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Experiences of lesbian women in social sororities at mid-sized public institutions: A qualitative study

Kate S. Solberg

Eastern Illinois University

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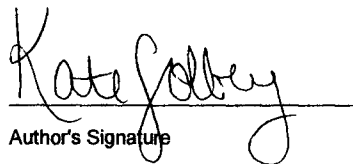
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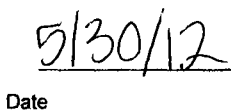
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Experiences of Lesbian Women in Social Sororities at

Mid-Sized Public Institutions: A Qualitative Study

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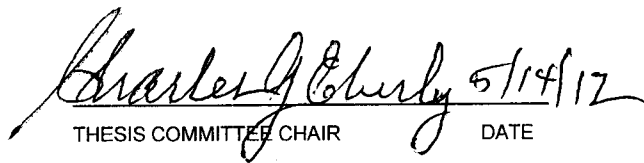
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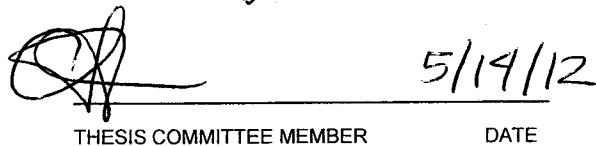
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Abstract

Experiences of Lesbian Women in Social Sororities at Mid-Size Public Institutions: A Qualitative Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of lesbian identified women in social sororities at medium sized public universities in the Midwest. Experiences and perceptions of three women were investigated in a phenomenological study to discover the influence of their sexual orientation on their lives as sorority women. Their responses indicated that while their experiences of being out lesbian women in their chapters had been largely positive, there is still a culture of heteronormativity fighting against full acceptance of diverse sexual orientations in the fraternity and sorority community.

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I want to thank Dr. Charles Eberly, first and foremost, for his help with this thesis. Without his passion for research and in depth understanding of my topic, this document would not be where it is today. His encouragement and consistent pride and confidence in my abilities were what kept me moving some days.

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Lastly, I'd like to thank the wonderful people of my cohort. Nineteen of the most amazing, supportive, hilarious, and beautiful people came into my life in August of 2010. I am a changed person because of their presence in my life. Their dedication helped me move myself forward when I could not see the light myself. I love you all. You are so dear to me.

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Chapter I

Lesbian Students' Experience in Sorority Life

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study on lesbian women in sorority life was to gain a better understanding of the trials and triumphs of students in this unique situation as a member of a single-sex organization and as people who are attracted to the same sex. What have been the experiences of these students in sororities, both positive and negative, and what are their stories from their own voices?

Research Questions

The objective of this thesis was to discover attitudes, climate, and overall adjustment of LGBT students in women's fraternities and sororities. Selected interview questions asked how participants came out to their respective organizations, how they were received, and their overall experience following that process. Additionally, participants were asked about their experiences and opinions regarding romantic relationships, and how their interpersonal relationships inside and / or outside the organization were affected by membership in a sorority. Overall, the questions asked sought to determine the extent to which LGBT students' sexual identity affected their experience and in what ways it could have been supported by those around them.

Overall research questions were:

1. What are the lived experiences of lesbian women as members of a women's social fraternity / sorority?
2. In what manner have lesbian women felt supported / not supported by their chapter and peers during their coming out experiences?

Significance of the Study

Analyzing the voices of lesbian sorority members about their experiences as members of single-sex organizations was selected for study because there is little research on this particular area of student life. With the growing number of youth identifying as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, the face of fraternities/sororities as organizations must change to reflect this trend by learning to accept and welcome sexual identity as one among a number of ways in which diversity can be expressed.

Reflective Statement

In my life, I have learned that understanding others' experiences has helped me to come to terms with similar experiences in my own life. Knowing that someone, somewhere, has gone through the same situations that have evoked the same emotions or thoughts is comforting to me. I (We) are not alone. I learn about myself when I can see the same situation from different people's perspectives. As such, I decided to write this thesis as a way to make meaning from experience in order to take informed, confident action. As an out, lesbian identified woman in a sorority during my undergraduate years, I wanted to make meaning and bring to life a unique group of women who shared similar feelings. I wanted to take my experience and share it in a contribution to student development research so when other women in the process of exploring their own identity find they are in this same situation, they will have something to reference, something to learn from, and the sure knowledge that someone else has been there before. I wrote this so that I can provide a place for women to share their experiences with me, in hopes that we can both learn more about ourselves by reflecting on one another's life experiences. My conversations with these volunteer participants brought to light some similar thoughts and feelings, some coming to conscious awareness for the first time.

Being able to add these experiences to my research, I believe I learned much more about my life, and in turn the lives of others, so that I may be able to support more women in the future as they are challenged to define their identity.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of the campuses are such that lesbian members are not well known or spoken about, and as such, a limitation of the study may be the small number of women who could be identified for the study, and even fewer women willing to consent to be interviewed, as some women who may identify as bisexual or lesbian may not know about the study due to the discrete culture at the institutions.

Definition of Terms

The list of terms used below for the purposes of the present study were defined by the author based on common usage within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, and within the fraternity / sorority community.

Active. An active is a dues paying, full-fledged undergraduate member of a social fraternity / sorority.

Bid. A bid is a formal invitation to join a chapter of a sorority.

Bisexual. Bisexual describes any individual who is attracted, romantically and sexually, to individuals of either gender, regardless of his or her own gender.

Closeted/ in the closet. The phrase “in the closet” is a colloquial term used to identify someone who has not disclosed his or her sexuality to those around him/her.

Function. A function is any program or event hosted by a sorority or fraternity. This can include formal or informal dances, mixers, or other typically social events.

Gay. Gay is a term to describe an individual (typically male) who is attracted both sexually and romantically to the same gender.

Heteronormative. Heteronormative is a term used to describe any occurrence within society that perpetuates heterosexism as the dominant and superior sexual orientation.

Heterosexism. Heterosexism is the belief or attitude that heterosexuality is the norm and superior to homosexuality.

Lesbian. Lesbian is a term to describe a woman who is attracted romantically and sexually to other women.

LGBT. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) is a blanket term for any individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Out. Out describes the status of a LGBT identified person who has disclosed his or her sexuality to those around him/her.

Panhellenic. Panhellenic is a term used to reference the 26 nationally recognized, traditionally white women's social sororities.

Potential New Member. A potential new member, or PNM, is an individual who is being considered for membership into a fraternity or sorority.

Summary

This thesis focused on the experiences, both negative and positive, of out, LGBT identified fraternity / sorority members. The review of research to follow looked at what has happened in the past to women who fall into this demographic, and what has been done to facilitate acceptance for such women. The number of women open about their sexual identity as lesbian, and the general public's awareness / acceptance of lesbians has grown in recent years, so this thesis examined what can be done to encourage acceptance within the fraternity / sorority community.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

The following literature review comprises four areas of development germane to understanding lived experience among lesbian identified members of sororities. The first area is homosexual identity development (Cass, 1979). The Cass Theory offers plausible explanations for the manner in which women come to an acceptance of their identities as same gender loving individuals, and their developmental mindsets during their time as active members in their respective organizations. The second area is the social and organizational culture of traditional Panhellenic affiliated sororities. An appreciation of group sub-culture is relevant to the research in that it explains how members affiliated with these organizations come to feel a sense of belonging or estrangement to the group and the reasons behind their attachment or lack thereof. The third area is women's body image, which is an important focus because understanding the dynamics of body image explains how the women interviewed may feel about their gender expression in terms of mainstream culture and body acceptance as portrayed through the media. These three topics were identified as the most related areas of study that combined together may create a better framework of understanding for the unique experience that same gender loving women have undergone, which begins the fourth area: the intersectionality between LGBT individuals and fraternity and sorority life, bringing together an understanding of the cross-section between these complex cultures and how they might impact individuals caught between these two different worlds – the heteronormative world of the fraternity / sorority, and the complex life of a same sex loving woman.

