journaling**

In her work with young people regarding sex and religiosity, Freitas (2008) included an online questionnaire as a supplemental to in-person interviews. This online questionnaire was sometimes referred to as a “journal” (p. 253), and she noted that in regards to some sensitive
topics, the students participating in her study were able to “offer a more complex spiritual portrait on paper, where they seem comfortable expressing their religious and spiritual interests” (p. 218). These journal entries comprised the bulk of her written work, and provided much insight into her participants’ behavior. The ability of students to write their responses online seemed to make a difference in receiving detailed information about how they understood their experiences, as well as provided useful data for analysis.

Similarly, in research on young adults and their religious practices, Smith and colleagues (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011) noted that their respondents had trouble articulating their religious beliefs in the context of interviews. Given this, along with the findings from Freitas (2008), wherein she found young people were more effective communicators via the written journal entries, I believed that the inclusion of an online journal component could offer an additional layer of meaningful data to that collected through the focus groups. It may also have offered the youth some further resources for exploring their feelings about the focus groups. I thus adapted this strategy. I reasoned that after some time had passed, the participants may have additional thoughts about the process or the topic. In a similar vein, Reinharz (1992, as cited in Berg, 2007) described a computer group diary, only open to contributors, which “provided a means for women both to express their own thoughts and read the thoughts of others” (p. 153).

After researching online journaling methods, I created a SurveyMonkey portal with three simple prompts. The first concerned the location of the focus group/interview, the second concerned the chosen pseudonym of the participant, and the last was a text box in which they could share their thoughts and feelings. Following the interviews, I shared information on accessing the SurveyMonkey portal, as well as my contact information, and invited them to use the portal if they thought of anything after our interview. To date, no participants have used the
online journal. This suggests that the needs of the participants were met in the face-to-face interviews.

**Paper Survey Instrument**

I also used a paper survey instrument, to which I have alluded earlier. The objective of this survey was to collect information from participants upon the day of each focus group or interview (see Appendix B). This survey was developed to obtain demographic data regarding my sample, as well as to address other aspects of the lives of the participants that may relate to existing research. For example, I included questions on religious views and church attendance, use of different types of media, and questions related to research by Ryan and colleagues (2009) that focused on interactions between LGBTQ youth and their families. This survey was shared with participants either after obtaining informed consent but before starting the actual interview, or after the interview itself as a form of transition back to the “real world.” I made the decision on whether to present the survey before or after the interview on a case-by-case basis, depending on time, location of the interview, and the general demeanor of each individual. Sometimes the survey served as an ice breaker before the interview. Other times no ice breaker was needed, and it served as a means of concluding the discussion. One of the final questions on the paper survey instrument asked what pseudonym the participants would like me to use when I wrote about them in my dissertation, so that they had the opportunity to choose how they would be represented.

Prior to employing the survey instrument, I shared it with many colleagues in the sociology department at my university, as well as friends who are part of the LGBTQ community. I wanted to make sure the questions were clear and that they addressed the things I thought they did. One colleague took it to a class and had students review it as a research
exercise. As such, the instrument went through several revisions. In spite of that, there were still items I had to explain or clarify for participants as they took the survey, and I encouraged them to write their answers in the margins if they did not feel they fit into my predetermined categories. For example, thinking that I may have participants who were part of the foster care system, I did not use the word “parents” when asking about some family information, instead using the term “primary care provider.” This was based on the suggestion by a colleague who works within the foster care system. I often had to explain this to participants, as in our society that terminology often refers to one’s medical doctor.

**Field Notes and Follow-up**

Directly after the first two focus group meetings (which became individual interviews), both my co-moderator and I took notes on the process. (In preparation for the focus group, I brought along a peer to serve as co-moderator. Therefore, when I interviewed the participants of those first two focus group attempts, a co-moderator was present.) After this, we discussed the event, searching for ways to improve the data collection process as well as what each of us found of interest. During such debriefings, we clarified any questions either may have had about the participant, affect, and interactions during the interview. As a sign of my appreciation for their assistance, I also made a donation to The Network following the two focus group/interviews I conducted in their facility. I also volunteered to assist them at Grand Rapids Pride, both as a way of thanking them for their assistance, and as a way to meet other young people that I could recruit for future interviews.

After the individual interviews, I took time to make notes to myself regarding the experience and my overall impressions of the interview. I noted observations of each participant in terms of affect and perceived level of comfort with the experience. I made brief field notes for
myself after these interviews in which I documented potential themes and other information that I felt might be of importance during data analysis.

**Transcription and Data Analysis Procedure**

From the time of the first interview, I began looking for themes within the data in a very preliminary manner. I began transcribing interviews soon after the first one was completed, and continued to do my own transcription for most of the interviews. As I had some funds available for transcription assistance, I hired a colleague in my graduate program to transcribe some of the interviews as well. Though time consuming, transcribing many of my own interviews allowed me greater opportunities to become familiar with the themes I began seeing early on in the process.

My next interaction with the data was to print all of the interview transcripts and read them, highlighting pieces of interest and looking for recurrent themes. As I did this, more patterns began to emerge regarding definitions of bullying, where it happened, and how school systems responded. Additionally, I began to see themes in how the participants dealt with being bullied. At this step of analysis, I also began open coding. Open coding has been identified by Esterberg (2002) as a method of working with data intensively and line-by-line in order to identify themes and categories that seem to recur. When recurring themes have been identified, those themes can be used as a rubric for revisiting the transcripts in order to expand, refine, and clarify the previously identified emergent themes (Esterberg, 2002). I did this repeatedly, as additional readings of the transcripts revealed different patterns of and responses to bullying. For example, upon noticing a trend regarding victimization by family members that participants considered similar to peer-on-peer bullying, I revisited the entirety of the transcripts to see if other participants also spoke to this experience.
My next step was to purchase Atlas.ti, a qualitative software analysis program that had been recommended by a colleague. I imported all of my interview transcripts into the program and began selecting quotations of interest and entering codes for the emergent themes. After initial coding of the interviews, I printed and explored my codes in order to determine how to merge condense them all. I then reviewed all of condensed codes and began organizing them into themes. I continued these iterations until I was no longer finding any new ideas. These themes provided the framework for the written presented here.

Validity and Reliability Assessments

Qualitative research is distinct from quantitative research in that the aims of each research are different. In qualitative research, the researcher aims to focus on meanings, versus quantifiable phenomena (Schutt, 2006). The emphasis is on studying the object of interest in depth and in detail, producing rich descriptions of the findings with an eye toward “sensitivity to context,” versus an approach which seeks to generalize from the sample of data to a larger population (Schutt, 2006, p. 329). As such, the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability in this research held different meanings than those traditionally associated with quantitative research.

Rigor

The objective of this chapter was to provide ample detail about the process through which data for my dissertation study were obtained. As there is no explicit set of criteria for conducting qualitative fieldwork, such as focus groups and individual interviews, across a variety of settings, I did my best to elucidate exactly what I did, when, and to what end. Thus, I followed the recommendations of Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002), who argue that
strategies for ensuring rigor must be built into the qualitative research process per se. These strategies include investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, an active analytic stance, and saturation. These strategies, when used appropriately, force the researcher to correct both the direction of the analysis and the development of the study as necessary, thus ensuring reliability and validity of the completed project. (p. 17)

I considered all of these recommendations and remained aware of my own level of responsiveness throughout the research process, paying particular attention to analytic approaches to the data, and the goal of achieving saturation in data collection. To this end, I hope to illustrate, as I present the findings of this study and discuss them in relation to existing research and theoretical constructs, that some level of theoretical transferability is possible. While generalizability in a traditional sense (application to a wider population), may not be possible in qualitative research, arriving at findings that can apply to and expand upon the conceptual frameworks of other studies on bullying and adolescent victimization speaks to the applicability of my work within other contexts.

Lincoln and Guba (1989) attest that in many cases, the decision will be up to other researchers who review the conditions, situations, and procedures used in a project to make a determination of degree of fit. I hope that those who read my dissertation will agree with the approach and tactics I took. One of the more agreed upon aspects of rigor involves taking steps to ensure “findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Aside from thoroughly explaining each step of the process throughout this chapter, I also employed triangulation of data across interviews and online journal entries.

Obviously, rigor is a difficult issue to address in qualitative research, and much discussion of how to accomplish it continues within the ever-evolving field of qualitative
inquiry. However, an important component in establishing rigor, in my perspective, concerns trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Krueger and Casey (2000) describe validity as adhering to procedures that “ensure that the results are trustworthy” (p. 201), and that using systematic analysis procedures aid in achieving results that are both “trustworthy and accurate” (p. 202). Similarly, Creswell (2009) asserts that “qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings while employing certain procedures,” and that establishing qualitative reliability may be incorporated into this by approaching data collection similarly across subjects (p. 190). There were several ways that I was able to establish validity through trustworthiness and reliability.

The initial round of recruitment (for the focus groups, and then the individual interviews) came through organizations with which potential participants already had relationships, namely The Network, in Grand Rapids, and the Kalamazoo Gay & Lesbian Resource Center in Kalamazoo. Through these efforts, as well as my subsequent recruitment efforts outside of these agencies, potential participants were able to read the recruitment information that discussed the purposes of my work and described my background. They all received informed consent documents (see Appendix A) that included information on the project; these needed to be read and signed before interviews began. At these points I also asked if they had any questions about my work or about me as a person, as a way of showing openness and transparency in the interview process.

As a researcher with a social work background and substantial experience in LGBTQ advocacy, I was very aware that in many respects I was my own greatest tool in terms of creating rapport. I strived to set the participants at ease before we began the interviews. In some cases,
when I judged a participant needed a little more time to settle in, I would ask if they would
wanted to complete my paper survey instrument (Appendix B) before we began the interview
(described earlier). Some chose to do so, which seemed to help acclimate them to the setting and
the proposed “work” of our meeting. After completing the survey instrument, they appeared
ready to begin the interview itself, without exception. These efforts seemed to bolster rapport and
sensitivity between the participants and me, and I believe, enhanced the overall trustworthiness
of my findings as accurate and fair.

Toward the end of each interview, I asked three particular questions: whether the
participants thought religion played a role in any of the bullying they witnessed or experienced,
whether they thought media played a role in any of the bullying they witnessed or experienced,
and why they think some people think it is okay to bully people who are LGBTQ. Sometimes
participants had already addressed these issues, and I would acknowledge that and then ask if
they wished to add anything else regarding the topic. At other times, these issues had not come
up, so they began a new topic of conversation. The placement of these questions was purposeful
in that they aimed at bringing each participant out of speaking directly about their own
experiences and into talking about bullying on a more macro level. Since so much of the
conversation around personal experiences was emotional and somewhat sensitive, these more
abstract questions served as a transition to the final aspects of the interview process. Again, such
tactics were aimed at continuing rapport and respect with each participant, as well as remaining
consistent in procedures across interviews.

From here I moved into my final two questions of each interview, which focused on
resilience. I read these questions directly to the participants in order to phrase them appropriately
and consistently: (1) Is there anything in particular you have been able to hold on to that helps
you get through these experiences? and (2) When you reflect back on your experience, is there any way in which being bullied help you in terms of personal growth? Again these questions were aimed at both signalized the final stage of the interview as well as allowing each participant to (hopefully) end their interview by talking about something a bit more positive. Finally, I asked the participants if there was anything else that they felt I should have asked but did not. This served as a final indication of the interview’s conclusion and segued well into the closing logistics of each conversation (stopping the recording device, completing the questionnaire if it had not already been, sharing my contact information, informing the person about the online journal option, providing a list of area resources, etcetera).

**Ethical Concerns**

Whenever one is working with a marginalized and stigmatized group, there are ethical issues involved. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods of life where much identity work occurs. This can become problematic when one identifies as LGBTQ, a label that often involves social exclusion, stigmatization, and vulnerability (CDC, 2011; GLSEN, 2013). Moreover, the topic of bullying can cause emotional distress. I was aware of these issues and committed to carrying out my research in a way that would not cause the participants harm. Using both my social work and theological background, I approached the interviews with heightened compassion and empathy. I regularly acknowledged the emotional and difficult nature of the interviews, offering support, empathy, and gratitude for being allowed to hear from the participants. My hope throughout the project was to try to make the interview experience an empowering one, offering a venue through which to share and process past experiences.

I hoped that these interviews offered the participants a chance of feeling heard, since they may feel invisible or overlooked by society. As explained earlier, I shifted the focus of the
interviews to areas of strength toward the end, as a way to help participants become aware of their personal fortitude and the social supports they have generated along the way. Furthermore, I provided resource lists to each participant following the interviews and used my social work skills to assess levels of distress throughout them. I routinely verified that the participants had access to necessary resources and were not exhibiting signs of distress before they left the interview sites. I also reminded them that I was available if they had any questions, and shared my contact information as well as the online journal component of the study, in case they felt a need to follow up.

Having the first two groups/interviews in settings that serve the LGBTQ population community (The Network, in Grand Rapids) was also helpful in alleviating some ethical concerns, since the participants were already comfortable with the setting, and potential threats based on sexual identification or gender expression were not present. Additionally, the participants already had relationships with staff at the site, and both moved to spend time with those staff after the interview ended. For other interviews, I allowed the participants to pick the site, or I suggested a couple of neutral locations in which to meet, such as area restaurants or coffee shops. This was done to allay any concerns about the setting that may have existed, and also to give the participants some choice and ownership in the interview process.

It is also important to note that aside from a doctoral candidate in sociology, I am also a licensed social worker and must adhere to the tenets of the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008), which includes guidelines for ethical interactions. I was aware that my participants may have perceived themselves as having less power than me, so I was very careful and thoughtful when interacting with them as well as when attempting to recruit potential participants. For example, if someone did not respond to inquiries
about participation, I did not pursue it further. Some potential participants shared with me that they were unwilling to participate due to the emotional nature of the interview topics. Some agreed through Facebook communication, but then did not respond after materials were mailed to them. I was respectful of boundaries in these situations.

Within interviews, I would sometimes preface a question with “It’s okay if you don’t want to answer this,” as a way of acknowledging that what I asked was clearly a difficult question. Usually, at that point of the interview however, a rapport had been established, and participants answered the questions I posed. Nonetheless, I was careful to pay attention to visual cues and less obvious verbal cues in these situations, and to change my line of questioning if I ascertained any signs of discomfort. In general, however, it seemed as though having made the decision to speak with me, the participants were willing to discuss their experiences quite openly.

**Sample Demographics**

I interviewed 24 young adults between the ages of 18-29 who lived in Michigan at the time of the interviews and identified as LGBTQ. These interviews were conducted in various locations in Michigan, depending on where the participants lived or wished to meet. Participants were from Kalamazoo (n = 13), Battle Creek (n = 3), Grand Rapids (n = 2), and Ypsilanti, Detroit, Lansing, Ann Arbor, and Kentwood (n = 1 for each city). Participants took part in individual interviews, or in three cases, joint interviews with their partners (at their request). I gathered demographic information on the participants through the pre-interview survey.

In terms of sexuality or sexual orientation, eight of the participants identified as queer (33.33%), six identified as gay (25%), three identified as bisexual (12.5%), two identified as pansexual (8.3%), and two identified as lesbian (8.3%). In terms of gender identity, eight of the participants identified as male (33.33%), and five identified as female (20.83%). There were also
other identities, which are included in Table 1 and indicate a much broader range of identities within these categories, as opposed to what is usually seen in survey documents. These multiple definitions of self are not surprising, giving the increasing fluidity in sexual orientation and gender expression of emerging adults.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexuality or Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attracted to women, but don't identify as straight</td>
<td>Transgender-FTM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Transgender, Transmasculine, Gender Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Genderfluid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual, Queer</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Transgender, Gender Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Transmasculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Transgender MTF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Transgender MTF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian, + Open-minded</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note that several of the participants in this research were active in leadership roles or known as public figures in the queer communities of which they were a part. It could be that their levels of comfort with discussing their lives in public forums and their pre-existing advocacy work may have led them to agree to participate in this work.

Fifteen of the participants identified as White (62.5%), four as African American (16.67%), and five as White/African American/Mixed or Biracial (20.8%). Two (8.3%) of the participants had graduate degrees, 16 (66.7%) had some college, three (12.5%) had bachelor’s degrees, one (4.2%) went to a trade school, and one (4.2%) had completed high school or obtained his/her GED. Existing research shows that LGBTQ young people are overrepresented in homeless populations and foster care due to their identities and the responses of families to these identities (Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal, 2006). Therefore, I also asked participants about their experiences with foster care and homelessness. Three participants (12.5%) were part of the foster care system at some point in their lives, and seven participants (29%) were kicked out of their homes due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Religious Beliefs**

Given existing data on the impact of religious beliefs about LGBTQ identities (Yip & Page, 2013), I asked several questions regarding religious identities and practices. In terms of religion, seven (29%) participants identified as “none,” three (12.5%) identified as Christian, four (16.67%) as Atheist, three (12.5%) as Buddhist, one as Pagan, specifically Wiccan, and one did not answer. Additionally, one identified as Christian and “open to other beliefs,” one as both Christian and Atheist, one as a “spiritually-enlightened Catholic,” one identified with Christianity and Spirituality, and one did not identify (left the answer blank).
When asked “How important is religion in shaping how you live your daily life?,” eight (33.33%) answered “not important at all,” three (12.5%) answered “not very,” five (20.83%) answered “somewhat,” and five (20.83%) answered “very.” No one answered “extremely.” One was left blank, and in two wrote “N/A.” I also asked, “Is there another belief system that guides your life? If so, please describe it in your own words.” Ten of these were left blank, one was marked “N/A,” and there were several written answers, which are included in Figure 1.

Can't know what happens when you die, so it doesn't matter what I believe in, as long as I live as a good person helping others flourish.

Integrity, authenticity, honor

Agnostic Atheist, not passionate about spiritual study on God, just value science as a system of thought.

Love wins; love always wins.

Positivity and optimism

Spiritual enlightenment and Buddhism

In addition to Buddhist morals, I try to live honorably and respectfully.

I have my own sort of moral code.

I value Hinduism and its teaching, and read books and ancient texts by Hindu sages/scholars to help guide me.

How I would want someone to treat me.

My experiences

Respect for all, We are all God.

Personal code of moral ethics

Figure 1. Responses to survey question: “Is there another belief system that guides your life? If so, please describe it in your own words.”

In order to ascertain how the participants experienced their religions, I included several questions adapted from Yip and Page (2013), who have conducted research on religious and
sexual identities of young adults. Yip and Page found that “religion is widely considered to be
the oppressive and restrictive ‘Other,’ particularly in terms of sexuality and gender” (p. 39).
Therefore, I included the following questions as a method of determining how my sample
perceived religious spaces:

- Do you feel as though your religion is accepting of your sexuality?
- Do you feel as though your religion is accepting of your gender identity/expression?
- Do you feel as though individuals within your religion are accepting of your
  sexuality?
- Do you feel as though individuals within your religion are accepting of your gender
  identity/expression?

All of these questions had the following answer choices: Yes, No, Prefer Not to Answer.

These questions address not only sexuality, but also gender expression. They also
distinguish between the experiences of a religion itself and the individuals who are a part of the
religion. Yip and Page (2013) found that the relationship between religion and sexuality was
“ambivalent and contentious” for young adults (p. 44). In particular, LGBTQ youth tend to focus
on the “personal, experiential, and relational” aspect of faith, which they found “liberating and
growth-inducing” as compared to religion, which represents “the organization and [is]
structured.” They viewed religion as “constraining and disempowering” (p. 28), in part due to the
“social control function of religion in the form of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’” (p. 29). The
participants in the Yip and Page study found their “counter-normative sexual identity
complicated their relationship with the religious space” (p. 29), which resulted in feelings of
alienation and led them to be less likely to disclose their sexual orientation within these spaces.
In Table 2, I provide participant responses to the questions above, including their sexuality/sexual orientation, gender identity, and race, as these particulars seemed to impact their responses. For example, someone who identifies as transgender female-to-male may pass as male, and therefore may not have problems with gender expression in a religious setting. Similarly, those who are from historically black churches may have differing experiences based upon race and either gender or sexual identity, so race is included. Additionally, I included how important the participants perceive religion to be in their lives, as that may impact their experience with religion as well.

Families

Finally, I included a section on families in order to determine how the participants felt their families treated them due to their gender identity or sexual orientation/identity. Ryan and colleagues, at the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University, have been researching family acceptance or rejection and its impact upon LGBTQ children for many years (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009). Their research informed some of my research project, particularly the construction of the survey, which included information from the Family Acceptance Project research related to behaviors of families with LGBTQ children. More specifically, my survey included a list of behaviors typically recommended to families of LGBTQ children to avoid, as they lead to poor health outcomes for youth. I also listed behaviors typically recommended to families to practice so as to help their children in terms of their sexuality or gender identity.

Table 3 is the table from the instrument, along with the recorded responses. The boxes in gray show behaviors that families should avoid with their children because they can be harmful and can lead to increased risk of suicide, drug and alcohol use, and positive HIV status (Ryan,
Table 2

Responses to Survey Questions on Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation/Identity</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Religion Accepting of Sexuality</th>
<th>Religion Accepting of Gender</th>
<th>Individuals Accepting of Sexuality</th>
<th>Individuals Accepting of Gender</th>
<th>How Important Is Religion in Your life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attracted to women but don't identify as straight</td>
<td>T-FTM</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Christianity, open to other beliefs</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Transgender, Transmasculine, Gender Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Genderfluid</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White, African American</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White, African American</td>
<td>Atheism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Not very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White, African American</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White, African American, biracial</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Christianity, Atheism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Christianity, Atheism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Not very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual, Queer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation/Identity</th>
<th>Gender identity</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Religion accepting of sexuality</th>
<th>Religion accepting of Gender</th>
<th>Individuals accepting of sexuality</th>
<th>Individuals accepting of Gender</th>
<th>How important is religion in your life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Transgender, Gender Queer</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Atheism</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Transmasculine</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Spirituality Enlightened Catholic</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Don't identify</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Transgender MTF</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Atheism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Transgender MTF</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Christianity, Spirituality</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Some*</td>
<td>Some*</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian, open-minded</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White, African American, mixed</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Not very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White, African American</td>
<td>Paganism, Wicca</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Names were not included here, since some participants used their actual names.

*aNot part of original survey responses; added in by participant.*
Table 3

*Family Behaviors Toward LGBTQ Youth*

Below is a list of behaviors that families sometimes use with LGBTQ youth. Please identify if your family/care providers did any of the following: (Circle the correct choice)

- **Y** = Yes
- **N** = No
- **X** = Prefer Not to Answer/Don’t Know [☐ = blank]
- [Y/N = sometimes or both, depending upon stage of life, time period]
- [not in original survey document, but entered by participant(s)]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit, slap or physically hurt you because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y = 4 N = 19 X = 1 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally harass or call you names because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y = 17 N = 7 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclude you from family and family activities because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y = 13 N = 10 X = 0 ☐ = 1 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block access to LGBT friends, events &amp; resources?</td>
<td>Y = 10 N = 14 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame you when you were discriminated against because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y = 13 N = 11 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure you to be more (or less) masculine or feminine?</td>
<td>Y = 17 N = 7 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell you that God will punish you because you are gay?</td>
<td>Y = 10 N = 14 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell you that they were ashamed of you or that how you look or act will shame the family?</td>
<td>Y = 15 N = 9 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you keep your LGBT identity a secret in the family and not let you talk about it?</td>
<td>Y = 16 N = 6 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk with you about your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y = 14 N = 9 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express affection when you told them you were gay or transgender?</td>
<td>Y = 10 N = 12 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support your LGBT identity even though they may have felt uncomfortable?</td>
<td>Y = 12 N = 9 X = 0 ☐ = 2 Y/N = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for you if or when you were mistreated because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y = 8 N = 16 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require that other family members respect you?</td>
<td>Y = 5 N = 15 X = 0 ☐ = 2 Y/N = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring you to LGBT organizations or events?</td>
<td>Y = 4 N = 16 X = 3 ☐ = 1 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect you with an LGBT adult role model to show you options for the future?</td>
<td>Y = 4 N = 19 X = 1 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome your LGBT friends &amp; partners to their home?</td>
<td>Y = 11 N = 12 X = 0 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support your gender expression?</td>
<td>Y = 11 N = 11 X = 1 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe you could have a happy future as an LGBT adult?</td>
<td>Y = 13 N = 10 X = 1 ☐ = 0 Y/N = 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Ryan, 2009)
2009). The boxes in white show behaviors that families are encouraged to practice with their children in order to facilitate healthy life outcomes. In the first two items, note the difference in the number of participants reporting treatment by their families. Thankfully, only four of 24 (16.67%) reported that they were hit, slapped, or physically hurt by their families because of their identities; however, 17 of 24 (70.83%) reported being verbally harassed or called names by their families for the same reason. Ten of 24 (41.67%) reported that their families told them that God would punish them for being gay, and 15 out of 24 (62.5%) were told that their parents were ashamed of them, or that how they looked or acted would shame their families.

This information on families is interesting, especially given that an unexpected finding within the interviews concerned the extent to which several participants felt the bullying they had received at home from their families was more significant than the bullying they received in school. This will be discussed in greater detail within the following chapters.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This research explored the experiences of LGBTQ young adults who lived in Michigan at the time of the interviews around the issues of bullying. In particular, I sought to learn about their lived experiences of bullying and why they perceived they were bullied, as well as how they managed to deal with the bullying. Since much literature on LGBTQ youth focuses upon the ways in which they are at risk in our society, I offer more focused information on what helped them be resilient and thrive in spite of the identified risks they have had to navigate due to their sexual identities or gender expression. As earlier research has shown, schools are not particularly welcoming places for LGBTQ youth (GLSEN, 2013), and knowledge about how they were able to cope with bullying experiences could be helpful for those who work adolescents on a regular basis, such as school social workers, counselors, or administrators.
In the following chapters, I will present the results of my research relying heavily on the narratives of the participants. I will address the types of bullying they experienced, how they were able to deal with the bullying, and how bullying impacted them. Originally, I had structured my research questions so as to address impact first and coping second. However, as I continued with analysis, it became clear that coping seemed to happen closer to the time of the bullying incidents, and impact was a longer term variable. Therefore, I switched the order of these research questions. I will start by looking at the types of bullying they experienced in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4
NATURE OF THE BULLYING

In this chapter, I will explore the types of bullying described by the participants in this dissertation research. It is important to note here that all participant pseudonyms were chosen by the participants themselves; some chose actual pseudonyms and some chose to use their real names. Additionally, the pronouns used in the narratives reflect the pronouns used by the participants to describe themselves. Frequently when people do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, they choose pronouns that best describe their current identity. This is also true for people who feel as though the gender space they occupy does not fit within the usual cultural binary categories. Therefore, occasionally I will use “they” or “their” to refer to an individual participant, as that is the pronoun preferred by that person. In other cases, I will use the pronoun “ze” and its counterpart “zir.” These pronouns follow the guidelines published by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (2016) and the Trans Student Educational Resources webpage (2016) (see websites for further information on the use of gender pronouns) and are becoming increasingly popular for those who do not claim a specific gender label.

I will begin by sharing participant definitions of bullying, and then move onto exploring the types of bullying they experienced in school and elsewhere. I will also present these chronologically through the life course, beginning with elementary school and progressing through middle and high school. I will note experiences after high school as well, as there are some changes in the types of bullying experienced as the participants aged.
Participant Definitions of Bullying

I began each interview by asking the participants to describe how they defined bullying, in part to see if or how much their answers differed from the definitions in the literature. Three participants’ answers were illustrative. A.J.’s definition is very succinct and covers a lot of area: “behavior that ostracizes, targets and offends.” Garrett’s definition was also all encompassing, but a bit more detailed.

That’s a hard one. ‘cause, honestly, I feel like just not accepting a person for who they are, even if you don’t bash them or you don’t put them down, but if you just don’t accept the person for who they are, you’re a bully.

