

HARRISON, RYDELL, Ed.D. *Uncovering Identity Negotiation Stories of Multi-Marginalized Students: Debunking Racist and Heterosexist Hegemonies and Developing Socially Just Schools.* (2015)

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Despite federal, state, and local school efforts to quell bullying, anti-bullying efforts fall short and student reports of bullying continue to increase. Students representing marginalized identity groups are subject to multiple forms of discrimination and seek solidarity with similarly marginalized peers in order to counter feelings of alienation and isolation. For multi-marginalized students, the likeliness of alienation and isolation increase, oppression is compounded, and the challenges of identity negotiations increase. At the intersection of multi-marginalized identities, there is an increased prevalence of social homelessness—a term used to describe a student who upon first glance should be wholly accepted in one or more social categories; however, because of his or her competing identities, the individual is unable to fully participate in the life of the social group without hiding a part of his/her identity. Although educational research around this topic recognizes how the stratification that exists in the larger society plays a significant role in how students manage their minority identities in schools, little qualitative research has been undertaken to investigate the complexities of identity gaps when individuals are multi-marginalized. Further, educational leaders tasked with creating bully-free schools that are safe and socially just for multi-marginalized students are without a theoretical lens to facilitate their understanding of their students' lived experience or engage in critical discourse on debunking the racist and heterosexist hegemonies that exist in schools. Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative study was

to understand and make sense of how multi-marginalized students negotiate their identities, and to provide educators with a heuristic theory that informs their approach to school leadership.

Utilizing constructivist grounded theory as a conceptual framework, I sought to unpack the k-12 stories of multi-marginalized individuals with bifurcated identities, and to generate substantive theory regarding social homelessness. Through semi-structured interviews with 14 African American men who identify as same-gender-loving (SGL), I collected data on (a) how African American SGL males negotiated their multi-marginalized identities in k-12 educational spaces; and (b) what impact—if any—their identity negotiation had on the relationships they built with other students, particularly students who belonged to only one of their marginalized identity groups. The initial data and field notes were analyzed using a grounded theory coding paradigm to explore causal relationships and significant patterns. The substantive theory that emerged from the study is grounded in the participants' experiences and depicts social homelessness as the central phenomenon among participants. This theory cites three causal conditions to social homelessness: alienation, shame, and lack of acceptance from peers. It also highlights four ways students respond to being socially homeless: over-achieving, seeking peer validation, becoming invisible and privileging identities. Because this study was intended to heuristically support the work of principals, the most important aspect of the theory of social homelessness is the notion that adult intervention has the potential to change outcomes for socially homeless students. Although these findings suggest the need for further research on multi-marginalized identity negotiation, the substantive

theory of social homelessness that emerged from the study can serve as a heuristic lens useful to educational leaders as they construct socially just climates in their schools.

UNCOVERING IDENTITY NEGOTIATION STORIES OF MULTI-MARGINALIZED  
STUDENTS: DEBUNKING RACIST AND HETEROSEXIST HEGEMONIES AND  
DEVELOPING SOCIALLY JUST SCHOOLS

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To the students who experience school from the margins with no social home to call their  
own.

APPROVAL PAGE

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

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Discourse on bullying has extended far beyond the walls of the schoolhouse and has become the subject of significant legislation. According to Bully Police USA—a watchdog organization advocating for victims’ rights—forty-nine states have adopted anti-bullying legislation since 1999 (BullyPolice.org). In 2009, the General Assembly enacted legislation to prevent bullying in North Carolina schools. According to North Carolina General Statutes §115C-407.15, bullying is described as behavior that places a student or school employee in actual and reasonable fear of harm to his or her person or damage to his or her property or creates a hostile environment (North Carolina School Violence Protection Act, 2009). Under the legislation, schools are required to implement methods and strategies for promoting school environments that are free of bullying or harassing behavior. While bullying is not a new issue, the attention it receives in the media, in schools, and at the state level evidences society’s raised consciousness of the negative impact of bullying. The creation of anti-bullying legislation is only one step in ensuring schools are emotionally and physically safe for students.

#### **Background Context: Bullying in Schools**

According to Demaray and Malecki (2006), at least one-third of American students in middle and high school have experienced bullying as a victim, as a bully, or

as both. Despite a myriad of interventions aimed at eliminating bullying, reports of bullying behavior continue to increase. By highlighting the role of power in bullying encounters, Greene (2006) builds upon the widely accepted definition of bullying as a form of aggression that is intended to harm or cause distress and includes a perceived or actual imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) cite physical and verbal abuse as traditional forms of bullying. For many adults, bullying is seen as a phase through which all students must pass. This description of bullying as a rite of passage describes this destructive behavior as normative and requires the victim to develop coping strategies rather than calling for a change in the status quo. In addition to more traditional forms of bullying—physical, verbal, and cyber—relational bullying has also become an issue. In relational bullying, students attempt to negatively impact another student’s social standing through humiliation, alienation, and/or manipulation of relationships (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, and Reid (1996) note the increased risk of emotional distress for sexual minority youth and cite the heteronormative climate of schools as a contributing factor. Over the last decade, the number of LGBTQ students who are bullied in school because of their sexual identity has risen and while the social milieu of schools supports bullying in general, Gastic (2013) highlights the disproportionate risk to sexual minority youth of bullying and victimization. In the wake of the 2010 suicide of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, New Jersey passed strict legislation to ensure schools increased their preparedness, responsiveness, and reporting of bullying. Following the media coverage of Clementi, there were suicides of several other students