Homosexual Identity Development

Homosexuality as a topic of research has an extensive but short history. In the 1950s, homosexuality was viewed as a psychological disease, on par with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (Kinsey, 1953). In the 1970s, homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and now homosexuality is more widely accepted in American society as a whole. Discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGBT) people still frequently occurs, however, and its consequences affect many youth and young adults. In a study of high school teens, it was found that 46.9% of LGBT teens had been physically harassed by their peers at school due to their sexual orientation or gender expression. Additionally, 91.9% of LGBT teens surveyed experienced verbal harassment, such as being called names or being threatened (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009). Due to the aforementioned high-frequency bullying and other difficulties experienced by LGBT youth that originate from their peer group, many of them choose to remain closeted and hide their sexual orientation until later in life. The coming out process is usually a painful one and as such, it can take a long period of time for an individual, especially one in the college environment, to begin the process of coming out (Rankin, 2003). Many tenets of the coming out process are similar from individual to individual.

The patterns seen during the coming out process have made it possible for researchers to develop homosexual identity development models, made to explain coming out and perhaps the emotions and thoughts that exist behind the many steps and cognitive processes. Below is a synopsis of the most widely known and accepted homosexual identity development model. Cass (1979) developed her model in 6 stages, explained in greater detail below.

Stage 1: Identity Confusion

Characterization of stage. The individual undergoes a questioning of feelings for the same sex that can be rejected or accepted. She may come to examine her pre-existing feelings about homosexual people without placing herself in that category.

Possible Thoughts. The individual may finally feel as if she is able to think about herself as a questioning individual, unsure about her sexuality. If a homosexual occurrence takes place, it can typically create confusion and upset feelings. Often times, she will develop strong emotional attachments and non-sexual bonds with other females. She can find comfort in knowing that many people question their sexuality on a regular basis. Many questions arise in regard to positive and negative impressions of lesbian and bisexual individuals and as a group or community. Her reaction may be one of three, based on her perception of homosexuality. She may consider the possibility that she is gay, and in this may be in a positive or a negative way, or she could reject the possibility altogether. There is a lot of personal confusion in this stage.

Stage 2: Identity Comparison

Characterization of stage. At this stage, the individual has accepted the potential that she may have a non-heterosexual identity. Heterosexual identification is largely maintained within broader society.

Possible thoughts: The individual begins to see herself as separate from heterosexual people. She can perhaps see herself as “possibly homosexual” (p. 223) or indeed homosexual. A sense of alienation from the normative group is experienced at this stage, and thoughts of contacting other homosexual individuals may arise.

Stage 3: Identity Tolerance

Characterization of stage. The individual decides to make contact with members of the homosexual community. The actual process of making the contact is in a sense the beginning of an awareness of personal sexual identity.

Possible thoughts. The individual feels contact with other homosexuals is necessary, and does so to fulfill growing needs to emotional, sexual, and social connections. The interactions with homosexuals, whether they are negative or positive, will have a strong impact on her perception of her own identity. Often times, disclosure of her new nonheterosexual identity to heterosexuals will be limited if at all, creating a sort of duality in identity at this stage. She is still presenting herself as straight to her peers.

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance

Characterization of stage. Networking with other homosexuals begins to flourish, and limited coming out processes begin. Initially coming out to homosexuals facilitates the later process of coming out to non-homosexuals.

Possible thoughts. Here, the individual has much more contact with other homosexual individuals. She begins to develop a network or community of nonheterosexuals to increase her comfort with her identity. She still seeks to fit into society's norms, while beginning to live her life as a same gender loving woman. She may tell some friends and relatives about her identity, since she is feeling more secure in her feelings and identity at this time. She feels a stronger sense of belonging, and understands and accepts herself more for her newly developed identity.

Stage 5: Identity Pride

Characterization of stage. Pride and loyalty to the homosexual identity and group is at the forefront, and feelings of activism are strong. There is a dualist view of heterosexuals and homosexuals, with value statements being placed on a given individual's sexual orientation.

Possible thoughts. Here, the individual is very proud of her new identity, and has a strong sense of loyalty towards her peer group of homosexuals. Their viewpoints become more respected than those of her heterosexual peers. She may be easily angered by heteronormativity and oppression of homosexuality in mainstream society. As a result, she may confront heterosexuals to promote her viewpoint of homosexuality.

Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

Characterization of stage. Removal of the straight versus gay dichotomy mindset; homosexual lifestyle begins to fit within normal constraints of society. Sexual orientation becomes a part of who one is rather than the entirety of one's personal being.

Possible Thoughts. The individual has more and more positive interactions with nonhomosexual people, and develops the mindset that society is not all good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals. The emotional and easily angered feelings lessen and become more toned down. The individual begins to see herself as a multifaceted person, not solely comprising her homosexual identity, but with many other positive and valuable assets. Disclosure of homosexuality is no longer an issue, and her "*outness*" is no longer hidden from anyone. As she is able to transition herself from a homosexual person to a person who is homosexual, the identity formation stages are completed.

Much of the pressures that LGBT individuals face in terms of being accepted into society can be paralleled with the experience that women face being the minority gender

in many cultures. Many LGBT individuals and women alike find that society may not immediately accept them due to their minority status, and they may find they must strive harder to prove themselves an equal, positive contributor to different aspects of everyday life (Quinones, 2004). A large portion of this difficulty for women is based on the long standing history of the objectification of the female body, which has led to a strong emphasis on body image in women, discussed further below.

Body Image and Women

Women and their conception of body image have long been associated with one another due to pressures and persuasion from the media (Grabe, 2008). Though many commentators acknowledge and agree that body-positive messages and promotion of average sized bodies should be more prevalent in society, the fact remains that a majority of companies refuse to change their habits and promotion of starved and waif like body types (Diedrichs, 2011). Women in college especially associate their self-worth with their body image, placing more value on women who had smaller and more desirable body shapes than they did on themselves (Leavy, Gnong, & Ross 2009).

These pressures affect women in general, but when it comes to sorority life, messages about socially desirable body types are perpetuated, believed, and taken to an even more dangerous extreme than with the general population. Rolnik (2010) found that women going through sorority recruitment at a major private research university displayed higher levels of self-objectification and eating disordered behavior, women who had a larger than average body mass index dropped out of the recruitment process at a higher rate, and were more dissatisfied with the formal recruitment process as a whole.

After the formal recruitment process, women in sororities begin the new member process, in which some women unfortunately and unlawfully still undergo hazing.

Accounts of the hazing process often include humiliating activities that make the women feel as though their body types are inadequate, and that something must change in order for their bodies to be more acceptable (Robbins, 2004). Additionally, many heteronormative activities occur as well, including being made to speak sexually to male fraternity members, perform sexually related humiliating tasks, and other related issues (Nuwer, 1999).