Garrett’s definition is important because it goes beyond behavior. Most definitions of bullying are clearly situated in behavior of one person toward another, but his is almost at a “spiritual” level in that it addresses what one holds in one’s heart toward another person. Codie’s answer, below, addresses something different yet again: “I would define bullying as either physically or verbally or emotionally denigrating someone or abusing them for no—there is never a reason. I’ll stop there.” Codie’s answer addresses the aspects seen in scholarly definitions of bullying (physically, verbally, emotionally denigrating someone), but also shows how the act has not justification. He does not say “for no reason,” although he starts to. He stops himself, and makes the point that “there is never a reason.” I interpreted this as meaning there is never a reason that can justify treating another person that way. Clearly bullies offer plenty of reasons for bullying, and Codie heard some of them in his youth, however his answer shows that he does not accept the reasoning behind the behavior. Although none of the participants seemed necessarily prepared to answer a question on what bullying is, they were all able to come up with some sort of response. Most of these were generally in line with the definitions in bullying literature.
Experiences of Bullying

Similar to the findings of GLSEN’s school climate research in Michigan (GLSEN, 2013), the participants reported experiencing bullying at school, with many of them reporting that they were first aware of it very early on (preschool or elementary school). Some, however, noticed it more in middle school or high school. There was only one participant who did not notice any bullying in school; she attended a very small school (about 50 students total) that was staffed by a large number of adults.

A variety of bullying was experienced by the participants, but the majority reported verbal harassment (e.g., being called names or being threatened) \(n = 23, 95.8\%\), and half reported physical harassment (e.g., being shoved or pushed) \(n = 12, 50\%\). Common tactics included being outcast from social groups, experiencing incidents of sexual harassment, having rumors spread about them, and having personal items stolen or damaged. Only one participant reported cyber-bullying, although he stated it was not much since social networking (e.g., Facebook) was not common “back then.” Most troubling, however, were reports of physical assaults \(n = 8, 33.33\%\) and sexual assaults \(n = 2, 8.3\%\). Physical assaults were more common throughout elementary, middle, and high school, while sexual assaults were reported in both elementary and high school. To better contextualize the range of bullying, I will begin with elementary school bullying and progress to incidents in other later life (educational) stages.

Bullying in Elementary School

GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, mentioned earlier) has been studying school safety for LGBT young people for years. More recently, they have teamed with Harris Interactive to expand their research to include the elementary school climate in the United States (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). This research was undertaken, in part, due to the increasing
awareness of the “unacceptable price of prejudice” in the U.S. (Byard, 2012, p. xiv) throughout the educational spectrum. The research is aimed at gaining “insight into the precursors of the types of biased language and bullying that characterize secondary schools” (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012, p. xv), so that effective action can be taken to make schools safer. According to the research “the most common reason for being bullied or called names, as well as feeling unsafe at school, is physical appearance” (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012, p. xvii). They further found that biased remarks in elementary school have two main foci: intellectual ability and the use of the word “gay” in a negative manner. Additionally, sexist language and gender stereotypes are commonly heard, as are homophobic remarks, and negative remarks about race, ethnicity, and religion (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). This was frequently the case in the narratives of my participants.

**Verbal Harassment in Elementary School**

My respondents discussed experiencing or seeing their peers be teased for being “different” throughout elementary school. Difference was demarcated through a variety of means: having dry skin, being Black, being overweight, being poor, being wealthy, being quiet, being smart, belonging to a particular religion, or having unusual sounding names. As early as elementary school, they also reported being bullied for being gay, or too effeminate, or for otherwise not performing gender correctly.

Jennifer talked about what she saw in first grade: “anytime you had a reason for someone to be not the same as everyone else, then you just come up with something to laugh at about them.” Ash first noticed bullying in elementary school and noted it was about body shaming, recalling comments such as “‘You’re fat or scrawny.’ Just a lot of nitpicky things that would come up as harmless, but would start the body shaming really early.” A.J. talked about being
bullied for his weight, among other things: “I don’t’ know, I’ve always been different. So some people questioned that . . . In fourth grade I remember being bullied in particular about my weight, second grade, too.” Tristan experienced bullying due to zir race.

So, mostly all the stuff that I had was race-related. So when I was in elementary school, I had dreadlocks, and I had had dreadlocks since second grade, and people would make fun of my hair saying it was nappy and like spiders and they would call me Medusa . . . It was more like people saying my hair was weird or that I was weird or my clothes were weird. They just kept saying I was weird, and I didn’t understand why people kept calling me weird.

As Tristan illustrates, many had an awareness of being “different” from their peers in some way, even if they were not clear about how they differed. It was striking how much of this related to sexuality and gender identity. Tequila described some of the early bullying he recalled, and he connected it to gender:

I really registered what bullying was when I was in . . . like first or second grade, when kids would push girls away, like, “Ew, you’re a girl” or “You have cooties.” Even though it was a little thing, it’s still in a sense bullying because of gender, not [because] of who they are.

Likewise, Sam noticed that he would be bullied for being “different,” recalling, “They were pointing, saying I was different. They would bully me about my skin. They’d bully me and then they’d say like things like ‘you’re gay.’ Most of them didn’t even know what it meant.” I asked Sam if he knew he was gay in elementary school because I was surprised to hear of children that age using that particular phrase. “Um, yeah, I knew I was different. My mom knew I was gay when I was five.” Although his peers were calling him “gay,” Sam was not clear at this point what that meant or if it applied to him. Like he said, he knew he was “different.” It is interesting that elementary students used the word “gay,” since developmentally it is unlikely they have much knowledge of sexuality.
Discussing the range of bullying in elementary and middle school, Risman and Seale (2010) note how often children will conflate sexuality and gender expression, thinking that they signify the same things. Hence being called “gay” or “faggot” before even being aware of their own sexuality. Even at this early of an age, bullying seems targeted at non-traditional gender representations as indicative of sexuality. This continues into other levels of schooling, but at this juncture it can be viewed, in part, as a developmental issue. Young people are not taught about the differences in sexuality and gender expression at an early age, and they thereby read them as the same thing. At the same time, these words are being used to police the gender expressions of youth perceived as not meeting expected gender standards.

Similar to Sam’s experience, Mal noticed that he began to hear the word “faggot” as early as second grade.

In second grade, a little girl called me a faggot. That was about the age where the name-calling started, and being gay, I started getting called gay, and that was when I started to identify with what was going on with me. You know, ’cause [that’s] when it was explained to me that it was when girls like girls. I didn’t know that I was trans at that point. I knew I was different. I knew that I’d always wanted to be a boy.

In this case, Mal’s gender expression became a marker of his perceived sexuality by his peers, similar to what was reported by Risman and Seale (2010). Gage also described being targeted for his perceived sexuality. “Um, it had to start in early elementary school. Folks would always be like, there’s that kid, his name’s Gage, and they’re like, ‘Gay Gage!’ and stuff of that nature.” Kenny also reported being teased for choosing to play with girls at recess and preferring “girl” toys.

These incidents show that elementary-aged students are policing their peers for their gender performance and what they believe that means about their sexuality. In terms of elementary school bullying, then, similar to what GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2012) found,
most of what the respondents experienced was verbal harassment. Sadly, however, I also heard reports of physical and sexual assaults in elementary school.

**Physical and Sexual Assaults in Elementary School**

Two participants experienced physical assaults in elementary school, and one also reported a sexual assault. One participant, Mal, experienced multiple assault incidents at school. One incident brought on a significant asthma attack that required treatment; alarmingly, this incident resulted in zero consequences for the students who attacked him. Below Mal discussed another incident that also indicated the school’s lack of response.

The next big one that I remember, I was in fifth grade—no, fourth grade. We were in a classroom, and at that point the hatred was just evident, and the teacher had stepped out and . . . The corner of my paper on an art project touched somebody’s desk and the boys started to repeatedly hit me. . . . [It] bruised my back instantly, like they were hitting me hard enough to leave instant bruises. My mom happened to show up at the school to drop off something and checked in on me, and I was in the hallway bawling my eyes out and she was like, ‘What happened?’ At this point she was very aware of what was going on at school, and um, she lifted up the back of my shirt and she was absolutely furious, walked me down to the principal’s office and showed her what had happened and explained [the situation] to her. The principal’s response was, “Well, kids are very territorial at this age.”

In this situation, a concerned parent and evidence of physical assault were both present and immediately brought to the principal’s attention, but nothing was done to acknowledge or remedy the situation. It is also noteworthy that Mal uses the term “hatred” here, and states that it was “evident,” indicative of the level of intensity the bullying had reached. Mal no longer felt safe at school, and the school administration chose not to intervene in the situation, basically excusing the behavior of the boys who assaulted him. Ultimately, Mal quit this school and enrolled him elsewhere.
Starr experienced almost daily bullying at school from an early age. In addition she lived in an abusive home environment, a common theme throughout many of the participants’ narratives.

I was bullied on the bus probably every afternoon. And then I’d go home and if, you know, my stepdad was angry or if he had any agitation, or if I did something even remotely that he considered wrong, I’d get beat at home. So it went back and forth between whether or not I wanted to go to school and get beat up or stay home and get beat up.

Starr described a significant assault in elementary school that happened on the bus on her way home one day:

Being 82 pounds, very malnourished, the only place I had strength were my legs. I got lifted right out of my seat and set across the back seats, when they switched over from the single back seat to the double and I got sat on as a bench the whole ride to my house. And the bus driver didn’t do anything about it.

This, however, was not the worst experience Starr had to endure. In fifth grade, she was sexually assaulted by a peer during the school day, at a spot just off school grounds that the kids knew of and that her assailant had claimed as his own. Her attacker had been provoking Starr’s friends, and she had stepped in to protect them, which resulted in her assailant inviting her to fight. When Starr showed up for the fight, however, her perpetrator had something different in mind. Starr described it:

Anyways, it just got to the point where I didn’t have my first. My first time with the three letter “s” word [sex], didn’t happen on my accord. My first time was, I had that right stripped. Not by the person I was dating, either. The person that took it was very aggressive and very closeted, I guess you could say. . . . But anyways, um, so we, I met him back at the shed and I’m like “So what are we gonna do?” And he kicked me in the gut. . . . And when that knee hit my gut, I bent over right away and that’s the last thing I remember before getting tied up.

In this case, no adults knew about the assault. The horrifying thing is that it happened so close to school, during the school day, in elementary school. Clearly for these young people, school was not a safe space. Sadly, in Starr’s case, neither was home.
In mentioned, Starr and several other participants in this research, were “polyvictims” according to bullying literature (Felix et al., 2009; see literature review). Starr was bullied for multiple reasons, such as socio-economic status, the way she looked and behaved in terms of gender, and other markers of perceived “difference” from her peers, such as her smaller stature. In their work, Felix and colleagues noted that polyvictims who perceived being bullied for gender or sexual identities were most at risk for poor outcomes in terms of their well-being. So, Starr was at high risk for experiencing poor outcomes in life, even before factoring in her abusive home life and her sexual assault. Research has shown that “exposure to interpersonal trauma can chronically and pervasively alter social, psychological, cognitive, and biological development” (D’Andrea, Ford, Stolbach, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2012, p. 187). Therefore, being exposed to different forms of violence in any of their environments can impact the well-being of youth. Additionally, the impacts increase as the types of traumatic stressors they are exposed to increase in number and type (D’Andrea et al., 2012).

It is important to note that the incidents of physical and sexual assault described here happened to participants who identified as transgender at the time of the interview. As Mal described earlier, he always knew he wanted to be a boy, and in fact thought he was for some of his childhood. Starr’s case is not as straightforward as Mal’s in terms of identity. However, what is clear is that their elementary school peers were policing them harshly for how they presented themselves, or rather, for how their peers interpreted their behaviors. They were both sent clear messages that they did not belong and were not welcome at school. Luckily, Mal’s parents were able to move him to a different school. Starr did not have that option.

These excerpts show the range of experiences the participants had with bullying in elementary school. There was a wide range of experience, from little to no bullying, to verbal
harassment, to physical and sexual assault. Many of the participants, however, noted that there were changes to the character of the bullying they received when they entered middle school.

**Bullying in Middle School**

As the youth approached the transition to middle school, different things became problematic in terms of bullying, and many of my respondents related it to sexual development. Several participants identified their changing bodies with the development of interest in sexual awareness, and they noted an overall change in behaviors between genders in school. The fairly harmless notion of “cooties” began to be replaced by suspicions of sexual interest in boys or girls. At this time, also, they noted that gender norms had different meanings, in that some of the clothing choices they made began to be identified as problematic by their peers. Additionally, this is when bodies became more relevant to their peers. Brent referred to a “swish” in his walk, and how that made everyone assume he was gay. Jennifer discussed how her clothing choices suddenly became problematic, as people did not know how to place her in terms of gender, whereas in elementary school her choices were not an issue. Tyler noted an increase in bullying about his weight at this time.

The character of much of this bullying, then relates to developing bodies, heightened awareness of gender roles and their meaning, and assumptions of sexuality based upon appearance. At the same time, the character of some of the bullying seemed to take on that of “gender policing.” Gender policing is when young people target their peers’ behavior (or assumed behaviors, based upon their gender expression) as a means of letting them know they are not meeting hegemonic gender expectations (Connell, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Risman & Seale, 2010). The messages are intended to correct the behavior of the peers and bring them back in line with culturally valued scripts of masculinity and femininity.
Duncan (1999) talks about bodily issues becoming more evident for young people in school around this time of life, and notes how boys and girls can be teased for not just their clothing choices, but for the perceived attractiveness of their bodies. Therefore, the teasing around being fat can become more problematic at this point in time, as it signifies a lack of sexual attractiveness, which we saw for Tyler. For girls, bodily attacks can become more personalized than they do for boys. Ember becomes a “slut” for being bisexual. Jennifer becomes both invisible to males because the boys don’t know how to read her gender presentation and targeted by females since they assume she is a lesbian. In this case, Jennifer experienced both visibility as a perceived lesbian and invisibility as an unknown.

**Verbal Harassment in Middle School**

Jennifer was verbally bullied in middle school because of how she chose to dress.

Once puberty hit, and people started to learn about sex, then I was like, I had no friends, actually. It was just like, I just hung out by myself and didn’t talk because people couldn’t categorize me, I don’t think. . . . People in general, our culture, when they’re young, they learn a concept of boy and learn a concept of a girl, and they don’t learn about anything in between. I was somewhere in between. And when people were like in middle school, it shifts ‘cause it’s not just, we’re all kids and we hang out. It’s the boys, if they talk to a girl, it means they wanna kiss them, and the girls, if they talk to a boy it means they’re gonna date them. So no one knew what to do with me. When you learn, like, that you have a vagina and this is actually what it is, then that’s when I started getting bullied.

Jennifer also discussed how boys and girls treated her differently due to what she described above.

Yeah, it didn’t [get physical] ’cause it was girls. Boys just thought I was gross ’cause I looked like a lesbian to them, like a stereotype of a lesbian. . . . I was just, I was bullied by them, but not for being, like, boys didn’t use the word “lesbian.” They just said I was ugly, or gross. But girls would, like actually want to say I was a lesbian. I don’t know what it was. Just like, I like wearing these pants. That’s why I’m wearing them. I don’t know.
In Jennifer’s story illustrates some of her confusion and sadness. She likes wearing pants, but to her peers there is something else, something “other” that they are perceiving. Jess had a similar experience in terms of how she was choosing to dress.

So when I went to Michigan I started dressing like a tomboy. . . . I dressed like a boy and that was heavily criticized by kids . . . I remember in 8th grade I got all of these tank tops but I was still a tomboy, so I wore all these tank tops trying to fit in. But I would wear basketball shorts and it would be so confusing to people. I was kind of taking a step to being more womanly but also still dressing for myself and so it was a very confusing time.

Here Jess and Jennifer were bullied for not dressing enough like girls. Similarly, some of the males I interviewed were bullied for not dressing or appearing enough like boys. Take, as example, Tequila’s explanation.

Well, I looked like Napoleon Dynamite (name of a character from a popular film of the same name) because I had the huge afro. They kind of made fun of [me] that way, or they asked if I was like, “fruity.” I didn’t really understand what they were doing with that, ’cause I just didn’t pick up on it. . . . It wasn’t really physical for me, I mean I had a few altercations where people like hit me in the butt . . . [saying] “Oh, do you like it?”

Brent was bullied for the way he walked in sixth grade.

’Cause I have a swish to my hips and everybody automatically [assumed I was gay]. Yep, so. . . . I mean in the fifth and sixth grade, it was more of like the name-calling, “fag, queer, blah blah blah,” and at that time, I wasn’t sure what those words meant. So of course, straight to Google.

Gage discussed being bullied for his perceived sexuality, because, “I was wearing, like, girl clothes. I wear skin-tight pants. . . . I guess they only viewed it as, like, girls wearing them.” Kenny noticed that he was bullied more in 7th and 8th grade, or as he described it, “when puberty hit.” He was bullied in elementary school for playing with girls more than boys, and for enjoying girls’ toys, and in middle school, he said, the bullying was for the same reason, “that I was more feminine.” Here we see that the young men are also being bullied for their physical presentations of their bodies, either for how they walk, how they dress, or for their perceived femininity.
Coming out. Another factor that impacted bullying was coming out as gay or lesbian in middle school. Ash noted that they really did not get bullied until they came out in middle school. Similarly, Gage came out in middle school, and noticed that “it was like we’d be walking down the hallway and they’d just be like snickering and laughing at us. Stuff like that.” Andrew also discussed how things changed for him after he came out to some of his friends:

’Cause before I came out, um, nobody, like everybody knew me as the quiet kid, you know? I’ve always had a book in my hand, and they always knew me with a book. [I] hardly ever speak in class in front of people, and then they found that out [that I’m gay], it’s like, I’m a brand new person. [They] don’t know who I am.

For Andrew, coming out meant that he lost the group of people he considered friends. They spread rumors about him at school, and people began harassing him, calling him names, writing slurs in his textbooks, and sticking notes in his locker. Additionally, they tried to steal things from his locker and pushed him around in the hallways. Some of this behavior may be characterized as more physical harassment, although Andrew identified it as verbal harassment.

Ember described a similar experience, noting that once she came out, the nature of her relationships really changed. She went from being bullied for the more generic reasons (socio-economic status) to being bullied for her sexuality and what her peers decided that meant about who she was.

Um, well, in middle school I was made fun of ’cause I was kind of weird and was in band. I don’t know. I didn’t dress well ’cause I didn’t have a lot of money. I had glasses. Little things like that, and then, I came out in 8th grade as bisexual and my whole group of friends, I had like a pretty decent group of friends at that point, all just turned against me and stopped talking to me, told the whole school that I was bisexual, and that I was like a slut and started throwing that.

At this point in the interview, I stopped Ember to clarify why she suddenly became a “slut.” As she explained, “Apparently that’s what it means to 13-, 14-year-olds. They didn’t really know
what it meant, I don’t think. I mean, now that I think about it, how can you really comprehend that at that age?”

Ember further discussed how she started becoming aware of her own sexuality, and how her friends responded to that:

But I didn’t know what that meant at the time, you know, until in 8th grade, it kind of occurred to me. It dawned on me and I was like, “Oh! Oh, I think I’m in love with her. I think I’m actually . . .” I think I knew for a long time but it really just occurred to me then that that was the label of it, and so I just identified as it, and I told my friends. I was excited, you know, like, I found this out about myself. And they’re just like, “Oh my god, that’s horrible. You’re such a slut. You’re a whore, blah blah blah.” All these, like, horrible things. [They] spread rumors about me, and it was awful.

So for Ember, a moment of excitement about figuring out her own sexuality became something totally different in the eyes of her “friends” and had serious impacts on her relationships in school. Coming out changed the nature of the bullying she experienced.

Although Codie, who grew up in a very rural area, did not come out, he was very clear about how bodily changes were creating issues at school, to the point where he felt he needed to practice some deception in order to fit in and avoid being bullied. Codie, who now identifies as transmasculine, was living and presenting as a gender nonconforming female in middle school.

Middle school was always weird because there were a lot of expectations around developing bodies and sexuality, and I was not into boys at all. I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to think about any of that shit and so I remember, like, telling somebody that I had a crush on a boy so they wouldn’t think I was weird and so I could fit in. But then someone told the boy so it was kind of a mess . . . . But yeah, middle school was weird because gender-wise, I was not fitting in and there was so much that I was just repressing about my own sexuality at the time.

Duncan’s (1999) findings on bullying during this time period, and its implications of sexuality and bodies in school, were very evident in the lives of the participants in my research.

Developmentally during this time, bodies are transforming, ideas about gendered relationships
are changing, and sexuality becomes more present as young people start to understand who they are, or in some cases, who they are not.

While many participants identified bullying in middle school as more related to changing bodies and sexuality, for others bullying was similar in character to what was reported in elementary school. Take, for example, Cass’ experiences:

I wasn’t picked on so much at school for being LGBT, so much as being poor. And um, a lot of people used to make fun of me for that, and I was a pretty big target, ’cause I was pretty quiet most of the time. And, I guess because I made good grades people didn’t quite like that. And I saw it happen to a lot of other people that were kind of like me, too. Um, none of it was usually physical, but it was a lot of name-calling and stuff like that.

The verbal harassment in middle school, then, ranged from attacks on difference in terms of socio-economic status, bodily changes, style of dress, and perceived sexuality. At this time, there seemed to be more relational bullying, in that rumors were often spread about peers and their perceived sexuality, such that some of the participants became bigger targets for harassment. Many also saw a change in their support relationships, losing friends as consequence of the harassment. Such changes were also accompanied by greater physical threats.

Physical Assaults in Middle School

Physical assault became problematic in middle school for five of the 24 participants (20.8%). In particular, Brent discussed being assaulted in middle school, and he relates this to his perceived sexuality:

In 7th grade I got jumped, and that was my huge, life-changing experience with the whole LGBT community and everything. . . . Um, it was wintertime, it was kind of darker out, and all of a sudden they just kind of circled around me and I got a nail to the face. I fell to the ground. I wasn’t expecting it, obviously, and yeah, from there, I just got beat on.
Ash shared a disturbing story of a middle school assault as well. It happened in the small rural town that was generally perceived to be predominantly Christian. Ash and their girlfriend were attacked by a group of five boys and girls.

I had a group of kids try to chase us down and set me and my girlfriend on fire. . . . They literally chased us with lighters and tried to set us on fire. It is one of the most distinct memories I have of when I was a child.

In this case, as was the case with Mal in elementary school, adults at school knew about the incident, but did nothing. Ash shared that, “When their parents found out about it, they were okay with it. There was no chastisement or getting in trouble. It was ‘they shouldn’t be presenting as lesbians in front of my children.’”

Both of these excerpts show that, for some participants, the general school climate was one in which a violent response to gender “outlaws” (Bornstein, 1995), or those perceived to be sexual or gender minorities, was tolerated or even condoned. In neither Brent’s nor Ash’s case did anything happen to those who assaulted them. Tyler’s experience was a little different, however.

I got into a fight in 8th grade. [I] never got in fights, but someone tried to jump me. I don’t know why, don’t know anything, and I beat the tar out of them (laughs). It was well known in the school, and [I] never had a problem after that. I was fine (laughs). I was really quiet. Yeah, like . . . I didn’t, like that’s the thing. I was, I would let people shove me into lockers and stuff, and bully me, and just one day I just had enough, and I just like went off and then never had a problem after that.

Later in our conversation, Tyler referred to this incident again, although this time it became clear that what happened was more than just a “normal” fight.

After the fight, there was nothing really. People just left me alone. It was a bad fight. It was like ambulance, police; that was a bad fight. I was pretty chubby. I was hard to get off anybody. One person wasn’t getting me off anybody, so . . .

In his first telling of the scenario, Tyler admits that he was usually quiet and that he generally accepted the bullying and the physical harassment he endured (being shoved into lockers). He
describes his response this time as, “I just, like, went off.” He had had enough. It is not until later in conversation that he revisits the situation and reveals the severity of it. The fact that an ambulance was called, as well as the police, indicates this was a very serious event, or as Tyler said, “a bad fight.” For a self-admitted quiet young man, who took a lot of bullying from people, to resort to this level of response is telling.

I will pause a moment here to clarify my terminology. My use of the term “assault” is purposeful, and speaks to the nature of the behavior that actually happened. If I were to simply refer to what happened to Brent, Ash, or Tyler as bullying, it would be easy to minimize these experiences. Clearly, these incidents are not insignificant forms of bullying that can be swept away with the justification that “boys will be boys,” “kids can be territorial at that age,” or other explanations that downplay the severity of the behavior. The designation of assault is important here, as we are seeing that young people’s lives can be at stake in these situations.

These narratives of middle school experiences of bullying have shown, once again, that this form of victimization happens across a spectrum. Verbal harassment and physical assault show the range of experience at this level of education for the respondents, and changing bodies and emerging identities appear to become more focal. Bullying in high school is similar, with some reporting that it started to taper off as their peers matured. That was not the case for everyone, however.

**Bullying in High School**

Similar to elementary school and middle school, high school bullying continued to be about difference. However, given the development of the adolescents, the focus on sexual and gender behavior remained. Brent noticed that the amount of bullying he experienced really changed: “Yeah, um, I mean kind of when I got into the 11th grade it just kind of simmered
Kenny experienced very little bullying in high school as well, but what he did experience was similar to middle school. “It was still the same. It was always my voice, and my [mannerisms]. But it was all verbal. It was never physical.” The only physical incident he recalled had to do with his brothers, who attended the same school. “Like, my brothers would get tormented about it, and one time my brother pushed somebody into a locker” (for calling Kenny a name). For other respondents, however, verbal harassment continued to be a problem.

**Verbal Harassment in High School**

Mal, who had experienced physical assault in elementary school, noted that in high school the bullying changed, reverting back to verbal harassment. “It’s the whole Catholic school thing . . . but the physical stopped, and it was just the name calling again, and the talking about how I was gay and whatnot, even though I’d never come out.”

Chad had a similar experience to Kenny, except his friends (rather than brothers) were harassed for being friends with him, due to his LGBT status.

There were kids that got harassed just for being friends with me. I didn’t have a lot of male friends in high school because of that, because most of them were afraid of being accused of being gay or getting harassed just by being friends with me.

This example speaks to the power of hegemonic masculinity for young men. It is so important to be perceived as “properly male” that it becomes dangerous to have relationships with males who are known to be gay (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Klein (2012) refers to this as “masculinity imperatives” (p. 5) and links them to the larger cultural problem of “hypermasculinity,” (p. 87) which she states is cultivated when men are in danger of being labeled as having “inadequate” masculinity. Klein states that distancing oneself from what is perceived as “feminine or homosexual” (p. 86) becomes a way to preserve dominant masculine...
status. In this context, then, what Chad describes makes sense; this is more gender policing in action. What we see from this, however, is what it costs Chad in terms of his relationships.

There were others who also discussed how their sexuality became problematic in terms of relationships with their peers. Darian, the young woman who said she did not experience any bullying in school, later recalled incidents from high school, one of which holds religious undertones about her sexuality:

Yeah, I do remember I had a friend in school that was more outward about who he was, and they made him publicly apologize to the class for being gay. . . . It was like an assembly; they gave him a microphone and gathered us all in the chapel. . . . I definitely had my own struggles with the kids there. Like I remember, it was so passive aggressive, people would drop off books at my door about homosexuals going to hell.

In Darian’s case, her peers left materials letting her know her behavior was unacceptable. Gloria’s experience with peers regarding her sexuality was different, but shared a similar message.

The one instance I can remember with bullying that’s related to LGBT issues . . . I was super, super head-over-heels in love with my best friend my junior year and I didn’t know it, right? ’Cause I had no idea that I was even, like, went that way. I just thought she was my best friend in the whole world and that’s it, you know? And, we got in kind of a fight, whatever, and I, long story short, I end up getting drunk for the first time when I was like 17, because of things that happened with her. And uh, I was super, super drunk and I just remember like calling her on the phone a bunch of times. She was at this party, and all of her friends were making fun of the fact that I was calling her so much, and she didn’t even answer the phone. And like, I remember one of my other friends who was at the party came up to me afterwards and was like, “I just wanted to let you know, like all of her friends were saying, ‘Oh, she’s a lesbian, she’s calling you this much, she’s totally in love with you,’ and like making fun of it that night.” So I heard about it through the grapevine, you know, and it was really painful. Like, that one hurt, ’cause it was totally true and I had no idea until then, you know?