Additionally, body image plays a large role in the bisexual and lesbian community. Gender expression, body types, and perceptions of beauty all play into a same gender loving woman's self-perception within that community. While lesbian women, in contrast to straight women, find images of women with significantly higher BMIs to be more beautiful (Swami & Tovee, 2006), college age lesbians still feel pressure for themselves to fit within the thin and slim ideal of mainstream society (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1998). This dichotomy indicates a potentially confusing situation for lesbian and bisexual women caught between the ideal body size of mainstream society and the typical body type preference of same-gender loving women. Put in conjunction with the culture of fraternity and sorority culture explained below, undergraduate years can be a disjointed experience for women who meet these criteria.

Recent Culture of Women's Fraternity / Sorority Organizations

Women's Fraternity / Sorority organizations have long standing traditions steeped in heteronormativity and body image messages, as discussed above. Many activities that sorority women participate in have a date component, in which the woman brings a male date to a sorority sponsored event, such as a mixer, themed social, or formal or informal dance (Robbins, 2004). These events often perpetuate the need for good bodies or poor self-image, because women place much emphasis on looking nearly flawless for the

duration of these events. Additionally, the pressure to bring a male date can sometimes be overwhelmingly high, and some women would rather not attend events than go without a male date. This comes from the constant emphasis placed on dating culture within the fraternity/ sorority community, making it difficult for women to feel content being single without desire to find a boyfriend. In some chapters, a male date is not enough. Some chapters place a high value on women dating men of fraternities, sometimes even specific fraternities, and if the members' dates do not come from the fraternity/ sorority community, it is almost as undesirable as coming alone, or with a friend (Syrett, 2009).

The pervasive dating culture even shines through in traditions such as Greek Week and Homecoming, when emphasis is placed on winning intergroup competitions, many of them requiring physical activity. Though the objective of these events does not relate to finding dates or boyfriends, often times women feel pressure to look and act more feminine and beautiful, since men who might be collaborating with them to perform for a variety show or dance competition are present. Sometimes the pressure is even more important than being fully prepared for the physical task at hand, putting presentable looks in favor of competitive drive (Robbins, 2004). Additionally, these competitive week long traditions can be steeped in heteronormativity that does not relate to dating on a surface level, but has roots in male-female relational activities, such as “Mr. and Mrs. Greek Week,” or competitions that require a fraternity teaming up with a sorority, leaving no option for collaboration between groups of the same sex.

Often times, in variety show or dance competitions, the women's performances are judged based on their looks rather than their talent or ability to complete the task at hand, with the winning group being the group that produces the most revealing or sexy costume. Men's criteria are different, however, and the winner is often the group who can

make the audience laugh the most through their awkward and often demeaning presentation on popular dance moves or songs. Homophobic culture permeates these traditions as well, as seen in “Dude Looks Like a Lady” competitions, in which the objective is to make a member of each fraternity look as close to a feminine woman as possible.

In the 1960s-1990s, little sisters were popular among the fraternity/ sorority community, something that changed the fraternity/ sorority community and increased its misogynistic culture forever (Syrett, 2009). Here, women were designated as “little sisters” of different fraternities, and were often close with the men of the group and drank with the men at their house parties. However, this relationship was demeaning to the women, and in many instances, the men adopted these women into this role solely for the purpose of getting them intoxicated and sexually exploiting them. One chapter went so far as to lay the woman upside down, pour different kinds of liquor down her throat, and wait until she had passed out from alcohol consumption, then having a group of men gang rape her while others watched from exterior windows to the house (Robbins, 2004).

LGBT and Fraternity / Sorority Culture

There is little research on LGBT students in fraternities and sororities, and what research exists is primarily focused on gay males in fraternities (Dilley, 2002; Rankin, 2003). Changing attitudes and shifts in social acceptance towards LGBT individuals makes it easier for research to happen, as people are more willing to participate in research as it pertains to this topic (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), so in the past few years more research has emerged.

A survey completed by non-heterosexual respondents who are members of fraternities and sororities (Case, 1996; Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005) gave some depth to

the topic of interest, with findings that indicated that these members joined fraternities and sororities for friends, social networking, and leadership skills, which were the same reasons noted by heterosexual members. Additionally, the survey estimated that between 5-6% of fraternity members, and 3-4% of sorority members identified as LGBT, with approximately 40% of those respondents having come out to one or more of their brothers or sisters during their time as an active member of the organization (Case, 1996).

The coming out process can be tricky waters to navigate as it relates to the fraternity/ sorority community. Findings show that members of fraternities and sororities who join while they are closeted and reveal their sexual orientation after gaining trust and friendship of the other members are met with much more acceptance than those individuals who are out of the closet from the beginning of the recruitment process (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001; Hesp, 2006).

In terms of the climate and attitudes of the fraternity and sorority community, more individuals report that their chapters are friendly towards LGBT individuals than homophobic, a positive shift from past decades (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005). In the 2005 study, participants' responses indicated a mainly even split between friendly and unfriendly environments within their chapter, with approximately 50% of the individuals reporting that they perceived their chapter as non-homophobic, with 47% answering that they believed their chapters to be homophobic. Answers were also affected by the geographic region in which the chapter was located, with the Northwest being the least homophobic, and the Southeast being the most homophobic, and other areas falling in the middle. Overall, the experience of these individuals is largely influenced by campus climate in general, and the attitude of the chapter as a whole varies depending on external influences of the campus and surrounding community. These factors are all predictors of

the success or failure of coming out of the closet to the fraternity and sorority community, and it continues to be a shifting culture on each college campus, changing with the political climate each year.

Summary

In summary, this review of selected literature has explained the difficulties and challenges that LGBT individuals face within American society and particularly within the college environment. Additionally, the section reviewed the body image issues of women in society and how that has a negative effect on young women. The section on sorority culture explored the ways in which programming without questioning traditional gender roles is prevalent in fraternities and sororities, and how heteronormativity and body image play a large role in that culture on a daily basis, and continues to be pervasive throughout the decades. Lastly, the final section broached the intersectionality between these three issues, and how macro level changes in acceptance to LGBT individuals is shifting sorority culture and making the experience for these women in these groups different as years go on. Together, this information is fundamental to the lived experience of lesbian and bisexual identified women in sororities. Chapter III will explain qualitative methodology to be used for the study. Chapter IV will describe themes emerging from an analysis of interview data, and chapter V will integrate the results of the present study with the published literature.

Chapter III

Methodology

Design of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the experience of lesbian and bisexual identified women in women's social fraternities and sororities. A qualitative research project, the principal investigator (PI) interviewed women who fit within these criteria to seek information regarding each of their experiences as same-gender loving individuals in these groups. The method chosen was a phenomenological qualitative approach, in order to best gain an understanding of the depth of the unique experience that these women faced (Patton, 2001).

Participants

The PI interviewed three separate participants, all female, lesbian identified women who currently are or were members of sororities within the past two years. Two participants were from the same campus, and one was from another Midwestern campus of similar size. All participants were white females, within the ages of nineteen and twenty five, who were members of their chapters for a varied period of time, ranging from three months to five years. One participant was a current member, and two participants were recent alumni of their chapters. The participants were found by the PI through asking colleagues if they could identify individuals whom would qualify to be interviewed. She contacted those individuals, explained the purpose of research, and invited each of them to come speak to her in a one on one session that would be transcribed and the findings used to complete her thesis requirements.

Throughout the process, the PI treated all participants and their information with confidentiality and discretion. All understood any verbal raw data would be destroyed within three years after study completion.

Site

The interviews took place over one semester in the PI office within a residence hall on campus, in the private office of the PI. Had participants not felt comfortable with the location of the office, interviews would have been held at a location of the research participants' choice. In one case, the participant was not local and could not travel, so a series of email communications were carried out until the PI compiled enough detailed information to be considered "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42).

Instrument

Research was completed through semi-structured interviews (Schumacher & McMillan, 2005) with participants who fit within the bounds of the study (Appendix C). The interviews were private interviews between the participant and interviewer, digitally recorded in a private location. Six main questions guided the interview, which served as points of reflection for the participant to speak about her experiences as a member of a National Panhellenic Conference social sorority.

1. With whom in your life have you shared your sexual orientation?
2. What was it about your chapter that attracted you to them at first and eventually convinced you to become fully initiated?
3. What is the culture of your chapter in regards to conversations about diversity and especially sexuality, and how has that affected your experience within the organization?

4. How do you perceive your sisters to react towards your sexuality?
5. Share some experiences with sisters that may have been affected by their knowledge of your sexual orientation.
6. How do your dating habits affect your role within the chapter?

Data Collection

Participants who qualified for the study were formally invited to interview, and asked to formally accept the interview invitation via email. When they responded that they agreed to participate, the interviewer scheduled a time to meet with each participant. Before the interview commenced, participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix B) explaining how their responses would be utilized and that all data would be treated confidentially, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that any data published would not include identifying information.

Treatment of Data

The interviewer transcribed the interviews after they were recorded on audiotapes. Participant names were substituted for numbers on the tapes. The information was then analyzed by the PI in a number of ways. First, the data in each individual interview was broken apart by subject, and each time a different subject was spoken about in the transcription, it was given a themed code. These codes were sorted out and organized and then each interview was scrutinized against the other interviews using cross-comparative analysis (Schumacher & McMillan, 2005) by the PI to find recurring themes or examples of experiences which shed light on the experiences of the participants that may speak for others in similar situations. When the codes were placed together, they were pulled together into 5 main subjects under which a majority of them fit, which the PI chose as

overall themes for the data. All data and materials from the interviews will be kept for three years and, following the three year mark, will be destroyed for confidentiality reasons.

Chapter IV

Results

The present qualitative phenomenological study addressed the experiences of lesbian women in sororities at mid-size public institutions. Three women meeting these demographics and these institutions were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C). Each question within the protocol, after a cross-comparative analysis, brought forth a set of five themes emerging from the data, which are explained and delineated in this chapter.

Participant Biographies

A short biography of each participant is provided below. These descriptions should enable the reader to better understand the experiences and place their voices into context to make more meaning of the findings that follow.

Participant 1- Emily. Emily was a 19 year old first year student at a mid-sized public institution in the Midwest. She began discovering more about her sexual orientation during her junior year of high school. Coming to college, she has been able to discover more about her identity, flesh out her feelings, and come to terms with herself. Her decision to attend the school was more in her mother's hands, who applied for her because she wanted her to continue her education. Emily was ambivalent and decided to go with an open mind.

Upon entering college, Emily took her first semester to be a very involved member of the campus LGBT group. Having a solid support network of people who understood her experience helped her to come out to her family and other important people in her life. Also during her time in this group, she heard negative attitudes

expressed about fraternity and sorority life at the institution, and she had a negative perception of it for the duration of the semester.

However, when some of her friends from her summer orientation joined a sorority, they persuaded her to come along for a few activities, and she found that she enjoyed them. She was offered a bid in January of her second semester, and she followed through with the new member process. Having been interviewed during the third month of her new member process, Emily was still very much in the middle of the coming out process within her sorority at the time. She spoke often about anxiety towards telling members in groups of more than one and a tiredness towards constantly having to come out to someone new. She also expressed slight anxiety about being perceived differently by her sisters after coming out, and as such, she still had a long way to go in the coming out process.

Participant 2- Maya. Maya was a 25 year old woman who graduated from a mid-sized public institution in the Midwest. Attending school was a matter of cost; her institution was one of the least expensive in the state at the time, and she knew she wanted to go to college, so that was the best option for her.

Maya decided to join a sorority after formal recruitment but still during her first semester at college. Her decision was influenced by her small group of friends, all of whom were members. She attended a recruitment event and felt comfortable, so she joined. She became involved with sorority life and her campus LGBT group almost simultaneously.

The coming out process for Maya began early. She discovered that she had same sex attractions at the age of 12, but she did not understand what they meant. She came out to many close friends in her chapter during her first semester in college.

Participant 3- Paige. Paige was a 23 year old woman who just completed her undergraduate experience. She attended a mid-sized public institution, which she chose for its strong program in the major of her interest.

Joining a sorority happened later for Paige, who went through informal recruitment her sophomore year. She joined the chapter that she knew to be welcoming to all people, because she valued that quality in a chapter. Still questioning her sexuality herself, it was a good fit.

Paige went through the stages of coming out later than the other two participants. She began to realize she had same sex attractions around the end of her senior year of high school, and she only came to terms with her sexual orientation during the junior year of college. She did not come out to anyone until her senior year, when she selectively told sisters, friends, and family. She was still not completely out to everyone she knew at the time of the interview. Joining a sorority where she felt understood helped her to move along in the process during her undergraduate years.

Emerging Themes

Themes developed based on the cross-comparative analysis of the interview data (Schumacher & McMillan, 2005) are included in the following section. Each theme will be described, then the voices of the respondents will be introduced to provide supporting documentation for each theme

Theme 1: Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity came up in each of the interviews on several occasions. Most of the instances of heteronormativity observed were not harmful or overtly hurtful to the participant but rather a cultural attitude engrained in the chapters' normal operations.

These experiences each impacted the participants' experiences enough to be remembered for anecdotal purposes, and as such, it can be understood that they were an impactful part of each of their sorority life experiences.

Emily. Heteronormativity was present in the language that Emily's sisters used. She described a somewhat defeated attitude towards changing this language.

Sometimes I hear words I don't like being used, and if I'm not out to that person I'm not comfortable saying that I don't like it. I'm sure I'll just get used to it. They don't mean it in an offensive way. Everyone says 'that's so gay' and 'faggot.' People say it all the time. Once I tell someone that I don't like something, they understand, and they'll try not to say it. But most of the time, I'm not comfortable.

At her sorority's date dances, they allow the women to bring female friends, but there were stipulations regarding the number of women which made Emily feel less welcome to bring a female date.

For our semiformal, you could sign up two dates. You sign up one date and they can be any gender, male or female. But they said if you were going to sign up your second date, it couldn't be female; it had to be a guy because they needed more guys. And I guess in my mind I just feel like I wouldn't bring a girl as a date to a function unless I was like completely out to everyone, and knew that everyone was okay with it. I'm just not comfortable with it yet.

In the larger fraternity and sorority community on campus, Emily had an upsetting experience that reminded her of how steeped in heteronormativity the community could be.