Gloria’s story relates to the relational type of bullying that seems to be more commonly experienced by girls in school. This impacted her peer relationships. The hardest part for her was realizing that she was a lesbian, and figuring it out through hearing what others had been saying about her. In this case, discovering her own sexuality was linked to being made fun of by her
peers. This is similar to what Ember experienced when she came out to her friends as bisexual in middle school and was called a “slut.” In high school, Ember was called a slut again. By this point she had moved from the diverse background of Detroit to a small conservative town on the west side of the state.

Um, and, like my first day I was a “gothic lesbian slut” because I wore black... a black blouse. [Laughs.] Yeah. They’re so conservative over there... The worst bullying I had in Detroit was people banging on the doors and yelling at me. People being mean here and I’m like, I was just ousted. Nobody would talk to me. Not for a long time. Um, just because of, I’m a lesbian... a slut lesbian. I didn’t even wear black every day. I was just... oh, man. It was weird.

“Slut bashing” is a phenomenon wherein “girls or boys question the sexual legitimacy of a target and then lash out at her with vicious names conveying that she is worthless” (Klein, 2012, p. 8). Slut bashing is a more vicious form of sexuality policing, according to Klein, because “girls’ sexuality is policed by almost everyone, and girls are seldom allowed to find their own sexual identity and expression” (p. 109). We see this in Gloria’s story, as well. Even though she was not being called a slut, her peers were policing her sexuality. For Ember, being a lesbian and wearing black equaled her being a “gothic slut lesbian” and resulted in social ostracism. Although something similar had happened to her in middle school, the episode in high school meant that she was unable to even begin to have relationships with her peers in this new environment.

Max spoke of a similar type of gender and sexuality policing in high school. He attended a large and racially diverse high school where he was bullied for his sexuality. At this time of his life, Max was female-identified and was identifying as a lesbian. He described his bullying as predominantly being about sexuality, “but also because of my gender expression, because I was a dyke lesbian. So even though I wasn’t trans then, there was still an element of gender intimidation and gender politics that didn’t jive with the rest of the school.” Max noted that he
did not have problems with bullying in middle school because he was not out then, but high school was a very different experience.

A lot of the violence, though, was targeted at the queer kids. A lot of the anger and confusion was all pointed at us rather than students of color. It was mainly queer kids and queer kids of color and I really noticed that when I was in school. We were the lowest after any other social group and a lot of people chose to stay in the closet because of it . . . We were really on our own to protect ourselves, so being that open at that young of an age, I experienced bullying frequently. Even though I’m outgoing and I’m friends with everyone, I still got bullied those first few months of freshman year before everyone got to know me, and it still really made an impact . . . Definitely at my school there were instances of physical bullying and verbal intimidation to the point where kids would miss school frequently.

Max’s story references a problem that is frequently addressed in GLSEN research (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). When LGBT young people experience bullying, it can lead to absences from school that can in turn lead to educational complications. The presence of what GLSEN calls a “hostile school climate,” or one in which students experience victimization and discrimination, “affects students’ academic success and mental health,” wherein those students experience “worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being” (GLSEN, 2014a, p. 6).

Another aspect of Max’s story that is salient is the fact that he mentions the intersections of race and queer status. Intersectionality definitely played a role in bullying for Max as well as other participants. Tristan, in particular, acknowledged that race continued to be a pivotal part of the bullying ze experienced, in spite of the fact that ze also attended a larger, more racially diverse high school.

High school was the worst though, because me coming out just made it a lot harder. But like, I feel like more people were accepting of me being trans and being queer than me being Black, ’cause like, when I came out in high school, all of my teachers were really accepting, which I lucked out on because I had the best teachers in high school. But it was the fact that I kept getting bullied in high school for race, not me being a guy, it was me being Black. So it’s just an interesting dynamic with how that works.
In Tristan’s story, like Max, having an intersectional identity adds different meanings to experiences of bullying. Max went on to discuss how the identities of bullying victims made a difference in how the school responded.

Yeah everyone would know it was going on but nobody would do anything. Faculty and students, no one would do anything. If it was a racial instance or if it was against a group for being nerds or the drama geeks, it would be taken care of. But the queer kids were such a small group . . . After any of the attacks we couldn’t tell our parents because a lot of us weren’t out freshman year, and even throughout the various grades we weren’t out, so we were stuck between a rock and a hard place because we couldn’t tell our parents, we couldn’t tell administration because they already knew, and other students wouldn’t align with us because we were on the bottom of the totem pole. It was this feeling of being trapped that was the scariest part.

In this instance, then, Max notes that racial bullying or bullying against other groups of kids was addressed, but bullying of queer kids was not. This clearly speaks to a lack of safety for these young people, especially since, as Max notes, many of them were not out to their parents, so they could not go to their parents for support either. Intersectionality matters here. If Max was bullied because his peers were racist, he may have gotten support. However, if Max was bullied because his peers were not accepting of other aspects of his identity (gender expression, sexuality), he would not be supported. Sadly, both Tristan and Max also reported experiencing assaults in high school due to their intersected identities, but predominantly due to their sexuality or gender identities.

**Physical and Sexual Assaults in High School**

Tristan was physically assaulted in high school after he came out as transgender. He shared his story:

So, after I came out as trans when I was 17. Three days after I came out I was assaulted. . . . I usually don’t tell people this, but for the purposes of this interview I wanted to. So, I was walking to the bathroom and . . . these three really big guys came and shoved me into the locker and just started kicking me and they started saying like, “You’re a freak. You should just die. You can’t be a guy.”
After this incident, Tristan went to school officials.

I told them I didn’t feel safe in the hallways and they, like, tried to look on the cameras and there was nothing, absolutely nothing. So, what might have happened is they hid in a sweet spot where no cameras were showing. It’s interesting because it like happened on the third floor and I refuse to go back on the third floor anymore. My parents don’t know. I never told my parents . . . all I did was, I would be, like, in the band room eating my food.

For Tristan, finding a safe environment in school, the band room, in this case, as well as some high school teachers who were supportive of ze and zir identity, was very important.

Max also shared a disturbing story about being assaulted in high school. Max’s assault, however, was sexual and he identified it as “corrective.” “I use the term because that was the person’s intent,” he said. Max’s story shows a level of elevation of peer gender and sexuality policing, in that Max’s sexual assault was meant to “correct” Max’s “unacceptable” gender/sexuality performance (Hames, 2011; Lehavot & Simpson, 2012). Even more disturbing is that Max identified the perpetrator as one of his best friends.

So that happened my freshman year . . . What happened was, it was after rehearsal and I was ambushed by one of my best friends. He was on the football team, but he was trying to essentially be in the group, so his initiation was trying to turn me. So that happened.

Overall, these experiences of high school bullying show that for some, high school was a safer environment, but for others it was more dangerous. Through the experiences of Max and Tristan, intersectionality becomes quite clear as an important factor in bullying. Moreover, authorities may respond (or not) based upon their own feelings about student identities.

Additionally, these intersectional identities also qualify Max and Tristan as polyvictims.

**Bullying Beyond High School**

Most bullying literature does not address this form of victimization beyond high school. In part, I believe this is because bullying is something we associate with youth. Once people are
no longer in high school, we have different assumptions about the way they are treated. It is not that they are no longer treated badly, but that we no longer have a special category for it. Pritchard (2013) contests the idea of different stages of development and issues of identity, as developmental stages are social constructions and identity categories continue to be relevant in adulthood. In society, however, when speaking of adults, we are more intentional about using the language of harassment or assault. If adults are being bullied, we seem to have less concern about it as a society, although there are some who study how adults treat one another in different contexts, such as workplace violence or sexual harassment. Originally, I had planned to stop my exploration of bullying with high school. However, other stories emerged from the participants that are worthy of discussion.

In her book, *The Bully Society*, Jessie Klein (2012) speaks of adult bullies, parent bullies, coach bullies, and teacher bullies, as well as what she calls the “bully economy” in America. She argues that American society tells students that “financial wealth and superficial gender markers are compulsory for social acceptance” and are implicated in one’s chances for future success as adults (p. 155). Klein says these values are embedded in American culture and are reflected in schools, where “competitive and punishment-oriented schools mirror the combative workforce” (p. 157). She compares our country’s values to European economies, which she argues, “tend to prioritize family and community as a primary value” (p. 159). Within the context of life in America, bullying has become somewhat normative, according to Klein. When this happens, then, young queer adults experience bullying in multiple contexts of their lives. Although this is somewhat parenthetical to the discussion of bullying in this research, she makes some compelling points that relates directly to my participants’ experiences. The first context I will explore is that of institutional bullying.
Institutional Bullying

In her interview, Darian was the only respondent who stated that she had not experienced bullying in her school environment. As stated earlier, she attended a very small school with a strong adult presence, so that there were multiple adults available to students if they needed to talk to someone. Later, however, Darian did recall some high school bullying, however when she went away to seminary, she had a very different experience. As she shared, “I got kicked out of college for being gay. . . . I had to deal with being pushed aside like I didn’t deserve an education because I was gay.” Darian described the experience in detail:

Like we go to school to learn and to become these accepting people and to teach other’s about how God accepts us for who we are and for you not to be accepting is just (silence) . . . I remember it was the day of finals and my RA came in and was like “Hey the RD wants to see you.” I told her I had a final and couldn’t skip it to go to the meeting and she was like, “No, you need to go.” So I missed my final and failed it because I wasn’t there, but I was just so bombarded because it was my RA, my RD, the dean of the school, the dean of discipline. Everyone [was] there and I felt like they were attacking me. And now, when I think about it . . . I just felt so attacked. I couldn’t even speak, I was just trying not to cry. . . . They told me that I could leave on my own or I could go through a hearing in front of my peers and it’s like, ‘They don’t like me.’”

When you first go into the seminary they make you sign this paper, this covenant, that you won’t do this specific thing and homosexual acts was (sic) in there, and I didn’t sign it because I already knew [I am a lesbian]. And that was one of the things they kept saying, “When you come into the school you agree to the covenant.” I was like, “Well, I didn’t sign it.” But whatever. I just felt so attacked and they came at me with all these points highlighted in the covenant and if they had been planning this out why didn’t they tell me? Why didn’t they give me time so I could defend myself?

This experience differs from the others in this research, in that the perpetrator of the bullying was the administration of an institute of higher education, a seminary no less. In her story, we can hear Darian’s difficulty with the incongruity of her view of religion and its teachings and the actions taken by the school’s administration. Additionally, she felt “bombarded,” as if the school had been planning this for some time but did not care to allow her
a venue in which to defend herself and her actions. Like she stated, she did not sign the covenant when she entered the seminary, and that was a major part of the case for expelling her.

Darian responded to the school administrators on her own behalf, without the support of her mother, who agreed with the decision of the school. However, Darian’s response, as well as the reaction of the school and her peers, is noteworthy.

I remember putting forth my case. I wrote a long letter with an email with biblical facts and articles. I wrote about 15 pages. . . . Basically what they told me was, “Sorry. It’s not going to work.” It was so interesting to see, and then I learned after I left that they had speakers come in about homosexuality and they said we should love everybody. . . . I talk to people there that are still my friends and they believe I left on my own.

For Darian, even though she did what she could to support herself using the tools she had learned in seminary, the outcome was unchanged. Additionally, the school had taken a public stance on acceptance of homosexuality in such a way that even her friends believed that her expulsion was her fault.

Yip and Page (2013) would describe Darian’s experience as an example of the seminary exhibiting the social control function of religion in the form of compulsory heterosexuality. Yip and Page found that such actions by institutionalized religious groups “produced a sense of alienation” among the lesbian participants in their study (p. 29). They further noted that some of the struggles of young people within their religious environments are “reflective of the heteronormative structure embedded in familial, cultural and religious spaces” that young people must navigate and negotiate (p. 122). This connects to my earlier discussion (Chapter 2) of the importance of spaces in the lives of emerging adults. Spaces are where young people do a lot of work, navigating and negotiating their identities (Tilleczek, 2011), or as Yip and Page state, “the places in which multiple, intersecting identities are lived out” (p. 11). For Darian, the space of
her seminary became unwelcoming and unsafe because of her sexual identity, and ultimately she was unable to remain part of that space because of who she was.

**Bullying at Large**

Although Darian was the only participant to share a story of blatant institutional bullying, other participants shared stories that one participant, A.J., for a lack of a better term, referred to as “bullying at large.” This type of bullying relates to a cultural acceptance of normative heterosexuality, and an implicit agreement that perpetrators of gender or sexual deviance are acceptable targets of violence. Barbara Perry (2001) refers to this type of thinking as “cultural permission to hate” (p. 103). Perry states that “abundant myths, stereotypes, images, and ideologies simultaneously support gendered and unequal relations of power, labor, and sexuality as well as the resultant gender-motivated violence” (p. 103). In terms of sexuality, Perry (2009) also discussed the “extensive cultural mythology that facilitates anti-gay sentiment and activity. It is a mythology that constructs gay identities as dangerous and wicked” (p. 434), as well as sinful, ill, and sometimes criminal.

Some of the stories from participants of their experiences after high school seem to fall more into this category, as will be explored below. Chad and Tyler both described instances of being near people in public who expressed homophobic sentiments. Tyler dealt with this by loudly saying, “Excuse me?” to the offender. However others were more subdued. Chad stated, “I mean, every once in a while there’s still harassment out in public. You never know what kind of person you’re gonna run into.” Codie discussed a couple of minor incidents: one in which someone threw a firecracker at him in his hometown, and one where a male stranger called him “fag” when he was driving in the town where he now lives. Such instances are perhaps more
severe forms of microaggressions, where cultural permission to hate appears to be embodied in bullying at large contexts.

**Gender/Sexuality microaggressions.** Earlier in this research, I defined microaggressions as a form of simple interactions through which gender and sexual minorities are targeted. The main message conveyed by microaggressions is that the target does not belong or is somehow Other (Sue, 2010). As an example, Jennifer discussed not pursuing therapy because she was tired of people asking her certain questions. She stated, “It’s already annoying enough to have to be always dealing with ‘Why are you gay? Is it ’cause you were abused?’” She also discussed a professional colleague who would phone her to discuss her sexuality, saying things like, “It must stink to be a lesbian because the way you guys have sex just isn’t as good. It just can’t be,” and “How can you even do it? Like, explain [it] to me.” When Jennifer let the woman know she was being offensive, the woman began to cry, replying, “Everyone’s just too over-sensitive.”

Jess and Darian shared a recent incident of microaggression they experienced while shopping at a local Target.

Darian: There was this little girl at Target today and we were holding fingers.

Jess: She gave us the hardest side eye.

Darian: Her head went sideways and her mom was at the café and we were just laughing and I was like, “Let’s just get out of here.” And I can see that her eyes were looking at us holding hands, and she was so confused. And we walked past, and she was like, “Ew.”

A.J. described a microaggression that he experiences rather frequently:

For example, when I’m at work, when someone asks me my name and I say “A.J.,” that’s final. I often get “Is that short for anything?” Um, that’s not your business. I said my name. This is my name. Don’t press me any further. That’s definitely a slight against me, and as someone who’s gender queer, that other person is effectively saying “I don’t think that you were born with this name.”
These examples show that my participants continue to receive social messages from people that who they are and how they present themselves in the world is not acceptable. Microaggressions “affect the quality of life and standard of living for marginalized groups in our society,” and “the harm they produce operates on a systemic and macro level” (Sue, 2010, p. 16). In addition to experiencing microaggressions, some participants discussed forms of workplace bullying, which are another aspect of bullying at large.

**Workplace climate.** Jennifer discussed her workplace, where she was not directly bullied, but where homophobia was evident. During one instance, she was part of an interview process for a new hire. She initially enjoyed the candidate, until this happened: “So, he started saying like, ‘Why are you guys drinking that . . . gay ass beer out of those faggot glasses?’” Jennifer decided to strategically inform the management that the applicant might not be the best candidate. She went on to describe how she felt about the situation. “And that guy was a nice guy, but he said that, so I had to stop him ’cause I don’t wanna have to hang out with someone who’s gonna be secretly making dyke jokes about me.”

Similarly, A. J. shared his experiences with negotiating his identity in the workplace, which is influenced by the fact that people in Michigan can be fired for being LGBT:

I have never been out at any of my workplaces, which is odd because I’m so unabashedly queer everywhere else. . . . I feel physically safe, but I don’t feel emotionally or mentally, I guess, safe to fully be who I am at work. So that’s something I still face. Even though it’s not directed at me personally, it’s directed to people like me. . . . Maybe I won’t be fired, but I might be treated differently. It’s not worth it to me, which is unfortunate. I would love to be able to be free to be me in totality.

Bri discussed her workplace environment as well.

I mean mostly at work, it’s a job. I need it. I typically just keep my mouth shut, even though I’m hoping to sometime present the idea of some sensitivity training to my boss. There [are] racial slurs going on sometimes, when my boss is not around. . . . I’m not sensitive to everything, or wanting to pick a fight about everything, but at the same time, there’s certain privileges, straight privilege, white privilege. And you’re not aware of it.
Talking about things that you don’t know about or you aren’t aware of or don’t realize that other people are. It’s offensive.

Thankfully others did feel greater support at work when encountering prejudice. Gwyn described an incident she experienced at work shortly after beginning her gender transition.

I was working at an Old Navy . . . and it was kind of like that bumpy first few months where, like, you’re super androgynous and people don’t really know which gender and pronouns to use. I had some people outright say “I don’t wanna go through the line with a tranny,” and they were kicked out of the store.

These incidents show that workplaces can be unsafe for LGBTQ young adults, and they show some different ways in which work colleagues (or customers) exhibit bullying behaviors, as well as supportive responses. Unfortunately such support was sporadic at best. Another place that has been problematic for participants is public bathrooms, where they also experience bullying.

“Bathroom shock.” Mal discussed several incidents in his twenties, before he transitioned and when he was living as a “masculine identified lesbian,” of having issues in bars and in bathrooms, in particular. “Going out to the bars, restrooms were horrible. Adults are no better than children.” Mal identified that he “had a lot of issues with cisgender males . . . my physical safety was threatened more than once.” He described one particular incident in detail:

I had another guy another night up at [bar] back me up against a wall after coming out of a bathroom, a women’s bathroom, because his girlfriend had been in there. And he backed me up against the wall, had his hand on my chest like he was gonna pound me. And then there was a lot of calling me “it.” There were a lot of people that would make sure to be clearly asking what “it” was.

Codie also had “bathroom issues,” which he explained:

So when I was female-identified I was very butch-lesbian-identified, so if I was in a woman’s room, women would come in and look at me, or ask if I was in the right room. One time I was at a rest stop and someone looked at me, stepped out, looked at the door, looked at me, looked back at the door and then left. People always ask questions about me, and I’ve always had a lot of bathroom issues because of the way that I dress, and my feminine characteristics. There was always a lot of bathroom shock.
For Tristan, bathroom issues were a part of dorm life when ze was in college, even though the university ze attended attempted to make the residence hall a safe place.

I was on the 5th floor with my own bathroom, which was heavenly my first year. But after that I had shared spaces and lived in a dorm that was, like, segregated . . . so I would shower at 3 in the morning because I didn’t feel comfortable showering around people. That played a huge role, because my roommate at the time said she was okay with me being trans, and she really wasn’t. And like, that was a lot of bullying, because she caught me one time going to the bathroom at 3 in the morning, and she was like “Why are you taking your towel?” And I was like, “to shower,” and she kept grilling me with all these questions and I was like, “I don’t need to tell you this,” so I left.

Tristan’s final line indicates another trend within the area of bulling at large, wherein non-queer people question queer people in a manner that crosses boundaries of privacy. We saw it earlier with A.J. and people questioning his name, with Jennifer and people asking about her sexuality, and here with Tristan. Some of this results from a lack of understanding, which is natural given the fact that gender and sexual variation in our culture has been largely ignored, due to discomfort with the topic and how the issues have been historically framed. These are not issues around which there is much education, given the dominant cultural discourses about gender and sexuality. What we see in the narratives of these participants is that boundary setting becomes part of their response to the hegemonic gender and sexuality norms in society. It is extra work that young LGBTQ people have to conduct in terms of navigating the intersections of their identities and the social worlds they inhabit.

**Queer spaces, unsafe spaces?** Another area where participants noted that they experienced bullying was, surprisingly, queer spaces. Tristan and Max both reported issues within the LGBTQ community due to race, among other factors. This is another context in which intersectionality plays a significant role. For example, Max was clear about the racism he experienced in the community:
I can say, as a person of color, I have definitely been bullied in gay spaces. Being a queer black trans man is not the easiest thing. When you are black there is a lot of racism especially in the gay and queer community, because as radical as they think they are, they are so heteronormative and so white they can’t even think that a gay person of color exists. When they do they have to set a certain norm. The gay black man has to be like the sassy black girl.

Additionally, Tristan struggled with the predominantly white queer culture on zir college campus, “because LGBT people are great, but you have LGBT people that have no competency of any sort of racial issues at all.” Pritchard (2013) addresses this lack of safety in queer spaces and notes that there are numerous ways in which “queer youth experience violence in spaces that are supposed safe for LGBTQ people” (p. 337).

Both Max and Tristan also discussed issues of trans-related bullying they have experienced as young adults. In high school, band was a safe space for Tristan, but that did not translate to college, unfortunately.

I was a part of [named] marching band for a few years, but I was ostracized from my section when I came out. I was wanting to be open and be myself, and I said like, “Hey, I want to let you know I’m trans and this is the name I go by, and can you please use male pronouns?” Nothing [happened]. I was instantly ostracized, even though we had a gay black section leader.

Tristan’s experience speaks to his transgender status. Whereas the people in band accepted a gay male, they were unable or unwilling to accept a transgender male. Max also experienced issues related to being transgender, although he related some of it to “passing,” or being able to pass as one’s preferred gender.

I’ve noticed a lot of the trans bullying is in passing. Like “If they can do itm why can’t you?” Especially with trans women that have really masculine features. People will be like, “Are you sure this is best for you, because you are never going to really look like a woman?” I’ve heard that so many times. I’ve had friends who will never meet the female norms, they will never strike cues as cis[gender], but they are comfortable with themselves and they have to be. I think the hardest part is knowing that they had to go through that journey of knowing that they don’t pass and they can’t go back. So where does that leave them? I think we need to start talking about trans and queer beauty norms because there are standards.
It’s hard in the trans community because not only do you have heteronormative expectations from the straight and cis[gender] community, but you have those expectations from the trans and queer communities. So we have these wealthy white trans folks who say that you can do it and pull yourself up by your boot straps, but they don’t understand that when you are black and queer and trans and poor and trying to get through college, it is really hard. I didn’t start hormones till last June, but I’ve been out since freshman year of college and a lot of people have always asked me when I was going to start, and now it’s “When are you going to have top surgery?” Like, where am I getting this money?

To the point on beauty standards, Max noted that there are additional pressures he experiences within the community—to get “that perfect queer haircut,” for example. Sadly, for him, “It almost feels like when I go into trans spaces my dysphoria will be triggered,” but he also acknowledged that “sometimes it feels like a competition.” Max is referring to gender dysphoria, which is a common experience for persons who identify as transgender. Gender dysphoria is defined as “psychological distress due to the incongruence between one’s body and gender identity” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2015, p. 1).

These experiences highlight some of the conflicts within the LGBTQ community. These have been present in American society since the very early days of the LGBT movement, where people started coming together to create community and safe spaces (Eaklor, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Stryker, 2008). Generally, the focus of these divisions has been on how queer people present themselves, since the goal has been public acceptance; therefore, those who do not present in ways that are seen as “acceptable” or “respectable” enough have frequently been excluded. A recent example of this is the erasure of transgender women of color from historical accounts of the events at the Stonewall Inn. When a recent film was made about this, the movement leaders, transgender women of color, were replaced with a fictional white gay male character (Stonewall, 2015).
These experiences also speak to intersectional and marginalized identities. A.J. spoke about how these intersections can be problematic in terms of finding safe spaces:

I have so many marginalized identities, and often in spaces I have to choose which one, which aspect of my identity, is more salient. Intersectionality . . . it seems to be a very difficult thing for people to grasp. I mean, I don’t think there’s any space I can just be the full summation of myself.

Collins (1990) has addressed the question of intersectionality and safe spaces for women of color. Although the participants in these excerpts do not identify as women, their voices speak to the struggles of finding safe inclusive spaces that welcome their multiple identities. This also echoes work by Perry and Ryan Dyck (2013), in which one of their participants discussed her experience as a trans woman, “We don’t trust anyone and that includes members of the queer community” (p. 58). As the participants my study stated, it is difficult to find spaces, even within the queer community, where racial and gender identities do not need to be carefully managed. As shown, there are many ways in which young queer adults are bullied by society at large.

**Physical and sexual violence.** For some young queer people, relationships can be problematic, as is true for non-queer young people. One participant, Tequila, shared that he experienced such violence as a young adult, stating “My first boyfriend physically assaulted me . . . um, once, once or twice. I’ve been sexually forced many times.” Tequila’s hesitations within the text of his narrative were clear and speak to the depth of the pain and difficulty he experienced while discussing this issue. While others disclosed instances of physical and sexual violence, his were the most poignant. In what was the most significant and severe of threats, Tequila shared his experience of being kidnapped.

There’s a time when I was actually kidnapped. I was afraid of owning [it] myself, of owning what just happened, you know? I mean, it was traumatic. I don’t know if I would’ve died. I don’t know if . . . I don’t know what would’ve happened, because he was very, very, very aggressive. Um (pause), I remember him having a tarp out. I don’t even know what for. I don’t know what for.
This is a clear example of how a young person’s gender expression and sexuality can impact his/her/zir/their safety in a world that is hostile to their identities. As noted in a few places earlier, the participants’ experiences with bullying, harassment, and other forms of victimization were not isolated to public and other extrafamilial contexts. A significant amount occurred within their families.

**Bullying at Home**

There were several participants who also discussed home as an unsafe place. Some clearly grew up in physically or emotionally abusive environments, describing physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse that was exacerbated, in some families, by mental illness. Several also mentioned alcohol abuse playing a role in their home lives. Frequently, due to their ages, they did not have the ability to leave these environments for safer havens, although many were able to find some support elsewhere. Others reported becoming homeless after running away or being cast out due to their family’s intolerance.

These experiences were an unexpected finding in my research. Many of the participants reported experiences they considered to be bullying by their families. The majority of rationales given in these contexts were religious in nature. Additionally, many found that the victimization they suffered at home was worse than what they experienced from peers. However, family experiences are rarely included in bullying literature. While Pritchard’s (2013) work addresses bullying by adults, it does not focus very directly on parents victimizing their children. Of closest relevance is his acknowledgement that “some adults are hostile to difference, diversity, and anything they deem non-normative . . . these adults respond to bullying in ways that are complicit with the violence occurring among youth, *while other adults bully their own peers and children*” (p. 337, emphasis added). He argues that in order to fully address bullying, we need to
move past “the ageist assumption of bullies being only children” (p. 337). Narrowing the conceptualization of bullying limits the lens through which safety for queer youth may be explored. It is clear that adults do not always provide safety for children, and that mistaken assumption undergirds much understanding and policy regarding bullying. Acknowledgement of such links is exceedingly rare in bullying research.

The closest aligned literature concerns family acceptance of LGBTQ young people (Ryan, 2009), though bullying is still not a part of the discussion. Such work comes out of the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University. The majority of the research by this group is focused on how family acceptance, or lack thereof (family rejection), impacts the long-term health of children (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009). (The specific section of my paper survey instrument on family responses was based on such work.) According to Ryan’s (2009) research, compared with LGBT young people who were not or only minimally rejected by their parents and caregivers,

highly rejected LGBT young people were: More than 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide; Nearly 6 times as likely to report high levels of depression; More than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs; and More than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and STDs. (Ryan, 2009, p. 5)

Ryan (2009) argues that regardless of the harm caused, families believe that they are doing what is best for their children when they practice rejecting behaviors. “Many parents believe that the best way to help their gay or transgender children thrive as adults is to help them try to fit in with their heterosexual peers” (p. 4). Many of the things that families do, then, are geared toward meeting this goal. The young people in this research, however, experience their family’s behaviors as a rejection of who they are.