It is a very heterosexual community. It really is. I had this experience where we were at a function, and I came out to a guy in a fraternity. I was with one of my

sisters, and he asked us to kiss. And I was just like, 'that's not okay.' I feel like fraternity guys think that when girls are gay or bi, they're gay or bi for their pleasure, for them to experience or view. And that's not what it is. I'm not gay to make a guy happy.

Maya. Maya described her sorority's reputation as somewhat heteronormative in nature when she talked about what a fraternity man had said to describe their chapter.

I remember a sister asking a fraternity member on campus how you would describe us and he said we were the nice girls, or the girls guys bring home to mom.

Some of Maya's sisters had a heteronormative viewpoint and used Maya to help them out where she did not have a similar need as they did in regards to finding dance dates.

There was one time when there was a date function in my chapter and some of the girls were looking for men to take to the event, because that was the normal thing to do, and a couple of my sisters asked me to be their wing-girl and help them find dates because I didn't need to.

Maya lived in the house for multiple years, and she spoke about one heteronormative rule that had been made with no consideration for women who do not date men.

In the house rules, one is that no men were allowed to spend the night at the house. No mention was made about non-member women staying overnight. When I lived in the house, my sisters would joke with me about being lucky I was gay because I could bend the rules, but I followed it out of respect, even though technically I didn't have to.

Paige. Paige spoke about her own pressures to bring a male date to her semiformal dance.

The theme [of the dance] was cowboys and Indian princesses. Even though some of my sisters who I was closer with were supportive of me bringing a girl, I was a bit nervous about bringing a cowgirl as my date because it just wasn't what the chapter was used to seeing and I didn't feel I'd been in the chapter long enough to disrupt that.

She experienced a heteronormative time during her new member period when her pledge sisters all had boyfriends and she did not get invited to a social outing, and she suspects her lack of a boyfriend was to blame.

All the girls in my pledge class had boyfriends, and I was single. They all went out for a nice dinner one week before our initiation, and I wasn't invited. When one of them was talking about it in front of me, she quickly explained that it wasn't because I was gay, but because I was single at the time and they did not want her to feel left out. I think it was honestly a mixture of both.

Paige also had an experience during a paddle swap which made her feel like the minority that was left out.

The chapter did a "hot boys" paddle swap, and each girl picked a famous guy they wanted on their paddle. When the girl who had come up with the idea realized that wouldn't work for me, the chapter laughed in good nature about it, and told me to pick a female celebrity I liked. It was not a big deal, but I felt a little awkward because it drew attention to my being different.

Theme 2: Coming Out Experiences

Each woman remembered her sorority coming out experience as a positive event

or alternatively as a non-event. The chapters each woman joined were described as down to earth and open minded, and they spoke to the positive experiences they had in being out women during their undergraduate years thanks to support from their sisters.

Emily. Emily had not come out to all her sisters at the time of the interview, but many of the individuals she did come out to within the chapter indicated that it was a non-issue to them. She spoke about some of these instances, and said,

Everyone is really like, 'Oh, we don't care. You're the same person, you're a person, that doesn't matter to us. You're you, why does it matter if you're gay?'

Emily additionally expressed some anxiety about coming out to large groups as a reason for not having come out to all of her sisters yet.

I don't usually tell three people at once, because I feel awkward... It's just intimidating I guess. So I usually do it one on one.

She also spoke about the chapter's recruitment methods, and how her sexual orientation did not have any bearing on her receiving a bid.

A couple of people told me that like before they choose to give bids, they talk about the girls and it came up that there was a rumor going around that I might be gay and everyone was just like 'Who cares? It doesn't matter.' So that was good.

Maya. Maya similarly felt little opinion from her sisters upon coming out. Their only adverse reactions were not towards her orientation, but rather her secrecy before coming out:

My sisters reacted largely neutral, as if it didn't matter one way or the other.

Except for the initial disappointment at feeling like I'd been hiding something or untruthful, I never perceived any negative attitudes. At the same time, their reactions were rarely notably positive either, no one threw a parade when they

found out; it was just, 'Oh, okay.'

Additionally, Maya noted a largely mature attitude towards diversity, with members being seen as individuals and not lumped into groups based on their backgrounds.

Within the chapter, there weren't a whole lot of discussions about sexuality or any other diversity issues, as the vast majority of the girls just took individuals as individuals, without any diversity identifying labels.

Paige. Coming out to her sorority was harder for Paige, and it took her a few years of membership until she was ready to do so. She describes her first experience of coming out here.

I had a group of three sisters who shared everything with me. When I got a girlfriend, I felt horrible about not telling them, like I was betraying them. And I wanted to, but I was nervous because word travels fast and I wasn't ready for everyone to know. But I took them all in my room one night, and took about fifteen minutes to gather my words. They were just like 'spit it out!' and finally I just bluntly said 'I'm dating a girl,' and they were just really excited for me. They told me they suspected it. And they promised not to tell anyone. It felt like a huge relief and they all hugged me and it was fine, like in a movie or something.

Telling a few more girls happened slowly for Paige, but it allowed the word to get out to the chapter without her going to each individual and announcing it.

At first when I was less selective about who in [the chapter] I told, I was nervous for it to get out, but then when it trickled out and I told people they could tell others. I was just relieved because I was ready for others to know, but I didn't want to go through telling them all myself. No one really acted different, and just

became more sensitive to my needs. It was nice.

Theme 3: Recruitment and Chapter Reputation

None of the women felt that the formal recruitment process had a place for them as out or questioning women. Thus, they joined their respective chapters during the informal process for differing reasons not typically seen in women going through formal recruitment. They joined chapters that they did not see as the “standard” sorority type and found a more welcoming home there for a number of reasons.

Chapter reputations on campus influenced the women's decisions to join their respective groups, as well, and reputations varied from each different social group on campus.

Emily. Emily did not see herself joining a sorority at first. Her perceptions from the media in regards to sorority life gave her a negative opinion of sororities, and she joined despite that. She discussed this experience and said,

You see sororities in movies and stuff like that and that's why I didn't rush last semester. I was like, 'why am I gonna join a sorority? I'm not like that, I'm not like those girls. And I'm not going to fit in.' That was me. I was completely against it. And over the semester, one of my friends I met at [freshman orientation] joined and said she loved it, so I had lunch with some of them and they were all really nice and down to earth. They're all really cool, and I just love it.

Additionally, Emily was a member of the campus's LGBT student organization her first semester at college. That group impacted her views of sororities and fraternities at the university, and about that, she said,

Greek life is definitely seen as very heterosexual. Like, in some light, fraternities are seen as homophobic. There is [an LGBT student organization] member who's

in a fraternity. But some fraternities are like that. [Members of the campus LGBT group] won't go Greek because they think it's heterosexual and homophobic. I think here, I think there's only me and one other person who are Greek in [the group], and it's a pretty large group, like 60 or 70 people. And a lot of this campus is Greek, so it's pretty large. So to have not that many Greeks in PRIDE, I don't know. I feel like the two, they don't have to come together, but like, they don't have to not like Greek life.

Emily believed that her chapter was among the more diverse on campus, and that it was an asset to her experience.

[My chapter is] actually a pretty diverse sorority, at least I think so. We have a few different races that make it feel really open and it's cool. I mean, most sororities on campus are like strictly white or strictly black. But I mean, I'm mixed and I'm in a white sorority, and I guess that plays another key factor, like two minorities in one, like. And we have another friend of mine in my sorority and she's Hispanic. We have a bunch of diversity.

Maya. Maya had a similar lack of interest in joining a chapter when she got to campus. Her mind was changed by some friends, and she said,

I never intended joining a sorority, but three of the four friends I made my freshman year were all in the sorority. They convinced me to come to an event, and when I did, I felt welcomed and comfortable. I never even considered any other sorority, but as someone who previously didn't make friends easily, I valued the real connection I made with them.

Maya describes her chapter's reputation as mainly neutral, if not positive. She said,

Generally it was seen as smaller and less significant among the other sororities, but there were no negative reputation attributes other sororities become attached with like promiscuity, binge drinking, or hazing.

Paige. Paige took on the beliefs of her hometown friends in terms of what sorority life meant to her, and it took a while and a positive sorority related experience for her opinions to change.

My friends from high school always said that sororities were places where girls went to buy their friends. The thought was that they were really vain. And I kind of agreed, but didn't have a lot of reason to believe one way or another for myself personally.

One individual in what was to be her future chapter helped to shape Paige's perception of sororities in a different way and convinced her to join.

Sophomore year, in one of my classes, I sat next to a girl who didn't look like how you typically think of a sorority girl. We talked a lot, and I liked her. She really singlehandedly made me more open to the Greek community. One day, she invited me to an open recruitment event where they were making cards for our philanthropy. I decided to go secretly without telling my other friends. I loved the girls, and they just talked about normal stuff. I was looking to get more involved, so I just figured, this could be for me after all. I joined and never looked back.

Paige's perception of her chapter's reputation was mixed, and changed throughout her time in college.

A few people told me not to join [my chapter] because it was all loser girls.

Meeting them, I knew that it was a large mixture of types of girls, and couldn't be

defined as losers as a whole group. That wasn't a fair assumption, and I was mad that I ever believed that. I think anyone who gets to know our chapter beyond its reputation knows that we don't fall into any one category. We can't be defined like that. We're diverse.

Theme 4: Dating Habits

Each woman spoke a little bit about different effects that their membership had on their romantic life. Their levels of outness during their active time in the chapter had an effect on their ability to date other women, or which women they dated.

Emily. Dating became harder for Emily once she joined her chapter, because she was no longer surrounded by LGBT-identified individuals.

It's not easy to tell that I'm gay. I wish I was more, well I don't wish I was more butchy, but I wish I had a sign on my forehead, so I wouldn't have to tell people. If anything, [dating is] going to be a lot harder. Last semester I was all about [the campus LGBT organization]. And if I wanted to date people, it wouldn't be that hard to meet someone. Because all of my friends were just gay, and everything, and I was in that little bubble. And now I'm in this heterosexual bubble so it's going to be a lot harder for me to find someone.

Maya. Maya briefly dated a woman who was a potential new member to her sorority, but does not believe that it had an impact on her admittance into the chapter.

I never dated anyone within my chapter, but I did go out with a [potential new member] two or three times just before she joined my sorority. I don't think my interactions with her really affected anyone. The girls loved her, and she loved them. None of my sisters even knew that we hung out until a semester later, but no one was surprised or had any negative comments on it.

Maya dated two women who were members of other chapters, but did not perceive that it affected any of their chapter experiences.

Another girl I dated went through formal recruitment. The girls all loved her as my girlfriend and some even as a friend, but they decided she was not a good fit for our chapter, a decision I supported. She joined a chapter similar in size, and though it happened at a time when our two chapters were just starting to work together on a couple projects and events, I don't think our relationship affected any of that. Later, I dated a girl who was already in a sorority, coincidentally the same one as my ex-girlfriend, and again, there was no positive or negative effect on either chapter.

Paige. Paige was still figuring her sexual orientation out for herself for a long period during her time as an active member. Thus, she avoided dating women for a lot of her time.

I had no idea what was going on with who I was, and so even though I liked girls, I was nowhere near comfortable enough with myself to go out with anyone. I avoided it, and so I was just single for a long time while I was in my chapter.

Dating women, when she was finally ready to do so, was an experience completely separated from Paige's college and chapter experience.

When I finally felt comfortable enough to be in a relationship with a girl, she was someone I met online and it was a long distance relationship. It helped that she wasn't on campus because I didn't have to tell my chapter until I was ready and it was on my terms.

Theme 5: Internalized Homophobia

Although their chapter experiences had been overwhelmingly positive or neutral in terms of their sexual orientation, the women each held bits of internalized homophobia that affected their experiences and willingness to be their full selves around their sisters and other people in their college community.

Emily. Emily's discomfort with bringing female dates to her sorority functions displays slight hints of internalized homophobia, in that she feels her dates are less worthy of consideration than male dates would be.

I'm really afraid to [bring dates to functions]. I know I shouldn't be, because a lot of my sisters already probably know about me, but I'm afraid to ask to bring a date. Like, to bring a girl as my date, is intimidating because I guess I'm not comfortable yet.

Emily felt that coming out was something that most people did not want to hear from her, as if she was offending people by outing herself. She felt awkward with the process because at times it seems forthright and unnecessary.

And it's just awkward sometimes they think I'm straight if I'm not out to them, so I try to beat around the bush if I'm not ready to be like "actually I'm gay," because how do you just, like, bring that up? People don't want to hear it all the time...you can't like spring that on someone. So, it's just like, I don't wanna offend anyone when they do find out that I'm gay.

Maya. Maya felt apprehensions about how other women would perceive sharing a room and bathroom with a lesbian, as if they would see it negatively. Her internalized feelings were far more homophobic than what was outwardly experienced.

I shared a bedroom with four other girls and shared a bathroom and walk-in closet with four more, which I would perceive as a situation which would have the potential for my sisters to be uncomfortable, but they never were. I was more nervous than they were.

Paige. Having had the hardest time coming out of all the participants, Paige expressed a few more instances of internalized homophobia. About her high school experience, she said,

Coming out in high school was not an option. I knew I was different, but hearing so many derogatory comments about gay people, I began to believe that I was less of a person if I identified within that category. So I kept it inside and had no idea when it would come out, if ever.

During her first few years in college, Paige avoided dating or being a part of the LGBT student group because she did not feel right about not being part of the mainstream culture.

When I knew who I was with my sexual orientation, I didn't act on it. Being in [the LGBT student organization] was not an option. I couldn't handle being different, because I felt that people looked at me differently. I may have made it up, but I definitely felt it.

Summary

Overall, the quotes shared with the PI gave a thick, rich description of these women's experiences. Differing from campus to campus and chapter to chapter, the names and situations varied, but by and large, a positive experience was had by each woman, and they each had similar thoughts and reactions to their times in the fraternity

and sorority community.

Chapter V

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This section explores the data collected by the PI compared with literature reviewed. The findings of the study will be explored more in depth up against existing literature, to see what the literature suggests and how it has remained constant with the findings of the participants' interviews.

With the theme of heteronormativity, the literature suggested that it was highly present in many fraternity / sorority chapters, with little change in culture from decade to decade (Syrett, 2009). As traditions changed, the cultures of chapters changed, but the practices remained heteronormative whether it was a hazing practice (Nuwer, 1999) or formal dance tradition (Robbins, 2004). The women did not share hazing experiences if they had any, but evidence of heteronormativity was present in many of their sorority activities. The women of Emily's chapter did not require male dates, but highly encouraged it due to a need for more males at events.