Participants in my study felt similarly. Nine out of 24 (37.5%) reported being bullied by their parents and/or family. As indicated earlier, most of the bullying seemed linked to religion,
was rejective in nature, and generally seemed more problematic than the bullying received from peers. (The participants who deemed familial bullying to be worse than peer bullying are identified with asterisks in the interview excerpts below.) For some participants, family bullying seemed focused on their sexuality while for others it focused on gender presentation. Ash’s experience was a mix of both.

Yeah, growing up in a Southern Baptist household, the bullying I received from my mother was very religious motivated. She wanted a sweet little girl that wanted to be in bows and liked boys and wanted to grow up and get married and have 50 babies and the white picket fence life. And while that’s great for those that want it, that’s not my path. . . . Yeah, it was my family, my friends, my peers, my teachers at school. It was the message that what I was doing was not okay and that it was a choice I made and that I deserved what was happening to me.

Tequila* clearly stated that the victimization by his family was the worst bullying he experienced: “the biggest bullying [that] really happened to me was with family.” He continued with the following narrative:

I came from a conservative Christian household. And you know when you really don’t want to believe something is happening, or like you are something, or like you are gay, you kind of just put it in the back of your mind? Anything that’s related to that you kind of just try to forget or ignore. And that’s what I was doing. So, I didn’t address, you know, sexuality. I didn’t address romanticism, I, you know, I kind of lived in this world and I wondered why I didn’t like women. I didn’t understand why at the time. . . . My mom came home from school, she’s a school teacher, and I told her. I was like, “Hey, you know I have something to tell you.” I told her what happened and she was crying and I was crying, of course, and you know she’s like, “We can fix you. We can fix this part of you.” And I was like “Well, you know, it really hurts feeling this way, ’cause I don’t like being different. I don’t like being this way. I’ve had like, suicidal thoughts.” And she’s like, “Well, we can fix this, or you can . . .” Um, “you can . . .” Um, she said “hurt yourself.” I think what she meant was, um, “kill yourself.”

In this excerpt, the level of discomfort Tequila was feeling when sharing this story was clear. Stumbling over the words, and the content, is important in this context, because it shows the emotional impact of this discussion with his mother. Tequila continued:

I told her [mom] not to tell my dad, and she told my dad. And he didn’t talk to me for a good month. And when he did, he was usually yelling at me. Um, my sister would come
home from school and she would just come into my room. Like the first few weeks she would come to my room and read bible verse after bible verse telling me how I’m going to hell, um. And I was, I was like 17 or 18 at the time. And, I was, I was naïve. And I went to, um, straight therapy. . . .

Tequila’s family sent him to therapy with a Christian counselor who was not practicing conversion therapy, but nonetheless told Tequila,

“You can’t be okay for being gay.” That really hit home. That kind of made things worse for me in the end, you know? ’cause not only did I get it from a counselor, who was supposed to hold up ethics of acceptance of your identity and who you are, but I also got it from my family. The bullying from my family wasn’t physical, but it was emotional and it kind of tore me down, in a sense that, you know, “Will I ever find happiness with myself? Will I ever be okay with being gay?” You know? “Can I find an identity with Christianity and being gay?” Cause they can’t find that for me.

Tequila’s mom had a brief period of wanting to find more resources, such as an open (and affirming) church, and connecting with a PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) group in the area. Tequila’s dad, however, “had such a negative attitude towards it that he was afraid of having, ashamed of having, a gay son, and didn’t want to admit that.”

And that’s really where the bulk of my bullying came from is from my own family, [and] my church. The church people never brought it up, but they weren’t accepting. They love me for who I am, but what I am is, you know, including my identity. They don’t include that part. So, it’s kind of half-acceptance.

Tequila identified religion as very important in his life on the paper survey completed prior to our interview. His distress is well illustrated in his transcript. He wants to be able to reconcile his views of religion and his personhood, or identity, but the resources in his life (family, therapist, church), do not offer support for such reconciliation.

Andrew* also described religious-based bullying from his family, particularly his mother:

I don’t believe in what they believe in . . . So, my mom was like, “We raised you the right way and you’re just being defiant.” When they first found out and asked me [if I was gay], I’m like, “yeah.” They’re like, “You make me sick to my stomach. And [make me want to] crawl in the middle of my skin and make me wanna throw up.”
Andrew’s family kicked him out of the house after this. They confirmed their suspicions of him after taking his phone and reading his text messages. They then confronted him with what they found. Their response to his admission clearly falls under the rubric of harmful behaviors presented by Ryan (2009). While Andrew was a little bit hard to understand at this point in the interview and it was not exactly clear what his family said to him, the underlying message was clear.

Jennifer* also had a particularly difficult time with her family and their response to her sexuality:

I’m not religious. They are. My mom is. Um, and my dad actually, even at the very beginning said that “I don’t like this, but I really love you and you’re welcome here any time.” My dad’s like that, but my dad is also like, “Well, you’re my daughter. I think gay people are weird, [but] I know that they’re people, and I know you’re my daughter. It is what it is. You’re welcome here any time, sweetheart,” or whatever. My mom was like, “No! Uh uh!” Like, crazy, and I just, like I said, I left. All semester I didn’t talk to them. I’d open my email that she had like, she had one of my emails. I saw one, it was like, “Honey I love you. But you must know the fires of hell . . .” It was like, pages of talking about torture and stuff. I just, like, didn’t read it ’cause I don’t believe in that. I was like, “Haha. I can’t believe she did this.” Like, crazy. Um, I was, it was a rough time.

Again here, as Jennifer talks about this episode, she is clearly struggling. The heightened emotional tone of these narratives was palpable.

Yeah, they’re like, “Okay, tell us what’s going on.” When I told them, they were just like, my mom was the biggest bitch I’ve ever interacted with. Her idea was that she was gonna punish me into realizing my morals and being, calling like whatever she says. I would be talking and she’d just interrupt and be like, “You’re not gay. You’re not. No, you’re not.” And I’d be like, “Yeah, I am.” And she’s like, “Why, you just wanna have a bunch of wild sex out there in college?” She’s like, “Ah, you just wanna have a bunch of kinky sex and be popular. You’re gonna burn in hell,” and all this stuff.

Tyler had a similar experience with his family. Having moved to Michigan to be with his mother at 18, he was soon kicked out of her home.

She kicked me out for being gay, and I lived in a homeless shelter . . . She kicked me to the curb. . . . I came home like a week later and she had a bible there and she told me “Either go to Christian therapy and get help or get out.” She already had my bags packed.
Tyler also talked about an earlier experience with his grandfather, which illustrates more of what Perry (2001, 2009) termed a “cultural permission to hate”, wherein it is deemed acceptable to vilify people who are gay or lesbian. Others mentioned this type of experience in their homes, as well.

They’re taught, I mean their families teach them that gay is not okay. Even my grandfather, he doesn’t know I’m gay, but like I remember being like 8 years old with him watching the news and there’d be like, you know, gay protests on the news or something. Him being like, “It’s frickin’ disgusting” or something like that and I, at this point I already know I’m gay, and I’m sitting here like “Oh.” You hear that growing up, which also I think puts depression into the gay teen’s mind. It makes it hard for people to come out.

A.J.* was also very clear that their worst bullying came from their mom:

Everything that I would consider bullying occurred at home with my mom. I supposed it started off psychologically, because I have an uncle who’s gay, and um, I remember being 13 and my mom saying like how disgusting he was and that you know, it was an abomination, blah blah blah, . . . Um, and because I heard this constantly like, “It’s unnatural, it’s a sin, he’s going to hell,” um, you know, “It’s disgusting.” And she would like, say things about Ellen DeGeneres and not wanting to see her on TV and talking about people in public, “Oh, ah, he’s gay and she’s gay and blah blah blah,” and using slurs and so I grew up in this environment. . . . She’s like, “I put God before you and this, it’s against, God said this and this and that . . . I’m never gonna accept that about you and I’m always gonna pray that you change and blah blah blah blah.” So . . . that to me is far more damaging than anything that a peer could say to me in a school system. . . . As I said, it’s so much worse when it comes from the person who gave birth to you.

Jess* often lived with her grandmother, who held very strict views on gender norms, which was difficult for Jess, because she identified as a tomboy:

I would say I can’t think of specific peer-on-peer bullying, but when I think of being mistreated because of my gender identity or sexuality, I think of my grandmother. I know that a lot of my grandmother’s actions and a lot of the bullying I’ve experienced come from her religious standpoint, her views, and her experiences. . . . Yes, I definitely felt mistreated based on my appearance and actions. I definitely felt most comfortable when she wasn’t around and when I hadn’t seen her in a while, but I needed her in my life because she definitely provided me with things that I needed. And so there was always that level of like, I have to perform to her standards.
Jess illustrates the struggle between needing and wanting to be herself, but also needing the support of her grandmother. This was evident for others as well. Part of their vulnerability in these situations comes from their need for housing and financial support from their families, as Darian mentioned earlier.

Darian’s mother refused to support her financially in college after she was kicked out of seminary. Darian discussed her struggle with her mother.

We would talk about it and I felt like she wasn’t there for me; one day she told me that she couldn’t be there for me because it was my fault and I remember feeling so broken, and now we just don’t talk about it. . . . Sometimes I feel like my mom doesn’t necessarily love me for who I am. She loves me but she doesn’t love the things that I do or the things that I participate in, as she says, but she loves me and that was always really hard for me to battle through because I didn’t live with my mom. I lived with my grandparents so it was always hard to know if my mom truly loved me. Then, like, coming out to my mom and her not, like, speaking to me for a while after that, and getting kicked out of school and her not being there, I never really felt like she loved me. She said it, but it seemed like she said it out of habit, but even like, yesterday with all the worry in her voice. She asked me if I was okay, and I knew that she meant it. So I know she loves me, but she doesn’t love me fully.

Here the story becomes one of conditional love and acceptance, in Darian’s point of view. This is also somewhat evident in Tequila’s story, as well as Tyler’s—the supports are available unless they are gay, lesbian, or transgender.

Gwyn’s experience was similar. She stated unequivocally that “home was worse than school.” “A lot of my physical problems and my quality of and basically any problem that I have in my life can be traced back to my father,” whom she identified as verbally and physically abusive. Gwyn also shared that she had been sexually assaulted by her uncle, and her family refused to acknowledge it when she told them about it. Additionally, her experience with her uncle overlapped with some of her school experiences, as she describes: “The kids at school would call me, like, a girly boy and things like that. Then my uncle would basically do the same
thing. It was just weird. It’s just super . . . ugh.” Gwyn went on to share the story of her parents kicking her out.

I was actually wearing this dress at the point when I came home, and I was like, “Guys, you seriously . . . we need to just talk about this, cause I’m not changing, and you guys either need to support me or change or get the hell out.” And they were like, “Why don’t you get the hell out.” And, then they just kicked me out. [They] started throwing my stuff out on the pavement, and uh, dad gave me a good last “good bye” beating and uh, sent me on my way. It was fantastic.

Gwyn had a very sarcastic sense of humor, and as she talked, she would often laugh bitterly or add little emotional barbs to her stories. For example, she was almost entertaining when she was telling this story, and her final sentence was delivered with a smirk. Even her phrasing of her father’s “good last ‘good bye’ beating” shows her emotional response to these acts of physical and sexual abuse and her attempt to cope with the damage they caused her.

Fortunately, some participants also had supportive family members who helped to buffer the hurtful ones. Ember shared that her relationship with her father was really important to her when she was living with her alcoholic mother, and she credited him with helping her get through tough times in her life.

He’s the one who really, I guess, helped me kind of be tough, like, “Don’t let them push you around.” He taught me to think for myself. Be an individual. Instilled those values in me. So that really kept me through. . . . Yeah, that got me through, I think.

Sadly though, after Ember moved in with her father in high school, things changed dramatically between them.

He didn’t accept that I was gay either. I mean, he wouldn’t. So he thought that was part of the problem. . . . Then it was kind of like a betrayal when he stopped like being there for me. When I lived with him, it was really tough.

Mal’s experience was a bit different than others due to the influence of the Catholic Church in his life. His family was Catholic and he attended parochial schools. Because of this, the experiences he had within his family were intricately tied to religion.
I think because I was in Catholic school, gender norms were very, very rigid. It was 20 years ago, and gender norms are very set. Me being in a Catholic school made it even more difficult because the teachings of the church are so very clear, um, on what is acceptable and not. . . . I was getting a lot of blame. Um, I was getting blamed by school, the staff at the school. I was getting blamed by my mother. I didn’t feel safe anywhere.

Mal also spoke to the larger family context regarding being gay.

My uncle had passed away. He was gay. He wasn’t out. And I think the support that was not there, was even more, it was driven home because a picture of him was burned after he passed, because his sister did not want, um, this is my great uncle, she didn’t want us kids to know he was gay. Everybody knew he was gay. He didn’t have to come out. But there was a picture of him on a beach with his arm around a man . . . nothing inappropriate. I found it. I remember I was going through pictures. There must have been two copies because I was going through pictures at my mom’s and I found it and I was supposed to be bringing them to Detroit where he passed, but I decided not to bring that one. I knew better. I knew better. And this was when I was sixteen and this was during that whole really rough period, and then come to find out, she burned the other copy, so that nobody would know, and that message just said, “This family is not gonna support you.”

All of these stories show that family bullying and family rejection had a large impact on the participants. Andrew became homeless, and years after being kicked out of his family home, he is still struggling to make it on his own. Jennifer maintains contact with her family, in spite of her mother’s denial of her identity, but she also shared that she usually goes to therapy for a while after a visit home in order to recuperate from the emotional cost of spending time with her family. A.J. does not really have much of a relationship with their mother any longer, because they cannot seem to make it work. They have figured out that occasional phone calls are okay, but that they cannot do much more than that. Tequila continues to struggle with the relationship with his family and his own religious beliefs. Many of these young people experienced exactly what Ryan’s (2009) research described in terms of family rejection. However, they identified these experiences as bullying.
Conclusion

Through these varied stories about life in school, and later, as young adults, it is clear that the young LGBTQ people I interviewed had many experiences of bullying, from those that were perceived as not too bad or “what anyone goes through,” to incidents of physical and sexual assault. The bullying was often about things unrelated to having an LGBTQ identity, such as race, weight, socioeconomic status, or simply being quiet. At the same time, however, there is clear evidence that the majority of the bullying reported was directly related to actual or perceived LGBTQ identities.

For some, bullying began in elementary school, even though they were not aware of their own sexual or gender identity at that point. Most reported experiences of bullying fall under the category of verbal harassment, as seen in the participant narratives, and in existing research (GLSEN, 2012, 2013; GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). This type of bullying happens throughout school, and for different participants, became more or less salient as they moved through their education. Verbal harassment continued past secondary school on a consistent manner, well into higher education and young adulthood.

Some participants reported physical and sexual assaults that occurred during their schooling, and in a few instances, into their young adulthood. Some of these incidents occurred on school grounds. Most of these incidents were not reported, and when some of them were, the perpetrators received no consequences for their behavior. Pritchard (2013) discussed this type of response from adults as “complicit with the violence occurring among youth” (p. 337). He further noted that adults practice complicity in these cases because of “their own bias motivations around identity” (p. 338). In some cases, the LGBTQ youth were punished for their roles in the incidents, which Pritchard also identified as a form of institutional bullying. Pritchard
argues that adult actions in these types of situations are often not considered bullying because we have constructed a discourse of bullying that assumes it is a “natural,” and presumably exclusive, part of adolescence. Furthermore, most literature assumes that adult presence equals safety for young people. Clearly, the incidents discussed in this research call that assumption into question.

Another way in which adults are implicated in bullying concerns what participants referred to as bullying by “society at large.” This type of bullying could be experienced at any time in life, though most frequently participants discussed this within the context of young adulthood. Sometimes this looked like verbal or physical harassment, sometimes it took the form of gender or sexuality microaggressions, and sometimes it became a concern in the workplace, especially since Michigan law does not offer job protections for LGBTQ-identified people. Many reported incidents of being harassed and threatened in public venues such as bars and restaurants, and some noted that it was hard to know where or when the next threat may arise. Such feelings speak to the ongoing level of vigilance in regard to one’s personal safety that these young people had to practice.

Finally, bullying was particularly salient in the family lives of some of the participants. These types of harassment, in particular, do not diminish for the participants as they move through young adulthood. Family issues, especially, may continue throughout their lives given the long-term nature of familial relationships. This then results in a lifetime of having to negotiate unsafe spaces within one’s family, where partners may or may not be accepted, and where one’s own personhood can be called into question.

Several factors play into the bullying experienced by the young people who participated in this study: a heteronormative culture which focuses on hegemonic masculinity and sexuality; a ubiquitous environment of policing forms of “difference”; and underlying religious messages
about the meaning of gender and sexual variation. Additionally, there is the problem of school personnel and administrators who implicitly accept the way these young people are treated by their peers and thus do not intervene to assist them or to hold bullies accountable for their behaviors. Intersectionality matters here, as well, as we heard repeatedly that multiple identities needed to be navigated and negotiated in almost all social settings, including those which may be presumed to be safe for LGBTQ young adults—queer spaces. In spite of these narratives of bullying, the young queer people in my study were able to survive. In order to explore this and learn from their experiences, I now turn to how they coped with the bullying and the ways in which being bullied impacted them.
CHAPTER 5
COPING WITH BULLYING

As I explored the narratives of participants, it became clear that the coping they described happened directly following their bullying incidents. Alternatively, their discussions of the impacts of bullying seemed to come from a place of reflection and looking back. Therefore, I have reordered my research questions to describe here how the participants coped with bullying and the impacts in Chapter 6.

LGBTQ young people are frequently framed as being at risk due to societal values around their gender and sexual minority status, as well as societal pressures to change (Russell, 2005). In order to understand how they survived and managed to be resilient, it is important to examine how these young people coped with the bullying they experienced. Although resilience was defined earlier, I reiterate the definition here as it serves as a framework for my findings. Ungar (2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), a recognized scholar on the concept of resilience, has moved the understanding of resilience from the ability to survive traumatic situations to a more encompassing definition which recognizes the impact of environments in which people are situated.

Research shows that in situations of adversity, resilience is observed when individuals engage in behaviors that help them to navigate their way to the resources they need to flourish (Ungar, 2011b, emphasis added, as cited in Ungar, 2013, p. 256).

These processes occur, however, only when the individual’s social ecology (formal and informal social networks) has the capacity to provide resources in ways that are culturally meaningful. (Ungar, 2013, p. 256)
Coping is frequently related to discussions of resilience. Coping has been defined as “realistic and flexible thoughts and acts that solve problems and thereby reduce stress” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 118), or as “a set of adaptive processes that can diminish or magnify the effects of risk or adversity” (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011, p. 2). Most discussions of coping come out of psychological literature, and they are framed in terms of adaptive and maladaptive coping skills (Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Garnett, Masyn, Austin, Williams, & Viswanath, 2015; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015; Kuper, Coleman, & Mustanski, 2013; McDavitt et al., 2008; Sornberger, Smith, Toste, & Heath, 2013; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). This is seen in Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner’s definition of coping—they speak to the effects of coping skills, in that they can sometimes “magnify” risk or adversity.

Hill and Gunderson (2015), however, offered a model that does not frame coping skills as adaptive or maladaptive. They explored a variety of factors in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of both concepts. Focusing on resources and personal characteristics that contribute to resilience, they identified five types of strategies utilized by lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals: (1) situation selection; (2) situation modification; (3) attention deployment; (4) cognitive change; and (5) response modulation. These strategies are adapted from the work of McDavitt et al. (2008), who researched coping strategies used by homosexual males when experiencing heterosexism. McDavitt and colleagues used research by Gross (1998) on emotion regulation as a way to describe their findings. Therefore, this model has built on existing research and has been used to further understand resiliency and coping in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. I will apply this model to my findings as a way to organize the narratives of the participants in this research, beginning with situation selection.
Situation Selection

Hill and Gunderson (2015) define situation selection as a means through which individuals identify specific strategies used for coping, such as seeking emotional and material support, viewing friends as family, seeking support through the Internet, seeking informational support, and setting boundaries (or “avoidance” in the John and Gross [2007] model) (p. 240). Hill and Gunderson describe setting boundaries as avoiding encounters with heterosexist individuals to protect oneself and avoiding situations that are distressing. The participants in my research frequently employed these strategies; I coded these as seeking support in my analysis.

Seeking Support

Participants mentioned a number of relationships that offered them support and helped them deal with bullying. These ranged from relationships with pets, friends or family, and other external resources, including the Internet and LGBTQ resource centers. Kenny identified that his family was a source of support. “I usually talked to my mom or my dad, and my brothers. They were very helpful.” Gage, like most participants, mentioned the importance of his friends.

I just tried to like hang out with my friends, like, as much as I could, and, so, they were kind of just like there for support and whatnot but also they were very like uh, like enabling, to a certain extent, they’re just like “Don’t even like worry about it.” Just, being around like people who understood [helped].

Similarly, Ash discussed how their experiences with friends offered many important supports:

It was listening and expressing empathy and shared experiences that showed me that there were people that were going to be okay with who I was. And I didn’t need to be ashamed all the time or hate myself for who I was, because there was nothing wrong with who I was.

Codie identified several other important sources of support:
I had cats. My cats were . . . I mean, just being able to hold a cat and have it purr at me! We just always had cats. “Your species is amazing, Annie!” (to my cat, during the interview, who was on his lap). My cats were a big source of support.

We [as a family] did see a therapist . . . but we didn’t go there consistently. My grandparents’ house was a sanctuary, as well. My grandma Bucky would just feed us [me and my siblings] and watch TV. . . . So yeah, cats, books, Bucky’s house, school. School was great because I was there for 6 hours a day and I knew I couldn’t run into him [abusive stepfather] there. I didn’t have a lot of friends in elementary school and I didn’t have friends that lived near me in middle school, but I did have this friend, Jennifer, who lived maybe a mile down the road. I remember going to her house a lot. . . I remember liking to spend the night there, because I didn’t have to be in my house.

Several participants mentioned the importance of nature and/or animals in helping them deal with the bullying they experienced. Cass and Gwyn, who were interviewed together, shared how nature helped them cope with their bullying experiences.

Cass: Generally going outside helps, too.

Gwyn. Oh yeah. (emphatic)

Cass. I like listening to birds and everything. It helps calm me down.

Gwyn: I would often just kind of walk. I had a specific spot that I really liked to go to, um. . . . There was always a big tree that was in the neighborhood that I was in. There was like this huge, just obnoxiously big, tree and I would go and sit next to it and uh, a lot of the neighborhood dogs would generally just kind of hang out there. I would just go and hang out with the dogs and the tree. (Laughs.) That tree was basically my best friend.

Likewise, Starr noted that the woods and the pigs on her family property helped her:

The woods. We lived on ten acres of nothing but trees and a trailer that needed to be torn down . . . which I’m thankful it did [not], but um, yeah, the only place I really felt safe was out in the woods or in the swing set or by the pigs. We had pigs out there.

From these excerpts, it is clear that friends were very important in terms of helping the participants deal with bullying. In some cases, school was helpful as an escape, as were family members. For others, pets and nature helped fill some of their needs for support. It is interesting to note that three of the four respondents who discussed nature and animals as supports came from homes that were unsafe and and/or abusive. In spite of these environments, these
participants were able to use the resources available to them to meet their needs, which shows resilience.

Another place where participants found support were community LGBT resource agencies. In Max’s experience, connecting to supportive adults at a local LGBT resource center made coping easier.

The thing that really helped me was the outside resources. . . . It helped to be fully accepted in my identity, and that’s why I was so thankful to have the resource center. Because not only did they show me it was okay to be queer, but that you could be successful. And you learn that there are other queers that might not have your experience, but they validate you. And also to see queer adults that have also gone through bullying. I didn’t even tell them back then that I had gone through that, but to see them and everything they had gone through and [see] that they came out on the other side; it wasn’t an “It’ll Get Better Project,” it was “This is how you can make it better.” They showed me how to do self-care, and, I mean, they gave me the tools to help myself. . . . Just knowing that being queer isn’t a bad thing, even though everyone around me was saying it.

Similarly, Kenny found a support group for LGBT youth that really made a difference for him. “It just made me feel that I wasn’t alone, there was [sic] others out there. So that opened a whole new level [of understanding for me], and I went to that pretty young. So, when I heard bullying, like name-calling, I just avoided it.” For these two participants, such resources made a difference in their ability to cope with being bullied. Participants were also able to access supports through online resources.

The ability to have online connections was very helpful. Tristan identified the Internet as the thing that helped zir get through zir experiences. Being trans-identified and not having any transgender people in zir life, the Internet became an important lifeline.

I met other trans people on the Internet. One of them is like my brother, and like I knew that if I didn’t meet him, I wouldn’t be here. I should tell him that. But he was one of the sole people that helped me come out and help me figure out that I am trans through all of the bullying. And I knew he was there, and I would just cry to him on the phone and send him all these emails and he was just always there.
Gwyn, who was kicked out of her family home for being transgender, also noted the importance of a particular connection she made online.

I had a friend up here [Michigan]. Um, met him online, super good guy. [He] drove 8 hours to pick me up, housed me for damn near a full year, um, got her [her partner] up here. Now we’re living in a nice little apartment that we found.

Participants also used video games as a way to relax and divert themselves from the bullying they experienced. For Tequila, video gaming emerged as a method of establishing social supports and connections to other LGBTQ-identified or accepting youth.

I found that many people that play video games constant(ly), like I did when I was younger in college, had gone through the same thing I did, where they were straight/gay/trans, whatever it may be. They’ve gone through some traumatic events and they find release into a mind-numbing video game or a community where you know, you don’t really see what the person looks like, but you play with them. And so those are some of the greatest friendships that helped me find who I was, and say that “You’re my first gay friend. But, you’re a great person and your identity doesn’t matter. It doesn’t define who you are.” I think that’s really what changed me, is those people, finding community online that accepts you. Playing through a video game, you know, getting stressed out and mad at them and vice versa, over a game, but also having connection every day.

A.J. had a slightly different online story to share, in which they talked about having an online presence as a boy as a way of coping with their gender identity and the constant misgendering by others.

I wonder, you know, in retrospect, I wonder if that was like, some kind of coping mechanism. Like, it wasn’t me who had these thoughts about the girls that I was talking to, it was my online persona, who is male. But I also wonder if that has something to do with also coping with my gender identity—like a very juvenile premature way of not really feeling female. I don’t know. I still, to this day, I don’t know. Maybe it just happened because enough people—I got sick of, you know, correcting people when they said “he.” And I just went along with it, but maybe it was something subconsciously going on there too.

Although some of the young adults in these excerpts did not have many supports in “real” life, they were able to connect to supportive others through the Internet, and these relationships helped them cope with their experiences of bullying. Another coping strategy used by
participants that fits under the category of situation selection is that of setting boundaries, or avoidance, in which people avoid situations that cause distress. I refer to this as seeking safety.

**Seeking Safety**

One way participants managed to “fly under the radar” and avoid being bullied was to find safe spaces for themselves at school. Safety can become a great concern for young people who are experiencing bullying (GLSEN, 2013). After Tristan was physically assaulted at school, ze completely avoided the floor where zir assault happened, and then found a safe place to have lunch, which was the band room. Mal also discussed how he tried to find safe spaces in elementary school, because recess was a time when he often felt unsafe:

> And, I, at that point, it probably was 3rd grade . . . I was dreading recess. So often times I would hide in the stairwell of the school and hope that none of the activity people would find me, because it was becoming very physical and threatening.

Similarly, Andrew figured out where he felt safe at school, and tried to make use of those areas, which were very limited. He described the safe spaces as “The library, and the back of the cafeteria, by the bathroom. . . . Pretty much everywhere else, no.”

Starr shared her experience of seeking safety in elementary school:

> The only time I felt safe at school was ironically the same place where I didn’t feel safe at school—the playground. But then again, that’s where I learned that it’s a dog-eat-dog world. Either you stand up and fight, or you’re going to get knocked down.

Due to the lack of safety Starr and her friends experienced, they developed a shared strategy in elementary school.

> We decided “Hey, you know, we should form an alliance and go against these people.” We called ourselves “the outlaws,” because we were the people that were deemed less likely to fight for ourselves, and um, it went from “the outlaws” to “the outsiders” because . . . we all made ourselves read *The Outsiders*. We always had the [rule], “Always walk in twos. Wherever you go, always walk in twos, and if you can’t find a group member, carry something with you, whether it’s a heavy enough book that you can swing, but still have mobility with it.”
Similar to the strategy employed by Starr and her friends, Ash made sure they were safe at school by not being alone.

I made sure I wasn’t alone. I made sure I was around adults because the worst that was going to happen around adults was verbal abuse, and I would much rather deal with verbal than physical. So, I just made sure I was never alone. I didn’t go to the locker rooms for gym class. I would change in just like the regular bathroom and go to gym class because that wasn’t safe. It really wasn’t.

While several participants discussed finding safe spaces and/or creating ways to feel safe at school, this strategy did not always work. For Mal, school continued to be an unsafe place, and the only way he could feel safe was to quit.

I was in and out of different schools, like I was in, probably two elementary schools and two middle schools before high school, and it was all related to bullying . . . I quit in the fifth grade. I quit school. I was out of school for two weeks and refused to go back to school. Um, and so I, I don’t know. It just escalated.

These last few excerpts show the level of threat experienced by participants within school environments. In fact, according to GLSEN, “schools are unsafe and unwelcoming for the majority of LGBT students” (2014b, para. 1). This leads to students missing school and having poorer educational outcomes. For Mal, at least, the lack of safety at school had an impact on his ability to attend regularly, which eventually led to him leaving. For these students, finding safe spaces and creating safety plans with friends were a way to deal with bullying. They were taking actions to assure their safety in a hostile environment, and they were focused on solving their problems.

For other young people, avoidance became a coping mechanism for dealing with bullying, and it was used as a protective strategy. Many participants discussed avoiding areas where they expected to be bullied or had been bullied in the past. Brent discussed changing his arrangements for getting home from school after being assaulted, for example. When he began to get picked up from school, he limited the access bullies had to him. In this way, he managed to
stay safe. Tyler also discussed avoidance as a tool. “I would take longer ways or different ways [to class], like, I’d avoid different people.” Similarly, Cass described her coping as “Basically a lot of avoidance, for me.” For Kenny, avoidance made sense, “’cause I only hung out with a few friends.” Again, Kenny’s story differs from that of many of his peers. He avoided people more because he didn’t care what they thought, not because he felt threatened. He attributes this to his home life, which was supportive. However, he did still acknowledge that he chose to avoid people who bullied him.

Chad avoided bullying in a different way, by trying to stay invisible. “Overall I just kind of kept quiet. Just tried to keep my head down and hope that it didn’t happen.” Gage discussed a similar experience:

I was like super introverted, so I would a lot of the times just like, ghost through the hallways. Try not to be noticed, and sometimes, even in the classroom, I would sit in the back. Not try to answer any questions to bring any attention to me. (emphasis added)

Jennifer also employed a strategy of remaining quiet to avoid conflict, in part because she did not really know how to respond to what was happening to her.

I was just quiet. . . . I guess people are mean. . . . I’ve always been someone who isn’t always good at talking and stuff, so they’d be saying stuff to me and I’d like, not know what to say. So that’s why I think I was quiet. I didn’t understand why they were making fun of me.

Cass reported a similar experience. “Yeah, I basically tried to avoid it, ’cause any time I would ever try to come up with some retort, like, when I get nervous I tend to stutter a little bit, so that never really worked out very well.” In these cases, avoidance and being quiet were strategies employed to limit the peer interactions they saw as bullying.

Kenny’s take on those who bullied him was a bit different, and it helped him to deal with the remarks from peers at school. “I always thought something was off with them. . . . It was always the ones who wanted attention themselves, I feel.” In this way, Kenny was able to see the
problem as initiating from the other person, and not being about himself. This is a way of setting boundaries, in this case, where Kenny is able to refute the stigmatizing behaviors by recognizing that they are not really about him.

**Situation Modification**

Situation modification includes two types of strategies with different goals. The first type of situation modification is called “self-assertion” in earlier models (John & Gross, 2007, cited in Hill & Gunderson, 2015, p. 240), but includes additional techniques in Hill and Gunderson’s model (2015). This category includes the specific strategies of avoiding the topic of sexual orientation, telling half-truths, maintaining a low profile, and covering up one’s sexual orientation. These strategies, according to Hill and Gunderson, serve to prevent negative reactions to oneself, which they identify as a benefit for LGB individuals. In my research, this was evidenced by participants who were able to “pass” as heterosexual or keep a low profile – what Hill and Gunderson identify as using “passing or covering strategies” (p. 240).

Some participants in my study chose not to come out about their sexual identities. Gloria discussed being afraid to come out until after high school. “I think I was so scared of getting bullied that I didn’t wanna come out. I just like avoided it altogether, you know?” Bri shared a similar experience:

I wasn’t super open with how I identified within it [the LGBTQ community], so not many people knew, therefore [they] couldn’t bully me about it... Um, I think I’ve been pretty under the radar for most of my high school experience.

In later discussion, Bri was clearer that she avoided coming out in high school in order to avoid bullying, mostly because of what she had seen some of her friends go through. These examples clearly show that not coming out was a protective strategy. If no one knew about their
sexual identities, then no one could bully them for it; therefore, not coming out made sense in terms of their overall safety.

The second type of strategy in this category is “situation modification: problem-solving attempts” (Hill & Gunderson, 2015, p. 240). In this strategy, people attempt to persuade others to change their attitudes (or educate them), resist sexual orientation change attempts, challenge harassers, and become politically active in LGBT issues. One way in which this manifested in my research was that participants fought back when bullied.

It was fairly common for the participants to fight back when they were bullied, or to eventually begin fighting back after being bullied over time. A.J. talked about their responses to bullying in elementary school, which entailed a consistent pattern of both verbal and physical resistance.

I never kind of just lied down and took it. I always had a quip and a retort for them. . . . As I said, sometimes I punched ’em. And, I would beat them in arm wrestling contests, so in a way they kind of feared me.

Starr’s approach to being bullied changed in late elementary school.

Up ‘til this point, I had been receiving so much [bullying] that I figured, “I’ve gone through hell. Why not bring on some more?” And during this time, I had also realized that it was time to start standing up for myself by any means necessary. And, so, I’m like, “You know what? If you’re gonna pick on me, I’m gonna pick back.”

Similarly, Ember stated that she “got kind of tough.”

[It] really kind of made me defensive, in my earlier years, especially. . . . I just didn’t take shit from people. I’d stand up for myself. You know, basically, I’d always fight back, because I didn’t feel like I should be getting bullied.

Like Ember, Ash and Max fought back when they were bullied.

I fought back. There were plenty of times where it was physically fighting back for my safety and there were times where it was verbal: “It’s none of your business who I fuck or who I love.” So I got my ass kicked a few times, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t fight back. Ash
For me, I’m very reactive, so I would fight back. I was always the one with the zingers, so if someone threw shade I would nip it right in the butt. . . . So that’s definitely how I reacted, was by being out and being vocal and being visible, because that was the best way for me to combat it. Saying, “Well if you try to take me down, I’m going to be fully out and proud. I’m going to do it right back to you.” Max

Gage and Chad identified that, as they got older, their approach to bullying changed, and they were no longer as willing to quietly accept it, as they did when they were younger. Gage stated, “Um, I guess like, the older I got, the more that I was in high school, the less BS [bullshit] I took, so I was just confronting people on it if they were being ignorant.” Chad expressed something similar. “Once I was a junior I started to stand up for myself, and once the people who harassed me at least saw that I wasn’t just gonna put up with that anymore, it definitely lessened quite a bit.” These two excerpts also show increasing self-acceptance. Earlier in their school careers, both of these young men tried to avoid bullying, with Gage using the metaphor of a ghost to describe how he moved through school. As they grew older, however, their responses to the bullying shifted, as they became less willing to accept how their peers treated them.

This section highlighted the experiences of participants who always fought back, as well as others who gradually developed the skills needed to do so. For these young people, there is an element of refusing to accept the way they are being treated by those around them, which shows resilience and increasing self-acceptance. This also shows a willingness to challenge the harasser, which is a strategy identified by Hill and Gunderson (2015) as a problem solving attempt. Another coping behavior I saw in this project was a refusal to accept the messages others were sending them about themselves. This can be seen as both challenging one’s harasser and as a way of refuting or counteracting stigmatizing concepts, which Hill and Gunderson describe as a strategy of situation selection. Earlier, Ash and Max gave examples of owning their identities and refusing to be tormented for them by their peers.
Flamboyance is another coping strategy that has been described in research. Harvey’s (2012) research on sexual orientation and resilience in young people defined “flamboyance” as a “hidden resilience strategy” employed by queer youth. She described flamboyant behavior as broadcasting one’s own sense of worth and self-acceptance, despite the messages received from others. In essence, flamboyant behavior says, “I know and accept who I am, and if you have a problem with it, that’s your problem, not mine.” Ash and Max, quoted above, were clearly sending that message to their peers. Tequila employed flamboyance as a strategy when dealing with the negativity and constant pressure he received from his very conservative religious family.

And, so I turned away from them and, you know? I flaunted being gay in front of them because I wanted to show them that “I’m going to be gay and this is who I’m going to be, and no matter how hard you try. I’m gonna be gay. The more you try, the worse it’s going to be for you.”

By using flamboyance in this way, according to Harvey (2012), the youth no longer feel powerless or victimized, because they are accepting of who they are. They have been able to “embrace the very things [they have] been ridiculed and marginalized for being” (p. 329). This type of response allows them to maintain their self-integrity, according to Hill and Gunderson (2015). Therefore, although flamboyance was not part of the Hill and Gunderson model, it fits well in this category of coping.

Through these examples then, it is clear that as the participants I interviewed became more aware and more accepting of themselves, they were able to cope with their bullying in different ways. They stayed “under the radar” about their sexuality, they fought back, and some practiced flamboyance as a way to cope. These problem solving attempts fit under the category of situation modification or self-assertion. The next category of coping strategies in Hill and Gunderson’s (2015) model is attention deployment.
Attention Deployment

Attention deployment, or “distraction” (Hill & Gunderson, 2015, p. 240), works by focusing attention away from the situation that is causing negative emotions and toward things that produce more positive emotions. I noted two ways in which participants practiced these behaviors: seeking diversions and disengaging from problematic interactions.

Seeking Diversions

Sam utilized several approaches to make himself feel better, which he described as shifting his focus to things he enjoyed, like hanging out with friends, swimming, and finding fun things to do. As he stated, “It would take my mind off of it, and next day it would be the same thing at the end of the day.” Other participants coped by reading books. Codie identified reading as helpful for him. “Books were another thing. I was constantly reading, just to be able to be in another world.” Andrew tried drawing, then found reading to be more helpful:

I’d always take my mind off of it and well, I used to draw and then I stopped doing that ’cause it’d be like, I’d be thinking about that while I’m trying to draw something else that doesn’t have anything to do with that. It would throw me off ’cause I’m so focused on this instead of drawing. So I just stopped drawing and I would release my mind into a book. . . . Just let whatever was up here go away for a little while, to jump into this world and these pages.

For Cass, video games and reading were both helpful. “I basically retreated to my room and played video games. . . . Trying to zone off to my own little world and everything, like, either video games or reading.” Similarly, Tequila said, “My biggest coping mechanism was actually video games.” For Tequila, however, the video gaming came with supportive online relationships that helped him cope with the bullying he experienced. (The importance of internet connections to others will be explored in another section, below.) Gwyn also identified video games as a useful tool:
I would always just, just go off and play video games. Not only the escapism, but just being able to get into a story, or get into some sort of good game . . . that has good story, good game play, all of the proper elements.

Codie and Gage found some help through writing about what they were feeling. Codie found it especially helpful as a way to deal with his conflicting feelings around his sexual development.

There would be moments in high school where I would feel so full of thoughts I couldn’t tell anyone else because I was afraid of what they would say, so I would write things down on scraps of paper and just like fucking write. . . . That was really helpful for me, and I could hide those papers and not show anyone. It was out of my brain.

I remember once at a punk rock show at a catholic high school. I just remember writing at a table about how I was gay and I couldn’t be gay because the world doesn’t like gay people. I must have been 15 or 16 then? I definitely never let anyone see that paper. I was just really ashamed of having those thoughts, and so I pushed it down as far as I could. And I think I just went with the gay thing because I didn’t know about transgender anything until I got to college, and so that was my only frame of reference for why I didn’t feel like other girls and why I was uncomfortable with my body developing. Growing breasts was fucking terrible. I got my period for the first time and didn’t tell my mom for three months because I was ashamed, I guess? I read *Are you there God? It’s Me, Margaret* and I was like, “Why are you so fucking excited?” But, yeah, I dealt with it with suppression and shame and writing.

In Codie’s example, although he identified that the writing helped in some ways, he also discussed that it was accompanied by shame and suppression of his feelings. Similar to Codie, Gage discussed a writing exercise he had developed to cope with emotions and negative experiences.

And like, a little while ago I tried this thing. I don’t know, it’s kind of weird but it’s not. So like throughout the day, I’ll just write down all of the negative thoughts I had, and then I would cross them off at the end of the day, and then I’d just rip up the paper and throw it away. . . . I was just like, “Okay. They’re there. They’re here. Now they’re gone.”

As seen above, some of the participants coped by shifting their focus to things they enjoyed, like swimming, reading, writing, or playing video games. Another way in which participants coped was by choosing to disengage from peer interactions that were problematic.
Disengaging

Hill and Gunderson (2015) discuss ignoring provocations and listening selectively as strategies employed in this category, with a proposed benefit of minimizing the emotional hurtfulness or danger of situations. In my research, the participants identified this as disengagement, or choosing not to engage. As Gage described it: “I mean, it’d be like, my friends and I just kind of sat there, and [they] were like, ‘Just disregard them. Like, don’t even acknowledge them.’” Codie varied his strategies for coping with bullying, sometimes engaging, and sometimes disengaging.

I just tried to either ignore it if I could, or just disengage as quickly as possible. . . . I always cut people off though, too, so they couldn’t hurt me as much. In kindergarten, I don’t know what I did. I cried at that time. In middle school, I got angry. In middle school I definitely engaged more, and in high school I disengaged and tried to avoid any conflict as much as possible. In middle school there were friend changes, and so by high school, I was over it and just wanted to fly under the radar.

There were many ways in which the participants discussed attempting to deal with being bullied through emotionally distancing themselves from the experience. This took many forms, such as trying not to take things personally, downplaying the incidents, or disengaging from them. These types of behaviors have been identified by Fine (2011) in research on LGB (his acronym) young adults as “minimization,” in which the experiences are downplayed in order to diminish their importance.

For several of my participants, the bullying they experienced didn’t make sense to them, and they were not sure how to respond. Chad described how he attempted to cope with school bullying, by trying to “shrug it off and ignore it.” As he explained, “one kid shoved me into lockers . . . that happened when I was a sophomore. I always just tried to shrug it off and ignore it. I felt like I couldn’t do anything. Sadly, part of “shrugging it off” for Chad was the sense that he was powerless to change the situation he was in. If Chad was powerless, the next best thing to
do was to ignore the situation and not take the comments and behaviors personally. Sam was able to re-frame the behavior of other kids toward him as simply “irritating,” which helped him brush it off:

I would come back to school and know that I could be there and like I’d have to deal with these irritating kids picking on me, but other than that I never felt like I was going to be harmed. . . . Irritating me is what they were doing.

In this case, Sam was using cognitive reframing as a way to help create some emotional distance from the events.

Gloria described a combination of shrugging it off and getting support from peers:

I think if you have that confidence, you can let remarks roll off your shoulder more, you know? And I think really coming to terms with myself and gathering a solid support system of friends is really helpful because, you know, if you’re upset, you can go to them and say what happened and they’re like, “Those kind of remarks happened to me too. It happens. The person’s dumb, they don’t know what they’re talking about. Just disregard it.”

Here, Gloria was able to ignore the provocations from her peers, but she was also able to mobilize support to help her do so. There is great variance in these stories of attempting to distance from the bullying. In Chad’s case, he did so because he felt powerless. Sam was able to reframe the bullying because he never felt really threatened. Gloria identified some internal strength that helped her cope with it. All of these are examples of attention deployment as a way to cope with one’s bullying.

These narratives show how participants were able to distract themselves from their bullying in some cases, or disengage and create some emotional distance for themselves in others. Both of these methods of coping fit under the category of attention deployment in Hill and Gunderson’s (2015) model. The next category in the model is cognitive change.
Cognitive Change

Hill and Gunderson (2015) revised John and Gross’s (2007) category called “reappraisal” to “cognitive change” (p. 240). The strategies in this category include cognitive reframing of heterosexist attitudes, deconstructing heterosexist assumptions, adopting a self-reliant attitude, and using media images to support cognitive change attempts. In my research, I noted that several participants discussed how they coped by adopting a self-reliant attitude, or keeping to themselves, as explored below.

Some of the participants coped with the bullying they experienced by keeping what had happened to them to themselves and only relying upon themselves for support. As Brent described:

I’m an internalist. I keep my feelings inside. Um, my counselor used to call me a ticking time bomb because of that fact. Uh, but yeah, I mean, I went to counseling for anger management and talked to them a lot, so, other than that . . . Punch a pillow every once in a while. That was it, yeah.

Andrew described his experience similarly, talking about spending time alone at school and keeping his feelings to himself, while attempting to shrug off his experiences:

I kept to myself, and like you know when I opened my textbook and seen this or that or opened my locker and see this note, I read it. I knew people were watching, and I’d read it and just like, shrug it off. But I kept it to myself inside. But on the outside, I made a show like it didn’t matter. And then I forgave, still do.

Starr talked about her time in elementary school, prior to joining with others to develop a safety strategy, describing herself as a loner: “I started becoming the loner . . . kind of the one that would sit with anybody but with nobody at the same time at the lunch table.”

These last three excerpts show that the participants isolated themselves, at least in part, due to bullying. Sometimes distancing from others was a choice; at other times it was seen as the
only available option. Ember, for example, discussed her feeling of having to deal with things herself since support was not available when she needed it.

I didn’t. I just had the attitude of “I have to do it myself.” I didn’t really have a strong support system and so that combined with stuff at school, you know, well, stuff at school wasn’t that bad compared to at home, so it was kind of like, I just dealt with it myself. It was another thing, just another thing.

In Ember’s narrative, keeping to herself is akin to dealing with bullying on one’s own, which is similar to what A.J. and Tristan identified:

So, I’ve always been the type of person to, like, deal with problems on my own. . . . Um, yeah, I just keep it. I carry it with me, but not necessarily in a way that I’m gonna like unravel. There’s a lot of pain there, and I don’t think that’s something that, um, is a hidden attribute of myself. A.J.

I just took it. I didn’t know what else I could do. For a while I didn’t tell my parents what was happening and then after a while I told them. But I just dealt with it, because I knew nobody was going to help me. Tristan

So, for some, bullying led them to keep to themselves and count on themselves for the support they needed, or to become self-reliant. It also led to some feelings of isolation, pain, and anger, as they described. Some participants also used cognitive change as a coping mechanism by practicing positive self-talk.

**Positive Self-Talk**

Positive self-talk was something that several participants discussed as a way of helping them deal with their life experiences. In Hill and Gunderson’s (2015) model, this would be viewed as a form of cognitive reframing. As Kenny told himself, “Life’s short. Avoid it. Yeah. Just ignore them. Just look at the bigger picture. That’s what I think. What does this little [episode] matter? We’re all human. We make mistakes.” In some ways, this looks like trying to keep a larger perspective on life in general.
For Brent and Tyler, the *It Gets Better Project* (2016) was helpful in this regard, as well. They were able to access media to help them make a cognitive change in how they viewed their experiences of bullying. The *It Gets Better Project* is an international movement that seeks to support queer youth by reminding them that life gets better and providing online videos of supportive adults offering encouragement. Tyler discussed the importance of the *It Gets Better Project* to him, stating “‘Love is louder’ is one of their sayings, so the phrase ‘love is louder’ was important to me for a while. Well, it still is. . . . things will always get better. There’s [sic] always new beginnings and new people.”

Ember credited her father with helping her develop coping mechanisms related to self-talk:

He’s the one who really, I guess, helped me kind of be tough, like, “Don’t let them push you around.” He taught me to think for myself. Be an individual. [He] instilled those values in me, so that really helped me through.

Ember was also able to hold on to upcoming life transitions that she knew would free her from the environments that were unwelcoming:

Like, you can make your own life, and I really, really held on to turning 18. Oh yeah. Every day I would hold on to be 16, so I’d get myself a car and get out of there if I had to. Being 18 so I could get out of the house, get out of school. School was just, I mean, the whole age was a horrible time. So I just knew that once I was [18 and out of there], my life was gonna be awesome.

Ember told herself other things that would keep herself strong:

Like, I would say that that holding on to that I’m an individual and strong, that I can depend on myself, has really helped me get through it. And the idea that nothing is permanent has helped me get through it. . . . I just, that’s what I’ve always told myself. If I can get through the next hour of this then I’ll survive. I can get through the next day or week or whatever. It’s gonna end. It’s gonna end. Everything bad ends, eventually. It’s kind of like getting a cavity filled. It sucks for like an hour, and then it’s over. It was the only thing that kept it from being so bad. Life wasn’t so good for me as a kid, so I feel like I had to come up with something or I’d let it defeat me.
Similarly, Jess’s father shared something with her in her youth that she continually turned to for comfort:

He told me I was special and there was something about me that was different, and that we didn’t know it yet, but that there was something about me. I am different and I am special and I can get through anything that I go through. I’m different and that’s okay. My dad’s words just push me along, even if I feel like I can’t relate to someone. Just knowing that it’s okay.

From these excerpts, we can see that the participants employed many different forms of positive self-talk to help them endure bullying. These ranged from using some form of perspective to realign their thoughts, to drawing upon statements from their families, to focusing on being able to move out of problematic situations. Also, some were able to draw from media images to make cognitive changes around the bullying they received. The final category of strategies for coping in Hill and Gunderson’s (2015) model is that of response modulation.

**Response Modulation**

This category refers to the strategies of venting and/or suppressing emotions, as well as substance use. These forms of coping are seen as attempts to relieve emotional pressure, diminish negative emotions, and experience emotional release (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). The participants in my study did not discuss venting, although they did discuss reaching out to friends and writing, as discussed earlier. One participant in particular, Codie, mentioned suppression of emotion in his narrative, which I will explore below. However, many participants discussed the use of substances, a variety of other self-harm techniques. Specifically, cutting, a form of non-suicidal self-injury (Sornberger et al., 2013) was quite common.

Hill and Gunderson (2015) described response modulation as an “attempt to modify the quality of an emotional response after it has been generated” (p. 245). For this reason, I interpret the coping strategies under this category more broadly as “attempts to cope,” and I include
methods that participants shared that did not really fit into the other coping strategy categories. In
some of the narratives, participants shared attempts to cope that did not seem very successful in
alleviating distress, and some reported feeling unable to cope at all.

The participants who identified that they felt unable to cope with bullying produced
narratives that often sounded like a form of emotion suppression, in part because they did not
know how to address them. Tyler, Codie, and Gage all had similar experiences, in which they
stated that they did not cope with bullying. Per Tyler, “I didn’t [cope with it]; that’s the thing. I
was, I would let people shove me into lockers and stuff, and bully me.” Codie shared an almost
identical response when asked how he coped. “Well, I just didn’t. I suppressed a lot of stuff.”
When I asked Gage how he coped, his response was similar. “I guess I didn’t. I kind of just was
like, ‘All right, I’m gonna take this,’ but not really process any of it. A lot of it just, like, stayed
with me.” When Gwyn described how she dealt with bullying, her response echoed the others,
“Um, not too well. Not very well at all. It’s—it’s really all I can say about it.”

Self-blame was identified by other coping researchers (Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009) as a
strategy employed by at-risk youth in which the person is hard on oneself or sees oneself as
being responsible for the problem. Ash expressed a very clear example of this.

It was an accepted part of my reality. I just thought it was normal that that is what I was
going through for who I was as a person, and I deserved that. And the reinforcement from
my family was that what I was doing was wrong and that it was a “decision” (you know
air quotes for that one, though). I just thought I brought it on myself, and that’s what it
was.

Notably, this is the only explicit example of self-blame that I found in my data. When
blame is mentioned in most cases, the participants talked about being blamed for their problems
due to their sexuality or gender expression; within such explanations, they most often place
blame on those who are bullying them or on the adults who did not intervene. However, this
example shows that Ash internalized the social messages from their environment. Most of the participants did not overtly blame themselves for the bullying, and a number of them resisted it by fighting back or expressing flamboyance. However, there were times when their coping strategies were not effective, as Ash explained here.

Sadly, there were other situations in which the participants struggled to cope with bullying. These participants resorted to self-harm, suicidal ideation, or suicide attempts as ways to relieve their emotional distress. Several participants identified self-harm as a method they employed to cope with being bullied at school or at home. Participants mentioned self-loathing, eating-disordered behaviors, drug use, cutting, and suicidal thoughts as ways in which they attempted to cope with their experiences. For example, Ash discussed self-loathing as one of their struggles:

There’s a lot of self-loathing at the time. Saying “in my youth” sounds ridiculous at 24, but when I was younger there was a lot of self-loathing and self-hatred and not understanding why I couldn’t land on one side of the fence. So there was a lot of self-bullying going on while people were also throwing in their punches.

Gage talked about how cutting briefly offered him some relief, and then did not:

A lot of it hit me once I got home. . . . it just turned into a lot of self-harm type of stuff. So it was just self-mutilation, like cutting and stuff. . . . (sighs). There was a little bit of relief, for a little bit, and [then] there’s just like, “Oh, I’m back where I was with these same feelings.”

Gage recognized that the relief he experienced from cutting was short-lived, and he found other ways to cope, some of which were discussed previously. Chad also struggled with cutting intermittently in life:

For a brief period in high school, I dealt with some self-harm issues [one of which was cutting]. That re-emerged later in life, when I was out of high school . . . I struggled with bipolar disorder and depression, which was only exacerbated by the bullying and mistreatment at school when I was home.

Ash discussed cutting as one of several methods they employed to deal with their life.
I cut, I cried, I took pills. Anything I could get my hands on. Obviously with my mom being a drug addict, I could get my hands on some pretty good shit. I experimented with cocaine a lot when I was younger. Obviously, I don’t now, but when I was younger, anything that could be an escape, I would get my hands on. My big thing was painkillers, and if you take enough, you feel pretty Zen. Also, you can see I’ve got a lot of the self-harm scars. That’s how I dealt with it.

Starr, who dealt with abuse at home and at school, started several concerning behaviors in fifth grade, one of which was attempting suicide:

I said fuck school, fuck my parents, fuck life, and I started drinking and smoking at five years old. (Laughs). Er, not at five years old, in fifth grade. . . . I started suicide, attempting suicide, [in] fifth grade. My first attempt was my birthday, my birthday of my fifth grade year.

Several participants mentioned suicide attempts in their interviews, although I did not explicitly ask about it. Andrew acknowledged that he tried to kill himself twice as a result of the bullying he received from his family. Chad also discussed several suicide attempts. He noted that his mental health issues may have contributed to this response.

The first time I tried [to kill myself] was when I was nine. I used to try and pray the gay away on my own. . . . So, all that building up over the years, plus when I was nine and I could finally understand, “Oh, I’m gay,” I saw that as wrong, and you know, believed what society was telling me. And when God would not answer my prayers or make me straight or normal, I didn’t want to be alive anymore. I also was on Zoloft at the time, which they realized later on, one of the side effects if it’s given to children can be hearing voices and suicidal tendencies.