For our semiformal, you could sign up two dates. You sign up one date and they can be any gender, male or female. But they said if you were going to sign up your second date, it couldn't be female; it had to be a guy because they needed more guys.

Maya's sisters encouraged her to be a wing-girl because they felt that she did not have the same needs as they in terms of dating practices when they went out to bars on weekends.

There was one time when there was a date function in my chapter and some of the girls were looking for men to take to the event, because that was the normal thing

to do, and a couple of my sisters asked me to be their wing-girl and help them find dates because I didn't need to.

Paige had trouble being the exception to the rule with the “hot boys” paddle swap in her chapter. While it was not a large ordeal, it made a difference to Paige because she felt ostracized when the chapter made an exception to the rule for her particular paddle.

The chapter did a “hot boys” paddle swap, and each girl picked a famous guy they wanted on their paddle. When the girl who had come up with the idea realized that wouldn't work for me, the chapter laughed in good nature about it, and told me to pick a female celebrity I liked. It was not a big deal, but I felt a little awkward because it drew attention to my being different.

Even though the voices of these respondents reflected that there was a general acceptance of LBGT persons within the membership of the sororities represented by the respondents, heteronormativity was deeply entrenched, with social drinking and general party activities focused upon finding someone of the opposite sex to date (Robbins, 2004).

In the review of literature, it was found that women placed much emphasis on body image during the formal recruitment process, displayed many objectifying thoughts, and disordered eating habits (Rolnik, 2010). When the PI spoke with the participants, none of them included body image in any reasoning for not immediately joining a chapter, rather citing their sexual orientation or media's portrayal of sororities as reasons for lack of interest. When the women did join, however, they each expressed a unanimous comfort with their particular chapter, citing down to earth actives as the reason they felt at home in their respective chapters. Body image never played a role in their decision to not join at first, or their decision to join when they finally did. This would suggest that women going through informal recruitment as these women did may have a lesser

number of body image concerns, and that the chapters and potential new members during informal recruitment may have a different focus when looking to fill their chapters than during the period of formal recruitment. Looking for comfort, and a fit, was highly valued among the women interviewed, and so it may suggest the idea that chapters who attract lesbian women may be the same chapters that place less value on the ideal body type.

Emily particularly spoke about a disconnect between the LGBT community and fraternity/sorority life. She mentioned that her chapter supported some LGBT-centered events, but that that particular LGBT campus organization did not have a positive attitude towards fraternity and sorority life in general, citing its “straightness” as a reason.

Greek life is definitely seen as very heterosexual. Like, in some light, fraternities are seen as homophobic. But some... [members of the campus LGBT group] won't go Greek because they think it's heterosexual and homophobic.

The same went for Maya, who mentioned that those in her LGBT campus organization spoke out about a need for LGBT acceptance in fraternities and sororities, with just a few members of this group being in chapters themselves.

As for the chapters' acceptance of the women, they all experienced what they designated as largely positive coming out experiences within their chapter. The only example of a woman not feeling comfortable coming out to her chapter was when Emily discussed the daunting nature of coming out to more than one sister at a time, when she said, “I don't usually tell three people at once, because I feel awkward... It's just intimidating I guess. So I usually do it one on one.”

Despite isolated incidences, such as Emily's confrontation with a fraternity man asking herself and a sister to kiss, the community seemed tolerant if not accepting of their

sisters. This is consistent with the literature which states that as time continues, there is a changing culture towards LGB individuals in fraternities and sororities that is allowing for more acceptance and tolerance of diverse sexual orientations (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005). The women spoke hopefully about the future, citing the possibility for further connections between the two divergent communities in the coming years.

In terms of the homosexual identity development referenced in the literature review, the women adhered closely with the patterns of development as described in the model (Cass, 1970).

The PI placed Emily in the fourth stage of identity development. She came out to family and some friends not in her sorority during college, with the support network of her campus LGBT group. This group allowed her to find the connections with other LGBT individuals that typically happens in this phase. In this stage, individuals typically limit identity disclosure to close friends and other homosexual individuals. Emily was in this category, in that she was not coming out to her entire sorority, but rather to closest individuals to her. She did not hide her identity, as most do in this stage, however, she did not display it outwardly as individuals in the fifth stage would be likely to do.

The PI also identified a possible reversion from the fifth stage back into the fourth with Emily. Having been an active member of the campus LGBT group, and participating in gay pride events put on by the group, then shying away from it the second semester and fearing outing herself to some sisters, Emily displayed signs of reverting back into the fourth stage.

The PI placed Maya into a few categories within Cass's model throughout her sorority experience. Coming into college, Maya seemed to be in the third stage. She had dated women before, and limited people knew about her experiences or identity, but

many of her friends and family were not informed. Within the first few months of college and sorority life, however, with the help and support of the new network she had found in her campus LGBT group, Maya moved into the fourth stage. After that, she remained somewhat in between the fourth and fifth stages for a while, being active in both the sorority and the campus group and having roles in both the heterosexual and non-heterosexual worlds, taking on many roles within her sorority, and a leadership role within her campus LGBT group. Her experience was unique simply for the amount of involvement she had in her campus group. This gave her a nearly dichotomous experience, and she was able to see both sides of her world clearly depending on the individuals she was with at the moment. There was little overlap from her sorority experience to her LGBT group experience, and it gave her time to spend with both groups separately.

Paige stayed in many of the lower stages of Cass's model for much of college. Not coming out for a long time, Paige had known about the fact there was something different about her sexual orientation, but did not discuss it or embrace it. This placed her in stage two, Identity Comparison. Here, she operated largely in the heterosexual world, while knowing about herself, but not allowing herself to contact others in the LGBT community or to date women. When she found a woman off campus to date long distance, Paige pushed herself into the third stage, Identity Tolerance. She was making positive progress within herself by reaching out to others who identified as LGBT. She was still not coming out to anyone in her life, and still living largely in a heterosexual world, but making strides by making a romantic connection. Paige took many proud steps one semester late in her college career, when she came out to her family and some sorority sisters she held closest to her. Coming out to them allowed her to move into the fourth stage, Identity

Acceptance. Her coming out experiences were positive, and she was able to make more connections as a result of accepting herself. Her experience was much slower and seemingly much more painful than the other two participants, but she made considerable strides during her undergraduate career.

Conclusions drawn from present study

Given that each participant had a unique experience with different chapters, and at two different institutions, solid conclusions were not abundant. The PI was able, however, to define some themes throughout the responses that shed light onto some conclusions to be drawn from the study, discussed below.

The coming out process, despite a woman's level of outness, can be daunting when in large groups. As such, women choose mostly to come out to small groups or individuals. This lessens anxiety for the women and makes the experience more personal. In addition, coming out to their chapters was related to the women's stages of identity development in Cass's model. The women were each at least in the fourth stage before coming out, if not, the coming out process helped move them from the third to the fourth stage.

In terms of who these women chose to come out to, the PI was able to conclude that coming out to close friends within the chapter was easiest. Individuals with whom the women had the most contact, such as big sisters, pledge classes, etc, were the most common sources of a first coming out experience within the chapter.