Tyler discussed drug use and suicide in his story as well:

I guess, I got started, I went down, bad. Down the toilet. I was drinking. I was taking Xanax. I was prescribed it, but like, I mean, it was just, I was a mess for like a good year. Um, yeah. . . . But, I was talking about killing myself and some cop pulled [me] over. I ended up getting taken by police to the hospital. I was there for 2 days but they let me go. A social worker came in and was talking to me and everything, and then I think that was kind of, almost, a wake-up call.

Mal struggled with depression as he dealt with bullying at school. And, although he used physical recreation to help him cope, he was also bullied in sports. “I ate a lot. I slept a lot,
played a lot of sports . . . I got picked on there, too.” His experiences also lead him to consider suicide.

There were many times throughout my childhood and young adulthood where I was suicidal. I would think about different ways and what that would mean and what that would look like, um, because it just seemed like nobody wanted me. It didn’t matter where I went, I wasn’t what I was supposed to be. But I didn’t talk about it. I was very shut off.

These excerpts show some of the more dangerous ways young people attempted to cope with bullying and relieve some of their emotional distress. Many of the narratives reported in this section show that the participants were getting by in the best ways they could. Some of these coping efforts could be viewed as survival strategies or “protective strategies,” such as those identified by Hamby (2014) in her work on battered women. Hamby found that battered women “are in difficult, stressful, and sometimes frightening situations and doing their best to figure out how to deal with them” (p. 3). I would argue that this applies equally to the participants in my study. Additionally, these stories of suicidal thoughts and self-harm speak to the level of impact the bullying had on the youth in terms of their mental well-being and their physical health, which will be explored in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored how the participants in my study coped with the bullying they experienced due to their LGBTQ identities. After a review of literature on coping methods for LGBTQ persons (Garnett et al., 2015; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015; Hill & Gunderson, 2015; Kuper et al., 2013; McDavitt et al., 2008; Sornberger et al., 2013) and a further review of other models focused on adolescents (Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), I chose to apply the framework used by Hill and Gunderson to help explain the range of their coping behaviors.
Hill and Gunderson’s (2015) work on the specific strategies used by LGB individuals was a good fit with my findings. Their framework, unlike some others in the literature, did not attempt to differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive coping styles or focus on productive or non-productive coping styles (Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). I wanted to explore what helped these young adults persevere in spite of their bullying experiences, and those designations were not helpful in this case.

The participants in this research coped through practicing situation selection, or seeking different types of support and setting boundaries by avoiding people or situations who were perceived to be unsafe. They also practiced situation modification, or self-assertion, whereby they avoided discussions of sexuality and “passed” as straight in order to avoid being bullied. They used situation modification as a means of problem solving, as well as self-assertion by challenging their perpetrators and by practicing certain forms of flamboyance. Additionally, they employed many tactics of attention deployment, or distraction, in order to minimize the emotional impact of what they were going through.

Another strategy they used to cope with the bullying was cognitive change, or reappraisal, whereby they became more self-reliant and used positive self-talk to help validate their self-worth and persevere. Finally, they used methods of response modulation in order to address the emotions they were dealing with, through suppression, substance use, cutting, and occasionally suicidal thoughts or attempts. This final category of coping represents the ways in which the queer youth in my study tried to relieve emotional pressure, diminish negative emotions, and experience emotional release. Some of the more dangerous coping attempts show
the level of impact the bullying experiences were having on the participants, and in the next chapter, I more fully explore those impacts over the long-term.
CHAPTER 6
THE IMPACT OF BULLYING

This chapter addresses the impact of bullying. One of the main questions I asked participants during their interviews was if they were aware of any aftereffects of having been bullied. Their responses fell along three general themes. First, many mentioned struggles with mental health issues, which they explicitly saw as consequences of bullying. Second, several discussed the impact of bullying on their relationships. Third, some stated that they had grown (productively) from their experiences of being bullied.

Impact on Mental Health

As explored in the previous chapter on coping, there were many ways in which the participants of this research attempted to cope with bullying; some of these indicated the toll bullying had on their mental health. Mal described his experience, which included disordered eating, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), many of which he framed as developing in an attempt to have some sense of control in his life:

I was a mess for years. Um, I was a mess for several years. . . . In high school, I got very thin. Um, just my mother was always telling me to lose weight. If I would just do these things, if I would behave this way and that way . . . so I started conforming. I started attempting to conform. Um, yeah. . . . I was extremely underweight, and the doctor had even said, you know, “You lose another pound, I’m calling your mother in, because I think you’re not eating.” And I wasn’t. I wasn’t. I wasn’t eating. . . . I didn’t eat breakfast, I would eat a salad at lunch, and then for dinner, it was like force feeding me. . . . I was depressed. I was, everybody hated me. I didn’t care. I didn’t want . . . it was a control thing, I think. It was one thing I could control, and that was the same way with when I was overeating. It was a control thing. I can have this, this this is one thing that I can take control of. I’m not in control of who I’m attracted to, I’m not in control of what’s going on in my head, I’m not in control of how they’re treating me, but this is the one thing I can control. . . . And I became very, um, I was very obsessive about a lot of things. I became, um, I was diagnosed with OCD when I got older, and I fully attribute a
lot of that to having a lack of control in my life. And the compulsions started when I was in high school . . . weird things that I would just have to do over and over and over. (emphasis added)

This excerpt shows that the bullying Mal experienced was having a significant impact on him and his quality of life. Prior research has established a clear connection between trauma and eating disordered behavior (Tagay, Schlottbohm, Reyes-Rodriguez, Repic, & Senf, 2014), and Mal’s life experiences are indicative of repeated trauma.

Mal was not alone in having this kind of response. Many others discussed mental health issues in response to their bullying. Ember shared that she “dealt with a lot of mental illness as a young adult.” Chad stated, “I struggled with bipolar disorder and depression, which was only exacerbated by the bullying and mistreatment at school when I was home.” Tyler described an evening when he was considering suicide as a result of his mental health difficulties:

I was on the side of the road one night, drunker than a skunk, on Xanax, prescribed, but I took it while I drank, which is bad. Um, and I . . . I don’t remember the night. But, I was talking about killing myself and some cop pulled over. I ended up getting taken by police to the hospital. I was there for like 2 days . . . I think that was kind of almost a wake-up call.

Tyler and Ember also mentioned depression, as did Mal in his earlier excerpt. Research on bullying and mental health has identified that victims have “higher levels of emotional distress and mental health issues than their peers” (Nickerson & Torchia, 2015, p. 40), as well as anxiety and depression. Ember discussed issues with anxiety, and Chad also dealt with bipolar disorder.

In several cases, these young adults also mentioned taking medication for their mental health issues, and a couple of them discussed being hospitalized (see Tyler’s story, above).

Ember shared her experience:

I went from mental hospital to mental hospital. I was on so many medications . . . I was [recently] looking at the medication doses that I was on. It was just ridiculous for a 16-year-old. . . . I was on like 6 pills a day, just for something that could have been, just, I could have talked [about].
Ember’s father had gone from being a great source of support to a part of the problem at this time in her life, as he did not accept her sexuality and this may have been implicated in his choice to hospitalize her. Similar to Ember’s story, Chad related that he was on a lot of medication:

> It’s hard to remember some periods of my life because of the different medications I’d be on or not on, and um, I also have a tendency to like, blur out if not completely black out, times that were really awful.

Gwyn shared some of her mental health struggles, even though she stated that she had never been diagnosed:

> I’ve not gotten a formal declaration from a therapist or anything, um, but Cass [her partner] can attest I have basically nightly nightmares, um, which is indicative of PTSD. And, um, because of some things that my parents did a little bit later, um, I have really bad mood swings, and things like that, which are super indicative of bipolar [disorder].

In Gwyn’s case, her family was abusive, and when she complained of being molested by other family members, she was not believed. Her experiences, combined with what she describes above, show that her mental health was compromised.

These excerpts indicate that mental health issues were problematic for many of the participants in this study (5 of 24, 20.8%). As Chad described earlier, his mental health struggles were exacerbated by the bullying he experienced at school. Bullying has been shown to impact mental health in several domains, “including emotional functioning, relationships, academic performance” and physical symptoms (Nickerson & Torchia, 2015, pp. 39, 41). Additionally, suicidal ideation and attempts are more likely to occur in targets of bullying (Nickerson & Torchia, 2015).

**Suicidal Ideation and Attempts**

Research has shown that sexual minority youth (LGB-identified) “report higher levels of suicidality than heterosexual youth, in terms of both ideation and attempts” (Poteat & Rivers,
2015, p. 111). Connections between victimization and elevated suicidal ideation have been noted in this population, as having “exponentially higher levels of suicidal ideation and attempts” due to homophobic bullying, in particular (p. 112). Similar research (Testa & Hendricks, 2015) has found that transgender (T) and gender-nonconforming youth report alarming rates of suicidality, from 38 to 83%, with one third indicating a “history of suicide attempts” (p. 123). Sadly, my research supports these findings.

Although I did not ask specifically about suicide attempts or self-harm, a number of participants disclosed that they had considered suicide (11 of 24, or 45.8%), and others disclosed that they had attempted suicide, sometimes on multiple occasions (6 of 24, or 25%). Five of the participants (5 of 24, or 20.8%) also shared that they had used self-harm, such as cutting, to cope with bullying. Clearly these numbers indicate that the bullying these queer youth were experiencing was impacting their mental health, in that they were using extreme measures to attempt to address their pain.

Chad shared that the bullying he experienced contributed to his struggles with mental illness and sometimes led him to feel suicidal. He discussed some of these aftereffects:

A lot of insecurity, and self-confidence issues that I still struggle with. And um, as I’ve gotten older and matured it’s become a lot easier . . . Everything from my past may have kind of fed into the self-harm . . . Over time I’ve had, I think, six suicide attempts, and, I mean, it’s been a while. It used to be from my first attempt on until just a year and a half ago . . . was the first time in my life since I was nine years old that I can remember not thinking about killing myself. Because it was a daily thought for me at least until then, and that, that’s a lot of stress. It takes a toll on you if every single day you’re thinking about that.

For Chad, insecurity, a lack of self-confidence, and a continuing struggle with suicidal thoughts were the long-term consequences he identified from being bullied. This is also evident in some of the other excerpts shared in this chapter. Bullying clearly impacted the mental health of these
queer youth. Another area that the participants said was impacted by bullying was their relationships with others.

**Impact on Relationships**

Several participants mentioned that their experiences of bullying shaped how they approached future relationships, in terms of feeling safe and trusting others. Codie discussed the impact of his home life (which was abusive) and its effects on relationships with his family members. He also discussed how these experiences continue to affect how he responds to people and relationships in his life.

I mean, it’s really hard to say, because of my home life; it had so much effect on who I became. I’m sure the bullying did not help. I became a really closed off person emotionally. I also did not trust people very much, and I was really into, like, holding grudges, so if someone pissed me off, I would write them off and that would be the end of it. I really hate confrontation, and I think a lot of that has to do with the confrontations I had with my stepdad and my mom and also these other people at school. But, yeah, so it’s hard for me to make that distinction. But in general, after my childhood I was a really closed off person, and it took me a really long time to learn how to trust other people and how to appreciate human touch because, I mean, I just had like, I just didn’t like to be touched, because you don’t know if it’s going to be a bad thing.

In Codie’s narrative, trust and safety become paramount considerations in his interactions with others. It is also clear that his family experiences had some overlap with his school experiences in shaping how he viewed people, intimacy, and touch.

Similarly, although Cass’s home life was “pretty safe” for her, she discussed some of the impacts of bullying on how she relates to people, in general.

I guess, um, I don’t trust people as much as I probably would. Um, a lot of my family was . . . they’re kind of like snake oil salesmen-type people. And, they like to lie to people and cheat them, maybe not to the extent that hers [referring to her partner, Gwyn] did . . . but it all compounds together that I don’t really trust people as much anymore. I think for me it’s basically given me this internal script that I use with people ’cause I tend to have, I guess because of that, I tend to think about conversations before I have them and try and play them out in my head before I talk about them. So, I like to be prepared for anything.
Cass’s partner, Gwyn, agreed with Cass’s statement, and shared the following:

It’s done a lot of the same for me, too. I, I have a really bad problem about it though, ’cause it’s like, I’ll meet somebody new and I’ll just start like, memorizing everything that they say, and then filing it into like little columns in my head and being like, “Ok, this person says this. They’re in this and this and this . . .” Like, I just immediately track down everything that I can know about them and what I can infer. It’s like I’m protecting myself from anything that could possibly hurt me.

These excerpts indicate how being bullied impacted future relationships for the participants. Chad shared earlier about his lack of self-confidence and feelings of insecurity, and Codie expressed he had difficulty trusting people and allowing himself to open up with others. Similarly, both Cass and Gwyn discussed how they have difficulty trusting people and feeling as though they will be safe in relationship to others. This manifests for Gwyn and Cass as a lot of pre-planning for interactions, or being hyper-vigilant for clues about their safety with others.

This is also common among survivors of trauma (Chu, Bryant, Gatt, & Harris, 2016). For other participants, however, the impacts have to do with their relationships with their families, who are not accepting of their sexuality or gender identities.

**Family Relationships**

As explored earlier, many participants stated that the bullying they received from their families was worse for them than the bullying they received elsewhere. Meyer’s (2015) work underscores the impact of family rejection and abandonment for LGBTQ youth, noting that for those with fewer resources to begin with, this can be especially problematic in terms of finding places to call home. Indeed, LGBT youth are overrepresented in homeless populations and out-of-home care (Wilbur et al., 2006). Ryan and Rees (2012) further explored the impact of parental attitudes and behaviors toward their LGBT children:

Parents think that by trying to prevent their children from learning about or from seeing themselves as gay they are helping their children survive in a world they feel will never accept them. But such well-intentioned behaviors are experienced as rejection by their
children and often make adolescents feel as if their parents don’t love them, are ashamed of them or even hate them. Many gay and transgender youth feel like they have to hide who they are to avoid hurting their family, being rejected by their family or even being thrown out of their homes. (p. 9)

In the narratives of several participants, it is easy to see how such family dynamics impact the relationships they were able to have with relatives. Jennifer discussed some of the aftereffects she experienced from being bullied by her family.

And then, just with the family and stuff, and being bullied... It sucks that I’m not close with my mom. Like, other people are so excited that their mom is around or this or that, and I’m like, not scared of my mom, but just like, she’s stress. Like, it’s, it’s actually really hard. Sometimes I feel really depressed because I know that my family, after I’m seeing my family for a week, even though I had maybe some fun, I actually go through a phase of depression every time, because I realize that my family is never going to understand me, even if they’re accepting. Except for just three people, no one in my family is ever going to understand who I was as a person, ’cause they’re not gonna know me, and I know it sounds dramatic, but like, I do (feel depressed).

Jennifer’s narrative here shows the impact of having to navigate her home life, which continues for her. Jennifer further shared that she usually returns to therapy briefly after visits home, to help her get back to her normal self. Family experiences have a significant impact on her. Additionally, her narrative shows that she grieves the loss of the kind of lifelong connections one expects to have with family.

The concern about continuing family connections was expressed by other participants as well. When a family is not accepting, it can have a great impact on a child. For example, Andrew became homeless when his parents kicked him out, and when his grandparents took him in, his parents then bullied them until they also kicked him out. When he then went to his church and tried to talk to the youth minister for assistance, his mother interrupted that source of support, too. This left him on his own, without supports, a situation that echoes Meyer’s (2015) warning above. (When I interviewed Andrew, he was living in a facility for homeless young adults.)

Although his family has made attempts to reconnect with him, their attempts are very
conditional. He can only come back if he will change, which is code for no longer being gay. “I have to change myself but nothing about the home environment is going to change. I’m just older. That’s it. I’m like, that’s why I haven’t come back.” The impact of this for Andrew is that he no longer has family connections. He can sometimes talk with his siblings, but he has to navigate his parents in order to do so, and he worries about what may happen to his siblings for communicating with him.

Tequila also continues to struggle with his family relationships due to how they treat him for being gay.

It is still challenging today, honestly. Um, it’s hard finding myself fully with them, you know? Like, should I include them in my life? ’Cause they’re family, and with normal bullying, you know, with school, you get away from it and eventually you move on. . . . But with my family, I mean, they’re always there, they’re a part of you and I think the only way I can cope with it is to realize that perhaps they’ll never change, and that’s their problem. Um, and you know, I’m living with them right now, so there’s not much I can do. ’Cause I don’t, I don’t have the resources to move out. . . . But, I don’t wanna have children . . . I don’t want to tell them that my parents don’t, they don’t like being . . . “They don’t like gay people,” or “they don’t think that my relationship with your dad is worth it, worth anything.” And, in a sense that means they don’t respect my child. And that’s really the biggest thing. Um. I can deal with myself, but having a child, but having a child, by bringing a child into the world, knowing my parents wouldn’t fully accept them like I want them to, would be worse than anything. ’Cause I can take care of myself. I, I understand. But they don’t. They don’t deserve that from my family. So for the longest time my family was really my friends and it still is, you know? The people I surround myself with, I see as my true family. My family is my blood family. They live in a different world than I do, and . . . I can’t live in that world without being hurt inside.

Tequila’s relationship with his family continues to be problematic, and it impacts how he sees his possibilities for his current and future life. He continues to hurt from how they treat him, and he also sees that their treatment of him may keep him from having children down the road. This type of situation is used as a cautionary tale for parents in the work of Ryan and Rees (2012), where they warn that parental rejection may result in their children not having families of their own. Tequila also makes a distinction between what he thinks of as his “blood family” and his
“true family,” wherein his true family is people he has chosen to have in his life because they value who he is.

Similarly, A.J. talked about his home life and his relationship with his mother, which continues to be problematic for him. A.J. was one of the participants who stated that the bullying he received at home was much worse than any he got from his peers.

As I said, it’s so much worse when it comes from the person who gave birth to you. . . . So, you know, I think this is something she’s gonna have to reconcile with as she gets older and starts maybe fearing death more. Okay, we need to do something better. Our relationship has gotten better . . . mostly though, since we learned that we work with kind of minimal communication. I go for several months without seeing her, and I don’t talk on the phone with her that often. I have to physically brace myself for seeing her ’cause I never know which direction it’s going to go in, if it’s going to be, “okay, we’re finally starting to have like a real, healthy relationship or are we just going to dredge up those old wounds” kind of thing. How I deal with it is, in a way, by not dealing with it because it just seems futile, and way too much stress and hurt, probably on both sides.

For A.J., then, the relationship with their mom is something that has to happen in very small doses, and they have no idea how communicating with her will be. They have to “brace” themself for seeing her, and the two of them communicate minimally. However, the beginning of A.J.’s statement shows the impact of their mother’s rejection, in that “it’s so much worse when it comes from the person who gave birth to you.”

The excerpts in this section show the many ways in which being bullied has impacted the quality of relationships for the participants. They discuss a lack of confidence in themselves and others, a need to “be prepared for anything” to happen, a lack of trust, and insecurity. Additionally, several of them discussed serious mental health issues that they felt were, at least partly, a result of their bullying. Others continue to struggle with navigating their relationships with their families and their sense of rejection, which can impact both mental health and other relationships. These are significant impacts upon young people, and their stories show how the
aftereffects of bullying continue to be present in their lives. Not all of the aftereffects reported by the participants, however, are problematic.

**Impact on Personal Growth**

In terms of aftereffects of bullying, many of the stories shared so far show difficulties experienced by queer youth, except for the following excerpt about Kenny. Kenny was the only participant who said he did not have any aftereffects of bullying. When asked if he had experienced any such consequences, Kenny stated, “Not really. No.” After a slight pause, he added, “Made me stronger, I guess. I just never really looked into it that much. . . . I think it’s due to my parents, ’cause they were so accepting.” In this case, the family acceptance Kenny experienced seems to have served as a protective factor in terms of the bullying he experienced by peers. This is a powerful example, in that it supports the research of the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan et al., 2009), which shows that having an accepting family leads to better health outcomes for queer youth.

One of the surprising findings of this work was that many participants identified that they had actually grown in various positive ways from having experienced bullying. In terms of bullying literature, the idea of growth is not usually explored. The literature instead is focused on the consequences of bullying in an attempt to draw attention to the problematic nature of the experience for youth. Therefore, my findings of growth were surprising. In fact, during my interviews, I had mixed emotions about asking participants if there was any way that they had grown as a result of being bullying. However, what I found was that all participants (24 of 24) stated that they had experienced growth from their experiences. Admittedly, some stated that they would have preferred to grow in ways that did not involve bullying, but nonetheless they acknowledged that they had grown.
Garrett was particularly emphatic in his response to the question. When asked if there was any way in which he grew from his experiences of bullying, he answered:

Every way. It is the reason I am who I am today. But, I don’t feel that’s the road everybody should have to take to get to where I am today. They shouldn’t have to go through it. They should just get to where I am today by being accepted and loved and open and happy and free, instead of having to go through all the struggles and the fights and wondering, “If I tell this person about who I am, are they just gonna turn around and walk away?” And that was my biggest fear in telling anybody that I was bisexual. It was, “Who’s gonna stick around and who’s gonna walk away?” ’cause there are gonna be some that stick around and some that walk away, and what can you do about it?

Garrett’s response here covers much of what I heard from other participants. He is clear that others should not have to experience what he did to get to where he is, and he is clear about the cost of admitting to others that he identifies as bisexual. At the same time, he is utterly emphatic that he grew from his experience.

The notion of growth as a result of bullying has not been explored, to my knowledge. In order to be able to discuss the concept, I looked to sources that discussed growth in a way that made sense in relationship to my project. The concept that best explained what I saw in participants is that of posttraumatic growth [PTG]. Posttraumatic growth is a concept that comes out of psychology, and it is defined as a cognitive process people engage in following highly stressful life events that results in their growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) state that posttraumatic growth manifests in the following ways: “an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life” (p. 1). They further state that those who experience posttraumatic growth describe it as “an outcome of an ongoing process, rather than a coping mechanism” (p. 4), and a “valuing of what has happened to them in the aftermath of trauma” (p. 5). One way in which PTG manifests is through an increased sense of compassion for others, particularly for those in similar situations.
Compassion

Several participants discussed developing compassion as a result of their experiences.

Mal, for example, is clear that what he experienced shaped him and taught him compassion.

I think the level of hatred [I experienced] just really taught me compassion. You know, I didn’t hold on to the hate. And the fact that I can sit here, 20, 25 years later and say all of these things and know verbatim, [have] such a vivid memory . . . I would say it’s almost photographic. It’s taught me to remember what I felt, and never forget how I felt in those moments. And it really shaped the person I am, and wanting to make sure I never make somebody feel the way I felt in those moments, for any reason.

Starr echoes some of Mal’s thoughts:

It’s become a custom for me to just be like, if I tell my story, it’s just one of those things where I just say, “Do I hate how I grew up? Do I wish I wouldn’t have gone through that? No.” Because if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be where I am at today. I wouldn’t be able to say I’m strong. I wouldn’t be able to say that, you know, I can be up there for everybody else, leading the front lines again. I wouldn’t be able to say, I know what it’s like, or I know what it could be like. . . . I always had a soft spot because I knew what it felt like to be hurt. I knew what it felt like to feel both emotional and physical pain.

Starr is clearly embracing who she has become from her life experiences, and valuing how she has grown in compassion.

Jess discussed how her compassion led her to find ways to respond to her grandmother’s bullying in a way that “wouldn’t cause emotional damage,” because she understood her grandmother’s vulnerability:

I took it in. I didn’t react emotionally, so I took a couple hours or days, or however long I needed and I wanted to keep this thought in my mind, which was like, “Overall she didn’t intend to hurt me, so this must be coming from somewhere else.” So I would try to understand where she was coming from and then just try to respond in a way that wouldn’t cause emotional damage because she doesn’t deal with her problems.

Jess’s story is interesting, in that she is discussing her compassion for the source of most of her bullying. She uses her compassion to see her grandmother’s limitations and respond in a way that will not cause “emotional damage.”
Ash talked about being able to have better relationships, due to their increased sensitivity with others, which is another form of compassion:

I think it’s made me more sensitive (when I talk to others). It’s made me more conscientious. . . . I think it’s made me less sensitive when people talk to me. I have a hard time connecting with others and allowing deeper connections and relationships to form, and I think some of that comes from the intense self-hatred that comes from being bullied. But I can acknowledge that and share that, and so far I can form good relationships with people that understand me, so that is wonderful.

In these narratives, the young people in my study illustrate how they have been able to transform the meaning of what happened to them in ways that become beneficial to others in terms of their relationships and their ways of being in the world. They have become more compassionate, even in some cases toward those who bullied them, and they want to make sure that others do not have to face similar experiences.

**Generativity**

Another way in which compassion manifests in the stories of my participants concerns generativity, or wanting to help others. Generative adults, according to the work of McAdams and colleagues, are “adults with a strong concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of youth and the next generation” (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001, p. 474). Often this mindset develops as a response to life experiences wherein the person has managed to forge a positive meaning from a difficult life event. Such was the case in Max’s explanation of the impact of bullying.

Max reaches out to others, even when he has little to give, because he is aware of the (sometimes lethal) consequences of the lack of support for queer youth. Max acts as an advocate for the queer community, using his experiences and knowledge to reach out to others in need. This community engages seems to have resulted from some of the bullying experiences he had in high school.
I think the over-compensation and the savior complex where I always have to help people, because I feel like every missed opportunity is me overlooking someone where I could have been their last chance. And so, if I have no time, but someone is posting on Facebook that they are having a horrible time, I always check in. It’s not even a duty. I just have to . . . its feeling as though if we don’t, nobody else will, because in our lives nobody else was there.

Wanting to help others was a strong theme throughout my data, actually, with many participants stating that they decided to be part of the project in order to help others. As Ash explained:

I think it is really important, and I think visibility is key. And talking about these issues makes a world of difference. And as long as someone is doing the footwork, the least I can do is contribute my story. If that is going to help one other person, then it is completely worth my time and more.

Similarly, Codie identified that being bullied helped him want to make the world a better place, where people can get the support they need:

It helped me. What I got out of it was my determination to make the world a better place so people don’t go through it. So people like [my stepfather] don’t get abused and perpetuate it. So people can go to school and feel safe and supported, and be excited about learning and becoming people and citizens of the world, and take care of one another.

Other participants noted that being bullied, although it was not ideal, paved the way to personal growth, and a desire to help others. A.J. described this very well:

It [bullying] has a paradoxical relationship on a person. It can either eat at you and tear you down, or it can make you stronger, and I think it happens actually at the same time, concurrently. . . . I became very good at just developing a thick skin, because if you can learn to deal with hurtful things, deeply hurtful things, that your own mother says to you, like, how can someone else hurt you that much? I feel like that’s probably the most hurtful thing that you can experience is for your own, like, parents to deeply hurt you. So, having dealt with that, I feel like that makes me stronger in a kind of broken way. . . . I’m kind of indebted to it. Like as rough as it’s been in a lot of ways, I wouldn’t have it any other way. It would be nice to one day be in a better place, but I would say my suffering and my marginalization and all that, alienation, has cultivated me into a person that I am proud of. . . . I’m also aware that a lot of people in my position don’t always come away so relatively unscathed, and I like to advocate for them, for us, really. So, that’s something that can help me heal even further from the bullying at home, and the bullying from society at large. (emphasis added)
A.J. was able to address the ways in which he became stronger, and how he was able to use that strength to advocate for others. Further, he identified that doing the advocacy work was also healing. All of these excerpts address generativity, in which the respondents use their experiences to aid others.

**Self-Acceptance and Awareness of Inner Strength**

Another way in which the participants recognized their own growth is in the realm of self-acceptance, or becoming aware of one’s inner strength. Gwyn was clear on how she developed from her experiences: “I would not be the person that I am today. I wouldn’t be like feisty, like, in your face. ‘I am who I am, that’s it.’ Like, I’m gonna be myself. And I don’t care what anybody says about it.” A.J. reported something similar, in terms of self-acceptance and being themself:

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve gotten more militant about like, “This is who I am and you’re gonna accept it or not.” I’m so over those days of appeasing other people. I’m like, “I’m me.” It’s important. That has primacy. Like, I have to be me. That’s for my own well-being in every sense of the word, you know? So fuck everybody else, basically. . . . In general, just having these experiences and also realizing that I would be so much more miserable if I tried to be anything else but myself. Like, just putting myself first, you know? I’m done pretending. . . . I had the realization that it’s so not worth it to not be myself. You only have so few years on this earth, so I’ve gotta maximize my time and I’m not gonna spend huge chunks of my life as someone I’m not. I mean, I’m not going back into the closet anytime soon and that goes for all the other aspects of my identity, too. Once you’re enlightened, it’s not like [you’re] going back into the darkness.

These two excerpts show how the participants have figured out that they need to be themselves, and they developed the strength to do that in spite of what they have been told by their families and society.

Ash identified self-love and self-respect when asked what helped them get through their life experiences:

My self-love and self-respect. Getting to a point where I don’t care what people think about how I identify because I’m really happy with where I’m at and where I’ve come
from and what I’ve made my life into and the things I’ve done to change my life and that includes me figuring out my identity and getting comfortable. Even on my worst days, when people are shitty and bum me out, I don’t so much care anymore. . . . Self-love really does get you through everything.

For Ash, self-love made a difference, and made it easier for them to persevere. Jennifer identified that she is more confident now, because she is more accepting of herself. “I’m more calm ’cause I’m accepting of what I am, and I’m confident in it.” Clearly, these young adults experienced growth in terms of their self-acceptance, which results in confidence and self-love.

Several of the participants also discussed growth in their awareness of their inner strength. Jess discussed how she figured out how to get past the rejection from her grandmother:

For years I just always had this deep-rooted need of validation from her that I’ve never gotten, and she doesn’t even know me. . . . Just to be in a space where I still love myself and I still accept myself. I can’t wait to just be; that is what I took away from all of this. To go through all that pain and struggle and trying to communicate and not get through, I found a lot of the answers I was looking for in myself. (emphasis added)

Jess’ example shows an appreciation of herself, and an awareness of her strength. Chad also expressed appreciation for his own strength:

It really helped me develop a sense of inner strength and it definitely made me stronger as a person overall. For a while there, it just made me weaker, ’cause it just wore me down. But, because I was worn down so much, and had to build myself back up cause I was given the chance to. I mean, a lot of the young teens you see killing themselves now, it’s because they are worn down nonstop and are not given a chance to build back up. They don’t have the support that I had in order to build back up. . . . I know that I’m one of the lucky ones to have that much family support, and so I hold on to that whenever I’m going through harassment or a rough time. I just remember that I’m better than this, and stronger than this. So I know I’m gonna be fine. . . . As I’ve made it through all of these experiences, I’ve come to respect my own instincts and my own inner strength.

Chad also addresses the importance of the support he received from his family in helping him develop his inner strength, and in being able to build himself back up after being bullied.

Brent discussed his growth in terms of strength, as well. He further identified that he grew from his experiences, and used them to help others:
I feel like it’s strengthened me. There’s a point where you almost begin to lose yourself in the bullying, and you have to fight your way through. I feel like that was the biggest gain for me . . . that strength of fighting through it all, realizing it’s not just me, and then going out there and helping other people who are being bullied. So, it really made me grow in strength and knowledge.

Tristan and Andrew also talked about becoming stronger. Tristan stated, “I can say that even though I went through all these experiences, it made me a stronger person in the sense that I know how to stand up for myself.” Andrew’s take on it is a little different, and it really speaks to him learning to rely on himself and go inward for the support he needs: “I guess it taught me to . . . it really just opened my eyes to me and myself as really being the people you can trust sometimes. Even if you can’t find somebody outside of yourself, you always have yourself to go to.” Similar to what Andrew took from his experience, Darian shared the following:

For me, it’s finding what I like to do and still making it on my own. Like, yes, I got kicked out of school and my mom won’t pay for it, but I can go back and I can go farther on my own. I am strong enough to live this life on my own.

All of these excerpts show how these young adults grew and found self-acceptance, self-love, and strength within themselves as a result of their experiences. These growth experiences are indicative of PTG.

**Spiritual Growth**

Another way in which the participants showed evidence of PTG concerns their spiritual growth, which Jess expressed passionately.

It’s helped me become an adult, and not a shitty adult like a lot of people are, but it’s helped me understand what I believe. It’s helped me understand what I think is true in this life. It’s helped me grow up in a sense because I think I’ve relied on my mom for a lot and it’s really helped me grow—not even just money management, but emotionally I’ve grown and spiritually.

Darian expressed her own growth journey, in which she became her “genuine” self, tapping into her core being:
For me it was establishing a sense of self. I was always trying to blend into the background because I was tired of being pointed out for my differences, and just realizing that I’m not meant to be in the background. And just taking each experience as a way to find my voice and step up into who I am and accepting whoever that is on that day. Just establishing a sense of self, and understanding that it doesn’t have to look like everything I’ve seen before, and it’s okay to just be. And you know, it’s still a struggle some days, but just to keep that in mind. I’ve definitely gained a sense of self in the most genuine way, not just the clothes that I wear. (emphasis added)

Many of the participant narratives shared here show that they have taken their life experiences and chosen to grow. Malchiodi, Steele, and Kuban (2008), in their research on PTG in children and adolescents, noted that those who have experienced PTG show “increased psychological and emotional maturity when compared to similar-age peers” (p. 296). I find this to be true in several of the cases in this research. The statements of Jess and Darian, above, show this, as does the following from A.J.

I live my life by the motto, “life can make you better or bitter, and it’s your choice.” That’s literally my motto, and I’ve just chosen not to let life make me bitter. There is so much good in the world and so much I can carve out to make my own path. I’m happy where I’m at. To have reached that point so young, I consider myself incredibly lucky.

The level of maturity of many of the participants was something that struck me during the interviews. They showed a level of self-development that seems unique for their age. Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) looked at early maturity as evidence of PTG, believing it was “driven by increases in openness, self-acceptance and self-actualization” (p. 322). These characteristics are also evident in many of the participant narratives. Such research helps explain why PTG is evident in so many of the stories shared here. To this point, Arpawong and colleagues (2016) found that the life stage of emerging adulthood “may indicate a greater predilection for developing PTG” (p. 2), in part because of the changes in autonomy and the range of new possibilities people experience during this time. Further, in their systematic review of PTG in children and adolescents, Meyerson, Grant, Smith Carter, and Kilmer (2011) noted
that women and individuals who are racial/ethnic minorities experience more PTG. It may be that many of my participants benefitted from PTG given their intersected identities.

Another interesting discussion of PTG comes from the work of Pals and McAdams (2004) who describe it as an “identity-making narrative process” (p. 68). They believe PTG is best understood as a process through which the self is transformed by the (traumatic) event, and then the event becomes part of the life story. As the person processes the negative event, he or she works to feel positive again; this can be aided by talking with others or writing, as a way of putting the experience into words and allowing one to move the personal narrative “in the direction of positive self-transformation” (p. 67). Further, Pals and McAdams note that narrative analysis “may constitute the most valid way of assessing posttraumatic growth” (p. 65). Given the structure of this research project, then, it makes sense that so much PTG is evident in the narratives of the participants.

In the work of Malchiodi et al. (2008) on PTG and traumatized children, several interventions are suggested that may increase the likelihood of PTG. One of these interventions is to help the child develop a “cohesive trauma narrative,” which they define as “telling one’s story, being heard, and being validated” (p. 297). Another way that PTG can be facilitated is through helping children explore what they have learned since the event. I believe the structure of my interviews provided some of these opportunities—I asked to hear the participants’ stories, validated their experiences, and asked if they had grown in any way from them.

**Resilience**

Resilience has been explored throughout this project. Resilience may be a factor in experiencing posttraumatic growth, but it also differs from PTG. The most commonly accepted definition of resilience is an ability to bounce back from adversity or hardship (Walsh, 2016). To
this point, Rutter (2006) defined resilience as “a relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress or adversity” (p. 1). This type of resilience is discussed in some work on PTG (Malchiodi et al., 2008), and the social work field has long been interested in developing resilience in clients as a means of enhancing their strength (Walsh, 2016). In this project, I have focused more upon Ungar’s (2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) definition of resilience, which addresses the ability of people to mobilize the available resources in order to meet their needs. As discussed earlier, sometimes these efforts appear in ways that are generally deemed as socially unacceptable. Ungar (2008) discussed some of these instances as hidden resilience, which happens when the available resources are inadequate and needs have to be met through other ways. Harvey (2012) also discussed flamboyance as a form of hidden resilience.

Two participants mentioned resiliency in their interviews. I asked Gage for his definition of the term after he mentioned it several times.

I’d say one’s ability to cope with whatever external and internal factors that are happening in one’s life and to just continue building and not. I wouldn’t say wallowing on them or getting stuck in these thoughts or these feelings, but having an ability to process them and move on.

Gage discussed resilience in the context of trying out coping mechanisms and having to discard them and try new ones, because they were not helping. In some literature, this is also discussed as adaptive coping, or coping flexibility (Kato, 2012).

A.J. was the other participant who directly mentioned resiliency in their interview. They stated, “Actually a lot of my upbringing helped me kind of navigate through life, in a way that is more resilient than some of my peers who seem to just like fall apart whenever anything happens.” In this excerpt, A.J. is talking about resiliency as the ability to bounce back after hardship.
Regardless of whether they spoke to resilience directly, all of the participants in this project showed it in some fashion in their narratives. They were able to find some way to deal with bullying, and they were able to continue to try to navigate the impacts of it which have been shown to be significant. Mostly, though, they showed resilience by their survival in the face of very hostile environments.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the impacts of bullying that were identified by the participants in this study. Many experienced significant problematic impacts, such as significant struggles with mental health issues like depression, OCD, eating disorders, and PTSD. They also suffered from suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and engagements with self-harm practices such as cutting. Given the existing literature on LGBTQ young adults, these findings are, sadly, not surprising (GLSEN, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Ryan et al., 2009).

Other participants were clear that their bullying experiences impacted how they relate/d to other people in their lives, in terms of feeling safe, trusting people, and being open to people and relationships. Some participants identified longer-term impacts of bullying, especially when it came from family members with whom most of us expect to have lifelong connections. When families were rejecting of their children’s sexuality or gender identities, the expectation of lifelong connection is challenged. This may spill over into future decisions about partnering and having children, as seen in Tequila’s story and in the work by Ryan and Rees (2012).

However, in spite of these findings, it was also clear that the young people in this research experienced significant growth as a result of being bullied. Many of the participants shared stories of how they were able to grow into greater self-love and -acceptance, with some of
them even noting that they grew spiritually from their experiences. As detailed in the latter half of the chapter, many participants experienced posttraumatic growth as a result of being bullied.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

LGBTQ youth are bullied over the course of their lives, at school, by peers, by society at large, and sometimes at home by their families. As a result of such bullying, some young queer people take their own lives. This research was undertaken in part as a response to a rash of LGBTQ youth suicides in 2010, as referenced at the start of this dissertation. As such, this dissertation served as a platform for exploring the lives of LGBTQ young people. Specifically, I examined the bullying experiences of 24 LGBTQ young adults in Southern Michigan between the ages of 18 and 29 via qualitative semi-structured interviews occurring between March and September of 2015. The research was guided by three primary questions.

R.Q. 1: What was the Nature of the Bullying They Experienced?

As described in Chapter 4, the participants in this research reported a variety of bullying experiences, beginning in elementary school and extending through young adulthood. In elementary school, they experienced verbal harassment and some physical assault. One participant experienced a sexual assault at school. The findings of this section were in line with the findings of GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2012) in that the participants were bullied for a variety of reasons, including their gender presentation and perceived sexuality. For example, participants reported being bullied for not being girly enough (girls) or being too girly (boys), or dressing in ways that did not match their assigned genders. Additionally, participants reported being called “gay” and “fag” in elementary school.
In middle and high school, the bullying was again similar to what was found in GLSEN research (2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). At this time of life, many participants identified that their developing bodies and emerging sexuality became more salient in terms of the bullying they experienced, as shown in previous research (Duncan, 1999; Klein, 2012). Moreover, similar to elementary school, middle school bullying ranged from verbal and physical harassment to physical assaults. Examples were given of experiences ranging from verbal harassment in the hallways and locker rooms to more severe assault incidents, such as when Tyler was jumped by a group of peers and beaten. One of the more grievous offenses involved Ash, who was surrounded by a group of peers who tried to set fire to them and their girlfriend.

In high school, the bullying followed similar patterns, with myriad reports of verbal harassment and physical assaults, as well as one report of a sexual assault being committed at school. For some participants, however, the bullying began to decrease, which was attributed to the youth growing up or maturing (as compared to middle school), or to the presence of school leadership that was intolerant of homophobic bullying. Also in this time frame, more participants began to be open about their sexual or gender identities, which sometimes increased their risk, as when Max reported experiencing a “corrective” sexual assault, and Tristan reported being physically assaulted for being out as transgender.

I also asked participants if they were bullied after high school, as young adults. Their bullying experiences changed somewhat in character at this point in their lives, with some of their experiences being framed as “bullying from society at large.” One participant used this phrase to describe bullying by society, in general. I contextualized this type of treatment by Perry’s (2001, 2009) “cultural permission to hate” thesis, where such treatment is societally acceptable based on shared cultural story, or hegemonic narrative, that demonizes LGBTQ
people. As a result of this cultural permission to hate, several participants reported incidents of being harassed in public restrooms and bars, usually for their gender presentation and people’s assumptions about what that means about their sexuality or personhood.

More specifically, participants reported people screaming at them from passing cars, relative strangers asking inappropriate questions about their sexuality, and other behaviors one could describe as gender or sexuality micro-aggressions. For example, A.J. reported people asking if that was really his name, something he took as a form of invalidating his gender identity. Similarly, Mal was referred to as “it” upon occasion, denying his personhood because of his gender identity. One participant even reported being kidnapped in his young adulthood; thankfully, he was able to escape the situation, but such experiences highlight the salience of bullying past the period of adolescence. Also in this section, some participants reported difficulties navigating their identities in the workplace, especially given that people can be fired in Michigan for their LGBTQ identities.

Another area in which participants mentioned being bullied was within the LGBTQ community. This is not surprising, given that there has been a long history of discord between the differing segments of it. Some of this has to do with concerns over “passing,” as well as the lumping together of diverse identities related to sexual and gender minority status (Eaklor, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Stryker, 2008). The participants described being bullied for not passing, for not performing their gender or sexuality “correctly,” and for being of different racial backgrounds. Indeed, the LGBTQ categorization is problematic in itself, since the issues experienced by the various factions within it are very different. However, given the overarching culture in the U.S. concerning gender and sexuality, it is not surprising that the groups were lumped together in the
first place, as they were all historically categorized as sexual or gender deviants (Eaklor, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Stryker, 2008).

One of the most significant findings in this chapter was the fact that several participants identified being bullied by their families. Nine out of 24 (37.5%) participants identified that their families bullied them, mostly due to religious reasons. Even more telling is that five of those (20.8%) identified that the bullying from their families was worse than the bullying they received elsewhere. Although I had expected to find that some of the participants had unsupportive families, I did not expect them to call the treatment they received from their families bullying, as this is not present in the bullying literature. Although there is much research related to how families treat their LGBTQ children (Meyer, 2015; Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009, Wilbur et al., 2006) and acknowledgement that the young people feel rejected by their families (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan & Rees, 2012), it has not been explored as bullying. Asking the participants about their experiences and hearing their voices allowed me to uncover that they feel bullied by their families, which is a significant finding of this research.

Another significant finding is how the meaning of bullying changes over the life course, as does the type of bullying experienced by participants. Most bullying literature is focused upon the years in which young people are in school. After they move beyond high school, the treatment they receive from peers or from the larger society is often not discussed. That which is discussed is no longer called bullying. The narratives of the participants in this research show that bullying continued into young adulthood for many of them. This suggests that discussions of bullying may need to be extended into different life periods.
R.Q. 3. How Have LGBTQ Youth Dealt with Bullying?

In Chapter 5, I answered research question three, which addressed coping with bullying. As noted there, I originally numbered my research questions in an order that I believed would make sense for presenting and discussing my findings. However, I found that my results suggested a different ordering—that coping seemed to arise ahead of discussions of impact for the participants. For them, the impacts of bullying (both short and long-term) were contingent in part on how they immediately coped with it, and their discussions of the impact of being bullied seemed to continue over time. In exploring how the participants coped with bullying, I presented their responses using a framework of coping and resilience developed by Hill and Gunderson (2015). They explored several types of coping strategies, such as situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation.

The participants in my study used all of these coping strategies. Participants sought different types of support to help them cope, such as emotional support from friends or family, LGBTQ agencies, and online resources. This coping strategy falls under situation selection in the Hill and Gunderson (2015) model. Getting support from friends was the most commonly discussed strategy. Another common coping behavior was setting boundaries. This was illustrated in the narratives through explanations on negotiating spaces in school, for example. They avoided areas that were unsafe, such as locker rooms, as well as fellow students who were unsafe.

Situation modification was another coping strategy used by participants. There were two types of situation modification identified by Hill and Gunderson (2015): self-assertion and problem solving attempts. Participants discussed trying to “fly under the radar” in terms of their sexual identity. Two young women discussed not being open about their sexuality, in part to
avoid peer harassment. This is an example of self-assertion in the Hill and Gunderson model. Some also resisted when others tried to get them to modify their behaviors, or not be themselves. Participants responded by putting themselves “out there” in very public ways, flaunting their sexual or gender identities. In other cases, the participants fought back, or otherwise challenged their harassment. Sometimes the decision to fight back developed over time, as they developed the resources to stand up to their perpetrators.

Attention deployment, or distraction, was used by many participants in my study as well. In the interview narratives, this looked like ignoring provocations from peers, or choosing to disengage. For others, this looked like seeking other forms of diversion, such as reading, swimming, writing, or playing video games. Most of these coping efforts were aimed at taking their minds off what they were experiencing, and to minimize or relieve some of the emotional consequences of bullying. Cognitive change was also present here. Many participants became more self-reliant, purposely keeping their troubles to themselves, and beginning to rely more purposefully on themselves for survival. Cognitive change also appeared like practicing positive self-talk. Several discussed things that they would tell themselves to help them persevere, such as reminding themselves that they were getting closer to moving out of their parents’ houses or that they were strong. For two participants, the It Gets Better Project (2016) was particularly helpful, and they used the online videos as a way to bolstering their emotional state.

The final coping strategy in Hill and Gunderson’s (2015) model is that of response modulation. The goal of this category of coping mechanisms is to experience some emotional relief or release. This category includes such things as expressing or suppressing emotions, and the use of substances to gain emotional relief. Many participants discussed their inability to cope with what was happening to them, and some mentioned suppression of emotions directly. In
other cases, participants discussed using drugs or alcohol and others admitted to cutting, having suicidal thoughts, and attempting suicide. The narratives in this last category spoke to the impact of bullying, seguing into Chapter 6.

R.Q. 2: How Did Bullying Impact LGBTQ Youth?

Chapter 6 addressed the question: How did bullying impact LGBTQ youth? Some of the answers to this question were briefly addressed in Chapter 5, which focused on coping. In some ways, it was difficult to separate the two, but coping seemed to happen closer to the time of the actual bullying, whereas the impact, or aftereffects, occurred over a period of time. That being said, bullying impacted the participants of this study in several key ways. The first way was in regard to mental health.

Many participants identified that they struggled with mental health issues, which they attributed in part to being bullied. These experiences ranged from depression to anxiety, to self-harm and suicide attempts. These are significant impacts with long-standing consequences. A few participants reported being hospitalized and/or being medicated for their mental illnesses over the course of several years. Clearly bullying affected these queer youth and their quality of life.

Another way in which their bullying impacted the participants was in terms of their relationships with peers and family. Many noted that being bullied resulted in them having difficulty trusting people in relationships or in feeling safe with others. Another way in which this manifested was in regard to family. For many who experienced family rejection, relationships with their immediate relatives continue to be problematic. Some have severely limited their contact with family members, “brace themselves” ahead of interacting with their parents; and/or return to therapy after home visits. One participant discussed how the experience
with his family made him reconsider whether he wanted children, because he did not think it would be fair to a child to be put in the middle of such a fractured and difficult relationship in which he is devalued. As is the case for self-harm and suicide ideation, familial relationships hold significant and long-term consequences.

Finally, many participants identified that being bullied had contributed to their personal and spiritual growth. I explored this aspect of their narratives using the concept of posttraumatic growth. PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998) occurs following a difficult experience or trauma in one’s life; those who experience PTG are able to grow as a result of the trauma. One manifestation of PTG was an increased compassion for others (Tedeschi et al., 1998). Many indicated that their experiences made them more compassionate and caring people in general. Sometimes this looked like generativity (McAdams et al., 2001), in which people seek to help those who are going through similar life events. Another way in which PTG was evident in the narratives of participants concerned increasing self-acceptance and an awareness of their inner strength (Tedeschi et al., 1998). Some participants also mentioned experiencing spiritual growth as a result of their bullying experiences. Overall, I repeatedly noticed what appeared to be an enhanced level of self-awareness and personal development in the participants. They often seem more mature than their peers of the same age. This is also a common characteristic of PTG (Malchiodi et al., 2008).

The impact of bullying on the lives of the participants was significant, in both surprising and less surprising ways. I expected to find mental health impacts, due to prior research, and the impacts upon relationships make sense given the content of the narratives shared by participants. I did not expect to find posttraumatic growth, however. Since I wanted this work to be strengths-focused, these findings were a pleasant surprise, and they challenge the overarching rhetoric of
LGBTQ young people being at risk. Although they experience risk in multiple environments of their lives, they also show resilience and have experienced growth.

**Connections to the Literature**

The findings of this research show that the contexts investigated in the literature review for this project are salient. The participants, throughout all of the time periods explored, shared that gender and the forms of its expression were often targeted via bullying. Participants were policed for their sexuality from very early ages, and this continues into young adulthood. Cultural ideas of normativity in terms of gender and sexuality continue to have a large influence in the lives of queer youth in ways that somehow allow people to feel justified in bullying those who express their sexuality and gender in non-heteronormative ways. Perry (2009) refers to this type of bias as “cultural permission to hate” (p. 429). From the narratives shared in this dissertation, it is clear that this form of gender and sexuality policing is salient in the lives of queer young people.

Many participants in this work were also bullied for their multiple identities; in some cases, one identity category would be okay, but another might be targeted. It is clear from these narratives that intersectional identities need to be considered when discussing bullying. Felix and colleagues (2009) found that those who are bullied for multiple aspects of their identities suffer the most in terms of their well-being, and many participants in this dissertation shared such experiences.

Sadly, many of the young adults I interviewed experienced significant forms of violence from others who were not accepting of their gender and sexual identities or presentations. Some experienced physical and sexual assaults, and others experienced forms of “emotional violence” (Gabarino & deLara, 2002, p. ix), such as verbal harassment (“fag”), intimidation (threats),
humiliation (“bathroom shock”), isolation (socially outcast), and fear. Some of their narratives reveal that even as young adults, it is hard to know when or where they may be targeted, so in some ways, they have to always be prepared.

Places and spaces were also important in this research, in that these queer youth had to find or create spaces of safety, and they learned to avoid places they recognized as unsafe, such as bathrooms and locker rooms. Queer spaces, which one would assume to be safe, were not always so. For some, workplaces were unsafe, and for others, home was unsafe. In all of these cases, finding safe spaces was an important refuge. Gwyn, who seemed to have no safe spaces, was able to find refuge in nature, “That tree was basically my best friend.” Others found refuge in their imaginations, through reading books and/or playing video games.

The context of school is already extensively studied in bullying research, and the narratives of the participants in this study addressed that particular context quite well. It was clear that school was often unsafe, and that school cultures had a large impact on how queer youth were treated. Similar to Pritchard (2013), however, I would note that the behavior of adults in school settings deserves more attention in bullying research in general. There is an assumption in much of the literature that adults preserve safety in school settings. That is frequently not the case, as seen in the narratives of participants in this study.

Since some of the initial research framing this project concerned resilience, it is important to look at the resources available to these young people. Research has shown that resilience is increased by the presence of available resources (Harvey, 2012; Ungar 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Walsh, 2016), and these young people were able to draw upon many different kinds of resources. The young adults in this project were able to mobilize resources to help them through their journeys; these took the form of caring adults, friends, pets, Internet connections, and
LGBTQ resource agencies. They also had internal resources they were able to draw upon to aid them in their times of need.

This discussion of the contexts of young people is important, as well, in making the connection between the contexts of their lives, their available resources, and their abilities to be resilient in the face of hardship. These components are part of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which describes human life as being composed of these multiple interrelationships and our ability to get our needs met so that we can grow. Therefore, these contexts matter, as they help determine the chances young LGBTQ people have to grow and persevere.

Finally, it is clear that the bullying experienced by these young adults were in large part motivated by bias. Prejudice of different types and beliefs concerning normative sexuality and gender expression undergirded their bullying. Minority stress theories, homophobia, and cultural permission to hate were represented in their narratives. Additionally, intersectionality mattered, as many of the participants could be categorized as polyvictims (Felix et al., 2009)—they were bullied for more than one aspect of their identities.

**Project Contributions**

Overall, this project allowed me to explore many aspects of the lives of queer youth—at least in terms of those who participated in this research. As I consider the project as a whole, there are four main points worth highlighting. The first is the concept of resilience and how it applies to this project. The second is the importance of relationships in navigating life transitions and difficulties. The third is the precarity of safety in the lives of many of these young people. The fourth is the concept of posttraumatic growth.
The Importance of Resilience

Resilience is a concept that served as a basis for much of this research project. I was interested in discovering how the participants managed to be resilient and not resort to suicide, like many other queer youth have done. What became clear in the course of this project was that Ungar’s (2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) work on resilience is an important factor to understand when considering the lives of young people. Many of the participants did not have access to the resources they needed to thrive. Many were still financially dependent upon their parents, so they were afraid or unable to be open about the struggles they were going through related to their sexuality or gender identities. As seen in the research presented here, some of those who were open with their parents experienced homelessness or other forms of withdrawn support (parents no longer paying for college).

When resources are not available, young people will do what is necessary to survive. In this research, some were able to connect with LGBTQ adults and resource centers. Others found support online. A few were only able to turn to themselves, but were able to survive in spite of their circumstances. It became evident that those with more access to resources were able to cope with their life experiences, even when these were incredibly painful. It also became evident that some of the young people had very few supports or access to resources. If we want to increase resiliency in young people, we need to pay attention to the resources they have available (Harvey, 2012; Ungar, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

The Importance of Relationships

Almost every participant stated that they relied on the support of friends or family to help them cope with bullying. Some were aware that the level of support they received from their families was something that they knew not everyone could count on, and they were grateful for
it. In Kenny’s case, it appeared that the level of support he received from his family was a protective factor; the bullying he reported was very minor, and he was clear when discussing it that the character of the bullies was the problem, not his. This example is supported by the research of the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009), which noted that family acceptance of LGBTQ young people is the greatest contributor to their health and well-being.

On the other end of the spectrum was Andrew, whose family not only kicked him out of the home, but also blocked his access to other family members and the clergy of the church his family attended. Meyer (2015) refers to this as “homophobic abuse in the family” (p. 15). Andrew was without relationships, but he somehow managed to find what he needed within himself. According to the research of the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009), Andrew is at high risk of suicide, drug use, and risky sexual behavior. However, when he was interviewed, Andrew had already confronted his suicidal thoughts and he did not discuss the other factors as problematic.

There were also participants who created their own families, or had chosen families. This was a common practice among the LGBTQ community in other time periods (Eaklor, 2011; Marcus, 2002), and it has continued for those whose families are rejecting. This is also present in the coping and resiliency framework of Hill and Gunderson (2015), and appears in the work of others (McDavitt et al., 2008) as well. The role of people who accept queer youth as they are is incredibly important. Both Ash and Tequila discussed being in unhealthy relationships in the past but acknowledged that they remained in them longer than they might have because their partners were the only people in their lives who accepted them as they were. Additionally, many
participants shared stories of going to hang out with friends or supportive family members for healing and comfort after being bullied.