Women cited the nature of heteronormativity, so deeply entrenched in sorority culture, as a frustration. When instances of heteronormativity occurred within their chapters, the participants were certain they were not intentionally rude or hurtful, but just a normal part of the culture. These microaggressions tended to subside if the women ever

said anything, but in some cases, participants felt they did not want to call out occasions of heteronormativity at every example.

In the same vein, participants felt their experiences were more at ease once they had come out to some members of their chapters. Anxiety about coming out was felt across the board, but there was a positive experience correlated with being out to one's chapter. After participants came out, they felt relieved and expressed a positive overall experience in being out to their sisters.

Recommendations

Future Researchers. If future research is to be continued on this subject, it is recommended to find participants from different locations or institutional types. This will vary results and show a broader perspective of women who live on campuses with very different cultures than in Midwestern public institutions alone. Additionally, with the participants, it is recommended to meet with them on multiple occasions. This way an investigator can look back on the transcript of the initial meeting and formulate questions to elicit more thick description of experiences. This, and member checking transcripts, will supplement the qualitative data gathered (Schumacher & McMillan, 2005).

With the stages of identity development, the PI had to look into their development on her own, assigning stages based on her own knowledge. If the research was to be duplicated, it would be recommended to ask the participants to reflect on how they fell on the development model at different important times in their lives, so that time could be saved and accuracy could be improved in assigning stages of development.

A more thorough review of each chapter's reputation would be recommended for future research, by interviewing heterosexual women of the same chapters. This way, a broader, more subjective understanding of the chapter's culture and climate could be

gleaned from responses, other than the perceptions of the LGBT- identified women whose responses are likely biased from prior experiences.

The PI was fortunate to find women who articulated largely positive experiences being out in their respective chapters, but it would supplement the research if a future investigator were to find participants who have had different, possibly negative experiences. This way, more recommendations could be made on improvements to the fraternity/sorority community based on actual events.

Lastly, the PI interviewed only women who were in traditionally white sororities. Recommendations for further research would include finding participants from traditionally black or other multicultural sororities, to understand the experiences of double minority women, ones who might be affected by cultural perceptions of LGBT people.

Student Affairs Practitioners

When working with LGBT individuals, it is important to never assume heterosexuality of students; it may hinder relationships and the students' ability to see the practitioner as a resource or support. Opening conversations up to the possibility of other sexual orientations will increase a student's comfort. In addition to inclusive conversations, it is important to have offices become an inclusive physical space. It is important to openly advertise offices as safe spaces so that questioning students may approach the practitioner for help or guidance or to listen.

When working within sorority and fraternity life, encourage open and gay-friendly recruitment practices by having conversations with recruitment chairs from chapters and councils about the importance of diversity and inclusivity in the community. Additionally, it can be helpful to educate the broader fraternity and sorority chapter

leadership on the importance of welcoming non-heterosexual individuals into chapters, as well as the benefit of diversifying their chapters.

After recruitment, consideration can be given to LGBT-inclusive functions. Advisors can encourage date functions with inclusive language for all members, rather than just heterosexual language. Additionally, when sponsoring on campus events, advisors can encourage chapters to look at sponsoring LGBT campus group events to be visibly supportive of diversity initiatives.

Lastly, begin to educate students on the importance of eliminating heteronormativity in their every day practices. This can be done with passive or active programming, and role modeling inclusive language in any interactions with them. Informing students about the reasons behind this inclusive language will spark inquiry about heteronormativity, and informing students of these practices may encourage eventual elimination of these practices among individuals.

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Appendix A: Letter to Potential Interview Subjects

Hello,

My name is Kate Solberg and I am a College Student Affairs Master's Candidate currently working on my thesis. I am contacting you in regards to participating in the research conducted for this thesis, which will be completed as a qualitative study. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experience of lesbian and bisexual identified members of women's sororities or women's fraternities. Your participation would consist of an in person interview lasting about one hour, and all responses would be used for the purpose of the study only, without association of your name with the research. Below you will find a copy of my IRB approval form and the Informed Consent Form, as well as the contact information of myself and my thesis committee. Thank you for your time and assistance. I look forward to speaking with you.

Kate Solberg

Appendix B: Informed Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH Experiences of Lesbian Women in College Sororities

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kate Solberg, a college student affairs graduate student from the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of self-identified lesbian women who are members of college social sororities. What is the lived experience of lesbian women in college social sororities?

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Partake in an audio recorded interview. This interview will most likely last an hour and you may be contacted in the event the primary investigator needs to ask any follow up questions.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

All interviews will be scheduled around your availability to avoid causing any strain on your schedule. Risks involve possible minimal emotional distress due to rehashing emotional events that occurred during their experiences. Please see the Eastern Illinois Counseling Center, located in the Human Services building on campus, for any additional help due to any emotional stress incurred.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

A better understanding of your multicultural identity in college may result in more comfortability with the proposed topic, as well as provide information to universities on what environmental changes could foster a better environment that would encourage a more LGBT-friendly fraternity and sorority community. You may also benefit from this study by being able to share your experiences and process through the experience with a person outside of your own peer group, and be able to explain how it feels to be a part of the group included in the research topic.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as

required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by the use of aliases in all documented and printed material. You will be asked to choose your own aliases; these chosen names will be how you will be identified in the study. During the course of the study the data will be stored on a flash drive that will remain in the principal investigator's possession at all times and also on a password protected computer in a locked room. Interview recordings will also be kept in this same locked room. The only people who will have access to the data or subject identifiers will be the principal investigator, the principal investigator's advisor and the thesis committee members. All of the subject interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes only. These tapes will be kept in a locked file drawer in the room with all of the research material and password protected computer. Only the principal investigator will have access to these tapes, and the tapes will be reviewed inside the principal investigator's apartment. The principal investigator is the sole occupant of this apartment, so there are no chances for these tapes to be overheard by anyone else. If you decide to formally withdraw from the study, you will have the choice of receiving all of the data that pertains to you (e.g., signed informed consent forms, transcribed interview) or having it destroyed and all of your data will be removed from the study. All data pertaining to the study will be retained for three years in printed form that will be kept in a locked file drawer that remains in the principal investigator's possession. All electronic files or audio recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer. Any recordings will be kept in the same locked drawer as the files for three years, and then destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Kate Solberg, Principal Investigator

kssolberg@eiu.edu or 217-581-6886

Or

Dr. Charles Eberly, Thesis advisor

cgeberly@eiu.edu or 217-581-7235

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. First, tell me about yourself in terms of your sexuality, starting with how you choose to identify, and who in your life knows about your sexuality, and when and how they came to know.
2. Tell me about your sorority, including size, type of campus, chapter reputation, and any other important details.
3. What was it about your chapter that attracted you to them at first and eventually convinced you to become fully initiated?
4. What is the culture of your chapter in regards to conversations about diversity and especially sexuality, and how has that affected your experience within the organization?
5. How do you perceive your sisters to react towards your sexuality?
6. Share some experiences with sisters that may have been affected by their knowledge of your sexual orientation.
7. How do your dating habits affect your role within the chapter?
8. Can you talk a bit about the culture of the campus LGBT group and their attitude towards fraternity and sorority life?
9. Overall, would you say your experience as a GL individual within your chapter has been positive, negative, or neutral?