Harvey and Stone Fish (2015) focused on the importance of relationships in fostering resilience in queer youth, citing research by Walsh (2012) which states that resilience is “encouraged by bonds with kin, intimate partners, and mentors, such as coaches and teachers, who supported their efforts, believed in their potential, and encouraged them to make the most of their lives” (Walsh, 2012, p. 174, cited in Harvey & Stone Fish, 2015, p. 399). Human connection is an important protective factor, and it becomes more so when youth have intersectional identities and/or are identified as polyvictims (Felix et al., 2009), or when their families are rejecting (Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al. 2009).

The Precarity of Safety

The third point I wish to highlight is the importance of acknowledging the precarity of safety for these young people. Recall, for example, Mal’s stories of bullying in elementary school, especially when his peers beat him right before his mom showed up at school. His mom immediately took him to the principal’s office, and the principal responded in a manner that was dismissive of the incident. Unfortunately, this response was all too common in the lives of the youth in this research. There were many stories of the adults in charge doing nothing, thus implicitly showing approval of what the bullies were doing or the messages they were sending. Also, although Mal attempted to find safe spaces at school, he eventually quit because he felt so unsafe. Pritchard (2013) is one of the only researchers I have found who clearly and explicitly addresses this response from adults in school settings, and he, too, uses Perry’s (2009) permission to hate framework when explaining these behaviors.
Safety was not something many of these young people could take for granted in their lives. School was certainly unsafe, but home could also be unsafe, as several were subjected to various forms of physical, emotional, and sometimes sexual abuse at the hands of family members. Some had alcoholic parents or stepparents, and others had parents with mental illnesses. On top of that, being in public is often unsafe for queer youth. Given the levels of violence in society and the number of school shootings that happen on a far too regular basis, many youth experience this lack of safety; however, for queer youth, this lack of safety is more prevalent (GLSEN, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Klein, 2012; Meyer, 2015), due to cultural permissions to hate (Perry, 2009).

In Chapter 1, I briefly addressed the social climate of Michigan, which can be very unaccepting of non-normative expressions of sexuality and gender. There has been much political upheaval in Michigan in terms of safety for LGBTQ people, and recently legislators argued for religious exceptions to be included in proposed anti-bullying legislation (Morman, 2015). Additionally, the attorney general of Michigan recently joined a coalition with several other states in order to fight “U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice's recent federal directive extending protections to LGBT youth in schools” (Trager, 2016, para. 1). This statewide environment is problematic, but the current national political climate is even more troubling, and it gets more media attention.

Further, at the time of this writing, the 2016 presidential election is in full swing. The Republican National Convention platform for 2016 is being called “the most anti-LGBT platform in history” by the “the president of the best known gay conservative group in the country, the Log Cabin Republicans” (Juzwiak, 2016, para. 1). One of the many items outlined in the platform is repealing same-sex marriage, which was legalized in 2015. Clearly this message
is appealing to some in the United States, as are the messages of violence and intolerance being repeatedly stated by presidential candidate Donald Trump. This “extreme cultural polarization” becomes a unique stressor, as it “leads to fragmentation and disconnection between queer youth and their various social ecologies,” according to Harvey (2012, p. 325), which then endangers their abilities to be resilient.

As Harvey and Stone Fish (2015) stated, “the risks of being oneself continue for many queer youth today, especially those who live in deeply religious cultures, rural communities, or those who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups” (p. 399). Many of their descriptors apply to the participants in this research, and I would argue that these risks are more relevant in today’s political climate. This overarching social climate results in an environment where young queer people know they are not safe or supported; this is part of the “bullying by society at large” problem raised by participants in this study. Sadly, this recent political rhetoric also relates back to Perry’s (2001, 2009) discussion of cultural permission to hate. When cultural permission to hate becomes part of our national political agenda, queer youth suffer, and their safety cannot be assured.

Meyer (2015) adds another important consideration to the discussion of safety in the lives of queer youth. His work focuses on intersectional differences, within which he notes that LGBTQ people who are poor “are more likely to face abuse than other LGBT people” (p. 11). This again relates back to the issue of available resources. For a full understanding of anti-queer violence, Meyer states we have to use the lenses of race, class, and gender (p. 15) that clarify whose lives are the most precarious, based upon institutionalized social discrimination. Pritchard (2013) also calls for a more intersectional approach to describing the lives of queer youth, and
more researchers are focusing on other markers of identity in queer youth (Daley et al., 2008; Garnett et al. 2015; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015; Kuper et al. 2013; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014).

The Possibility of Posttraumatic Growth

The final point from this project that deserves more consideration is the concept of posttraumatic growth. As a licensed social worker in the state of Michigan, I was surprised to stumble upon this area of research. Although social work as a profession is very concerned with trauma, I had never heard of posttraumatic growth prior to conducting this research. The concept seems to be undervalued. With its similarities to the concept of resilience and the trauma-based focus of social work, it deserves further empirical and practical examination. Indeed, it worked quite well in describing what I saw in the participants’ narratives regarding the aftereffects of bullying.

Harvey (2012) encourages clinicians to seek “hidden strategies of resilience” in their work with queer youth as a way of focusing on their strengths and encouraging the development of resilience, for “the creation of resilience is the creation of hope” (p. 334). Similarly, focusing on PTG can also be useful for clinicians and the young people they see. Malchiodi and colleagues (2008) identified several methods designed to increase the odds of the development of PTG. First, they identified several questions that can be asked to assess whether young people are experiencing posttraumatic growth. Some of these are, “What is it that you will no longer take for granted?” and “Do you believe that you could be of help to others who have faced a similar situation?” (pp. 296-297). Malchiodi and colleagues also recommend that youth who experience trauma receive social support from significant others, develop “a cohesive trauma narrative (telling one’s story, being heard, and being validated),” and understand “that one is not
to blame for what happened” (p. 297). Employing the strategies recommended by Harvey (2012), and by Malchiodi and colleagues, will bolster the growth of queer youth.

Indeed, after looking at the research on PTG, I wondered if the reason so many participants said that they grew from their experiences of bullying was because my interview was set up in such a way that some of those factors were present. This was not by design, as I did not find PTG until after completing the interviews. However, I would say that the presence of these different components was a happy accident. I gave the participants a venue for sharing their trauma narratives, I validated their experiences by listening to them, and I asked them if there were ways in which they grew as a result of their experiences. This process may have inadvertently served as a PTG intervention, thus leading all 24 of the participants to identify that they grew from their experiences.

At the same time, this may be coincidence. Certainly many of the participants were already invested in their own personal growth, and many of them were already engaged in different aspects of the LGBTQ community—as mentors, activists, or educators. These behaviors have been identified as resilience strategies for trans youth in the literature (Singh et al., 2014), and some trans youth in this dissertation research shared this as well. The good news is that these young adults managed to persevere, and they identified that they have grown from their experiences, although they also stated they may have preferred to grow in other ways.

The four areas of concern presented here offer direction for positive movement and change in the lives of queer youth. Resilience needs to be addressed in future work with and for LGBTQ young people. Similarly, the importance of relationships with caring others as a protective factor is something that needs to be highlighted in work with queer youth. Relationship resources facilitate resiliency and healing. Further, we need to be aware of the
precarity of the social environments of young people in general; the environments of queer youth are even more precarious, and this needs to be addressed in more public arenas. Finally, the possibility of posttraumatic growth needs to be highlighted, with more human services providers being made aware of its impacts and receiving training on how to facilitate its development.

As Meyer stated, “Reducing violence against LGBT people is a societal and collective responsibility” (2015, p. 135). I have presented many ways in which we can help ameliorate the hostility of the climates in which LGBTQ youth live, and foster growth opportunities for them as they fight for “the freedom of spaces in between” the labels society has given them and navigate the “cultural blind spots [that] get in the way of best efforts to help children grow up queer” (Harvey, 2012, p. 326).

**Limitations**

As with any research project, this study has limitations. The first is the self-selection of participants. Although I put much energy into recruitment efforts, my sample was limited to 24 young adults. There could be many reasons that they agreed to speak to me, and I did not ask what they were. A second limitation of this work is the difficulty of the topic. My early efforts to conduct focus groups failed, and many potential respondents who received initial materials or expressed interest did not follow through. As I learned from doing the interviews, the topic, although many of the participants had some distance from it, continues to be sensitive. Some potential respondents even shared that it was too close for them, or too painful to discuss. Given that, there may be experiences of bullying and responses to the bullying that were not addressed here.

Finally, this is qualitative research. It is limited in scope and cannot be generalized to others in a traditional sense. However, the narrative descriptions are rich, and the themes
uncovered in this work may resonate with other queer youth. Further, the narratives in this work illuminate the lived experiences of LGBTQ-identified young adults in southern Michigan, exploring their bullying experiences, coping mechanisms, and impacts. Hopefully, their stories may serve to offer some sort of comfort and support to those who read them, in the spirit of encouraging posttraumatic growth.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Statement of Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology

Principal Investigator: Angie Moe, PhD
Student Investigator: Melinda McCormick, MSW
Title of Study: Bullying Experiences & Resilience in LGBTQ Youth

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “Bullying Experiences & Resilience in LGBTQ Youth.” This project will serve as Melinda McCormick’s dissertation for the requirements of the PhD in Sociology. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**
This research is intended to study how LGBTQ young adults understand their experiences of bullying, and what effect bullying has had in their lives.

**Who can participate in this study?**
In order to participate in this project, you must be a LGBTQ young adult between the ages of 18 and 30.

**Where will this study take place?**
The interview will take place at a pre-determined public location which has been agreed upon by the participant and the student investigator, or via telephone or Skype, depending upon the wishes of the participant.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**
This study will require a one-time commitment to participate in an individual interview lasting from one to two hours.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**
If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview with the student investigator.

**What information is being measured during the study?**
This research is intended to study how you understand your experiences of bullying, what these experiences mean (or mean!) to you, and what effect bullying has had in your lives, as well as to determine if the bullying aided your personal growth in any way.
What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

One potential risk of participation in this project is that you may become upset by the content of the interview shared by you. Melinda McCormick is a licensed social worker and has been trained to respond to any discomfort that might arise for individuals, and she will have information available about counseling and other community services that offer additional types of support, should you need them.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

One benefit of this activity is having the opportunity to share your story with a caring adult, which you may find to be an empowering experience. Additionally, this information will be shared in publications and presentations to help educate and foster understanding in those who work with or have an interest in LGBTQ young people.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

The only cost to you associated with participating in this study is your transportation to the site of the interview, which will be determined by you.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

All of the information collected from you is confidential. That means that your name will not appear on any papers on which the information is recorded. The conversations will all be coded using a fake name (pseudonym), chosen by you. The typed conversations, as well as the informed consent forms, will be retained for at least three years in a locked file cabinet in the faculty investigator’s locked office. There is some information that the researcher is required to report if revealed in the interview, including information that suggests a clear plan to do harm to yourself or others and the current abuse or neglect of a minor. Such information will be reported to and handled by the appropriate authorities, including but not limited to the local police or Adult Protective Services. These exceptions regarding the confidentiality serve to protect anyone from potential or current harm.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study. You may also refuse to answer any question at any time during the interview by indicating that you’d like to “pass.”

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact Melinda McCormick at (616) 212-8851, Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu or Dr. Angela Moe at (269) 387-5276 or angie.moe@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review
Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant’s signature

Date
Appendix B

Paper Survey Instrument
Please circle the item(s) which describes your sexuality or sexual orientation.
Gay    Lesbian    Bisexual    Straight    Queer    Questioning
Prefer Not to Answer
Other: ____________________________________________________

Please circle the item(s) which describes(s) your gender identity.
Male    Female    Transgender    Transgender Male-to-Female
Transgender Female-to-Male    Gender Queer    Prefer not to Answer
Other: ____________________________________________________

Please circle the item(s) which describes your race or ethnicity.
White/European American    African American/Black
Hispanic or Latino/Latina    Asian or Pacific Islander    Native American
Other: _____________________

What year were you born? _______

Are you a citizen of the United States of America? (circle correct answer) Yes  No
Prefer Not to Answer
If not, where are you a citizen? _____________________________________________

In what city do you currently live?
Do you currently have plans to move away from Michigan? Yes  No
Prefer Not to Answer
If yes, please specify where you plan to move:
_________________________________________

Have you ever been involved in the foster care system in Michigan or another state? (Circle one)  
Yes  No  Prefer Not to Answer
If yes, please specify which state: ___________________________________________

Have you ever been homeless (forced to leave your home and seek shelter elsewhere)? (Circle one)  
Yes  No  Prefer Not to Answer
If yes, please specify when: ________________________________________________
If yes, did your sexual or gender identity or expression have anything to do with you becoming homeless? Yes  No  Prefer Not to Answer

Have you ever been part of the free lunch program at school? (Circle one)
Yes  No  Prefer Not to Answer  Not sure

Please go to the next page.
Please circle all of the items that describe your primary care provider(s).
Biological care provider(s)  Non-biological care provider(s)
One provider  Two providers  It’s complicated
Heterosexual  LGBTQ orientation, please specify: ______________

Education

What year did you graduate high school or attain your GED? ______________

Please list the middle school(s) and high school(s) you attended below, as well as the city in which they are located and the years you were there (ex. 2010-2011):

Middle School 1
Name: ___________________________________________
City: ____________________________________________
Year(s) attended: ___________________________________

Middle School 2
Name: ___________________________________________
City: ____________________________________________
Year(s) attended: ___________________________________

Middle School 3
Name: ___________________________________________
City: ____________________________________________
Year(s) attended: ___________________________________

High School 1
Name: ___________________________________________
City: ____________________________________________
Year(s) attended: ___________________________________

High School 2
Name: ___________________________________________
City: ____________________________________________
Year(s) attended: ___________________________________

High School 3
Name: ___________________________________________
City: ____________________________________________
Year(s) attended: ___________________________________

Please circle your highest level of education.
Less than High School  High School/GED  Some College
Associates Degree  Bachelor’s Degree  Graduate Degree  Other: ____________

Are you currently pursuing higher education? (circle one)  Yes  No
Prefer Not to Answer
If yes, where are you enrolled? __________________________________________
If yes, what is your program of study? ______________________________________

What is the highest education received by your primary care provider(s)?
(Circle more than one if you have multiple caregivers.)
Less than High School  High School/GED  Some College
Associates Degree  Bachelor’s Degree  Graduate Degree  Other: ____________
Please go to the next page.
Media

Do you follow the news?  Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer
If yes, where do you get your news? (Circle all that apply.)  
Newspaper   TV   Online   Radio
Other (please specify): ____________________________

What news source(s) do you follow? Please write the name(s) of paper/magazine/website/TV broadcast/other(s):
_______________________________________________________________________

How often do you access the news? (Circle the best choice.)
     Daily   More than 3 times a week   A couple of times a week   Rarely   Never
Other: ___________________________________________________________________

What types of stories do you like to follow? (Circle those that apply.)
Sports   Entertainment   Politics   Weather   LGBT-related   Science   Nature
Local Interest   Religion
Other (please specify): ___________________________________________________________________

Religion

With what religion do you identify (if any)? (circle correct choice)
Buddhism   Christianity   Hinduism   Islam   Judaism
Paganism   Atheism   None   Other: ____________________________

Do you attend religious services?  (circle correct choice) Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer
If yes, how often do you attend?  (circle correct choice)
      Daily   More than 3 times a week   A couple of times a week   Rarely   Never
If yes, do you attend the same church as your family?
     Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer

Do you feel as though your religion is accepting of your sexuality?
     Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer
Do you feel as though your religion is accepting of your gender identity/expression?
     Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer
Do you feel as though individuals within your religion are accepting of your sexuality?
     Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer
Do you feel as though individuals within your religion are accepting of your gender identity/expression?
     Yes   No   Prefer Not to Answer

How important is religion in shaping how you live your daily life?
Extremely   Very   Somewhat   Not very   Not important at all   Prefer Not to Answer

Please go to the next page.
Is there another belief system that guides your life? If so, please describe it in your own words: _________________________________________________________________

( use back of sheet if more space is necessary)

Below is a list of behaviors that families sometimes use with LGBTQ youth. Please identify if your family/care providers did any of the following:

(Circle the correct choice)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit, slap or physically hurt you because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally harass or call you names because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclude you from family and family activities because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block access to LGBT friends, events &amp; resources?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame you when you were discriminated against because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure you to be more (or less) masculine or feminine?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell you that God will punish you because you are gay?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell you that they were ashamed of you or that how you look or act will shame the family?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you keep your LGBT identity a secret in the family and not let you talk about it?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk with you about your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express affection when you told them you were gay or transgender?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support your LGBT identity even though they may have felt uncomfortable?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for you if or when you were mistreated because of your LGBT identity?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require that other family members respect you?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring you to LGBT organizations or events?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect you with an LGBT adult role model to show you options for the future?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome your LGBT friends &amp; partners to their home?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support your gender expression?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe you could have a happy future as an LGBT adult?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from Ryan, 2009)

What pseudonym are you using today? ____________________________________________

Are you willing to be contacted to learn about participating in a one-on-one interview at a later date? (circle choice)

Yes  No  Not Sure

If yes, you may be contacted by Melinda McCormick to arrange a meeting.
If not sure, you can email Melinda McCormick for more information.

Thank you for your participation!
Appendix C

Focus Group Schedule
Intro:

- Who I am
- Who my co-moderator is
- Why we are here today
- Let’s start with an easy question: What is your chosen pseudonym for this project? Please spell it after you state it, so we can get it right. We will go around the room so each person has a chance to share. If you’d like to make a brief statement about why you chose it, that’s fine.

Expectations for the group process:

- Agreement to not share names or identifying information about others outside of this room
- Let’s not talk over one another. It shows respect, and it allows us all to have a chance to speak without being interrupted.
- Any other things you think we need to say about what is ok or not in the situation? We want you to feel safe so we can talk freely about these topics.
- You have index cards and pens in front of you. If you don’t want to forget your comment, make a note so you can bring it up again when it’s your turn. You may see me do that occasionally as well, if someone says something I want to ask of others.
- Please get food or drink as you wish.
- Note that the co-moderator may be writing notes, which are for my benefit, and so s/he can give is an overview of our discussion at the end of the meeting. I may ask him/her to write things on the flip chart sometimes.

Focus questions:
These are a general outline, and not all questions will be asked. Part of conducting a focus group is to follow the conversation where it is naturally going. As such, some of these questions may not be asked or answered. One can also expect focus groups to need guidance at some points of
the conversation; this is where some of these questions will help us to keep the conversation moving.

- As you know, we are here to talk about bullying. How would you define bullying?
- Were you aware of bullying going on in your school?
- What years of school were the worst for bullying, do you think?
- Where did bullying happen at school?
- Do you think the adults at school were aware of this as well?
- Say more about this. Which adults in which contexts?
- Did you feel safe at school after this happened?
- What could have been done by the adults at the school to make you feel safe?

- Why were you being bullied? What did the bullying seem to be about?
- Did anyone intervene? Who? Was it helpful?
- How would you have liked for people to respond to you being bullied? What would have helped?

- How did you deal with being bullied?
- Did it have any aftereffects that you recall?
- Can you share some specifics about me about this incident?
- Where did you go for support?
- What might that support look like, and who offers it?

- What were your responses to the bullying? Did those change over time?
- Are you still bullied as a young adult?
- If you weren’t bullied very much, what do you think protected you from being bullied?

There are some theories on why people bully others. I am wondering what you think of these:
Does religion ever play a role in the bullying you’ve witnessed or experienced?

Do you think media messages about LGBTQ people play a role in bullying?

Why do you think some people believe that it’s okay to bully people who are LGBTQ?

Is there anything in particular that you’ve been able to hold on to that helps you get through some of these experiences?

When you reflect back on your experience, is there any way in which being bullied helped you in terms of personal growth?
Appendix D

Interview Schedule
Intro: Thanks for meeting me. What was your chosen pseudonym for the focus group in which you participated? Just to make sure I am getting this right, please spell it for me. Also, here is an informed consent document I need you to read and sign before we can proceed.

Expectations for the interview process:

- I will be asking some questions of you, which are you free to refuse to answer by saying “pass” at any time. You are in control of this conversation, and we can stop at any time. Just let me know when you feel like it’s time to stop. I will only stop our conversation if we reach our agreed-upon two hour time limit.
- In general, I am here to listen to you and find out more about your experiences of bullying, like we discussed in the focus group.
- How was that experience for you?
- What made you decide to meet with me for an individual interview?
- What parts of the group discussion did you wish we had time to talk more about?
- Let’s talk about your experiences.

Minimal conversational prompts will be used to aid the interview, such as “tell me more about that.”

Focus questions:
These are a general outline from our focus group, and not all questions will be asked. Part of this interview process is to allow the participant to guide the conversation. As such, some of these questions may not be asked or answered.

- Were you aware of bullying going on in your school?
- What years of school were the worst for bullying, do you think?
- Where did bullying happen at school?
- Do you think the adults at school were aware of this as well?
- Say more about this. Which adults in which contexts?
- Did you feel safe at school after this happened?
- What could have been done by the adults at the school to make you feel safe?
o Why were you being bullied? What did the bullying seem to be about?
  o Did anyone intervene? Who? Was it helpful?
  o How would you have liked for people to respond to you being bullied? What would have helped?

  o How did you deal with being bullied?
  o Did it have any aftereffects that you recall?
  o Can you share some specifics about me about this incident?
  o Where did you go for support?
  o What might that support look like, and who offers it?

  o What were your responses to the bullying? Did those change over time?
  o Are you still bullied as a young adult?
  o If you weren’t bullied very much, what do you think protected you from being bullied?

There are some theories on why people bully others. I am wondering what you think of these:
  o Does religion ever play a role in the bullying you’ve witnessed or experienced?
  o Do you think media messages about LGBTQ people play a role in bullying?
  o Why do you think some people believe that it’s okay to bully people who are LGBTQ?

  o Is there anything in particular that you’ve been able to hold on to that helps you get through some of these experiences?

  o When you reflect back on your experience, is there any way in which being bullied helped you in terms of personal growth?
Appendix E

Recruitment Letter to Agencies
Dear Friends,

I am an LMSW and a current PhD student who is interested in LGBT youth health outcomes. For my dissertation research, I would like to conduct focus groups with young adults in several communities in Michigan—Ferndale, Grand Rapids, and Kalamazoo—to determine what types of experiences they have with bullying in their lives, to find out how gender expression impacts their lives, and to see if religious rhetoric influences their self-perceptions. My aim is to use this research to write scholarly articles aimed toward changing policy in schools and perhaps in area churches to become more protective of LGBT youth.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to allow me to contact young adults who are or have been involved with your organization to see if they would be interested in participating in a focus group, and to further ask if you would allow me to conduct the focus groups in your facility, so that the youth would be comfortable during the process.

I would like to recruit youth between the ages of 18 and 24, since they are able to consent to the process themselves, and because they are close enough to high school age to be able to have some insight on what they have gone through. I would expect a focus group session to last from 1-1.5 hours, and I would hope to conduct two per facility, hopefully with 6-8 youth in attendance per group. I would provide food and beverages for the young adults for their participation.

I have been involved with the Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center since 2005, when I served as their youth outreach coordinator, and I facilitated their youth group for five years on a volunteer basis. I currently use my LMSW to conduct trainings for school social workers and other human services professionals and students who plan to work with LGBT youth. I am a founding member of a grassroots organization in Kalamazoo which shares the research findings from the Family Acceptance Project that show that even minor decreases in the amount of family rejection can greatly impact the health outcomes of their LGBT youth.

One of the things I have found in my studies is that having the actual words of young people describing their experiences has a greater impact than other types of data I present, which is partly why I wish to conduct focus groups. Also, having done individual interviews, I think the presence of peers will have a positive
impact upon how the young adults will be able to discuss and process the questions I raise in group with them.

I am trying to obtain letters of consent from organizations before I approach the university to get approval to conduct my research, and that is why I am writing you at this time. If I am able to show that community organizations are on board with my research and are willing to allow me to use their resources in order to conduct my research, I will have a better chance of gaining approval to proceed.

I am aware of the ethical issues surrounding this request, and I have many ideas for ways in which the youth can be protected throughout the process, including their ability to opt out at any time. I am confident that my professional skills will allow me to work with your organization in a manner that is respectful of the organization and the young adults who choose to participate, and I am more than willing to share some of my research data with your organization if it may be of help in your organizational mission.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you are willing to allow me to conduct my research in your facility and to assist me in accessing some of your former/current youth, please prepare a letter stating such for inclusion with my dissertation proposal. Alternately, if you would prefer me to draft a letter for you stating such, I am happy to do so.

If you would like to discuss this further with me, please call me at (616) 212-8851, or email me at melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu. I look forward to meeting you at some time in the near future, and I thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Melinda McCormick, LMSW
Ph.D. Student
Department of Sociology
Appendix F

Recruitment Scripts
Short version (classified ad):

Seeking LGBTQ young adults ages 18-24 interested in discussing their experiences with bullying within the context of a focus group at Affirmations (Ferndale), The Network (Grand Rapids), or The Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center (Kalamazoo). Please contact Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu, Western Michigan University PhD student in sociology, for more information.

Short version (for agency distribution):

Were you bullied when you were in school? Would you like a chance to discuss your experiences with others who have had similar experiences? Melinda McCormick, a PhD student at Western Michigan University, is looking for young adults ages 18-24 to participate in focus groups discussing the topic. Our agency is hosting these focus groups on [Date], from [Time to Time], and Ms. McCormick is providing food and beverages to participants. Please contact Melinda at Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu to find out more if you are interested in joining the discussion.

Recruitment Flyer:

Were you bullied in school? Would you like to meet with your peers to have a group discussion about those experiences and what they meant in your life?

I am a PhD student at Western Michigan University, and I am interested in the bullying experiences of LGBTQ young people in Michigan. For my dissertation, I am conducting focus groups with LGBTQ young people aged 18-24 to discuss bullying experiences. I wonder in particular what you were bullied for, how you dealt with being bullied, and what helped.

I was a youth group facilitator for five years at the Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center, and I have been working to advocate for LGBTQ youth in schools since I stopped being a volunteer in that capacity. I now do trainings with school social workers and other social work professionals around ways to effectively help LGBTQ youth. My current research is on bullying of LGBTQ youth and how they cope with the bullying in their schools (and other places).

I am conducting focus groups at three Michigan gay and lesbian resource agencies: Affirmations in Ferndale, the Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center in Kalamazoo, and The Network in Grand Rapids to find out what life is like growing up in Michigan for LGBTQ youth. A focus group is a collection of 6-8 persons who have a group discussion about a topic in the presence of adult moderators—in this case myself and my colleague, Ramon—who are interested in the topic and the well-being of the young people in the group.

We will be meeting for time periods from an hour to an hour and a half to discuss the issue of bullying and things that you identify as being important to the study of bullying of Michigan young people. I will provide food and beverages for the meetings as well as some structure for our discussion.
My hope is to share this information with school administrators and social workers in Michigan to aid in their understanding of bullying that happens and to give them some ideas of ways in which to help LGBTQ youth have better school experiences. More generally, I hope to share some of your voices with other adults to help them understand what bullying is like for LGBTQ youth. You are the experts in this area, and I am requesting your stories and input on this important research project. I hope to use this information to complete my dissertation, and to write publications and present at conferences on this important information.

Would you like more information about participating? Please contact me at Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu. I am happy to answer any questions or to sign you up for a focus group.

Thanks for your help! I look forward to hearing from you and getting to know more about you and your life experiences. Please know that I will keep all of your information confidential so that no one will be able to identify you from your stories. At the same time, I think your stories are important and that others can learn from them.
Appendix G

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: November 19, 2014

To: Angela Moe, Principal Investigator
    Melinda McCormick, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 14-10-18

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Bully Experiences & Resilience in LGBTQ Youth” 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: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”) Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. 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 HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

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

Approval Termination: November 18, 2015