who were bullied based on their (perceived) sexual orientation or gender identity that received national attention, and the federal government issued a “Dear Colleagues” letter to school districts to remind school’s of their obligations to protect students under the existing laws (Gastic, 2013). Like previous efforts, New Jersey’s legislative changes and the federal letter that followed have done little change the social climate of schools. While peers and school adults can contribute to a negative school climate for sexual minority youth, they can also play a significant role in making schools emotionally supportive for LGBTQ youth as well as all students who represent other marginalized identity groups (Gastic, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

To effectively rid schools of bullying, it is imperative that school leaders create climates that debunk the current social milieu that marginalizes students based on their racial and sexual identity. To do so, school leaders must engage in critical discourse on the discrimination and prejudice of marginalized and multi-marginalized students and provide opportunities for marginalized and multi-marginalized students to share their experiences. Evans (2007) refers to the above process as sensemaking. “Sensemaking is generally understood to be the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals” (p. 161). Within these stories, school leaders must look for instance of discrimination, alienation, and social homelessness (Harrison, 2009)—a term used to describe a student who upon first glance should be wholly accepted in one or more social categories; however, because of his or her competing identities, the individual is unable

to fully participate in the life of the social group without hiding a part of his/her identity—and the school leader must take steps to create a more inclusive environment (Evans 2007).

In her study of school leaders' sensemaking of racial and demographic changes within their schools, Evans (2007) acknowledges this need for open dialogue within schools and advocates for honest discourse on the impact of race: "To address the needs of a racially diverse student population, school leaders must eschew color blindness, "see" race, acknowledge the various sociopolitical manifestations of racism, and recognize their own (or a group's) dominance and marginalization of others" (p. 185). A school's inability to acknowledge race can lead to a school culture that fails to protect students from racially charged bullying. Color-blindness or invisibility, therefore, is not a form of protection, but a risk. In her study of adolescent sexuality, Ruskola (1996) refers to gay and lesbian youth as the most invisible and outcast group of students in schools. Despite their invisibility, researchers have long-noted the disproportionate risks of bullying and victimization of sexual minority youth (Gastic, 2012; Saewyc, 2011; Varjas et al., 2008), which can be explained by the heteronormative culture of schools (Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 1998).

Discourse on students' experiences within racialized and heteronormative school contexts is a significant step towards inclusive school cultures and away from the hierarchal climate that supports the bullying of marginalized students. Open dialogue on the intersections of race and sexuality in school settings can provide school leaders with tools to reshape school cultures and ensure all students are afforded a safe learning

environment. One way to achieve this end is to provide African American males who are same-gender-loving (SGL) spaces to retrospectively tell stories of their k-12 experiences. The purpose of this qualitative study is to uncover the stories of African American SGL males. I want to explore their stories about their k-12 education in their own words and from their own perspectives as they reflect back on the climate of their schools. Initially, I wanted to hear the stories of African American SGL students that are currently in k-12 settings, but I felt that students who are currently living in the context of bullying and violence would not be honest in their responses because they feared their answers would be used against themselves or others (Coggeshall & Kingery, 2001). Instead, I chose to focus my study on adult male participants. My hope is that their words and past experiences will provide school leaders with a unique lens or heuristic theory that will be useful in understanding the lived experiences of multi-marginalized identities as they construct socially just schools.

This study is guided by two broad research questions.

1. How do African American students who identify as SGL males negotiate their multi-marginalized identities in educational spaces?
2. What impact—if any—does their identity negotiation have on the relationships they build with other students, particularly students who belong to only one of their marginalized identity groups?

I am interested in uncovering stories of intersectionality related to their marginalized identities. Intersectionality investigates the intersections between forms or systems of oppression (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Carathathis, 2014; McCall

2005). The experience of being an African American SGL male cannot be understood in terms of being African American, and of being SGL, considered independently. It must include the interactions of the two, which frequently reinforce each other. I am also interested in investigating the notion of feeling at home with either marginalized identity group. While membership in marginalized identity groups increases risks of psychological damage from dominant identity groups (Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2010; Cox, Vanden Berghe, et al., 2010; Longest, 2010; McKoy, 2013; Tatum, 1997), it can also serve as a “support group” that fosters a sense of solidarity (Tatum, 1997). I’d like to understand if there are spaces where African American SGL males experience solidarity, comfort, and familiarity of home within their marginalized identity group as well as whether or not they experienced the isolation and alienation of social homelessness within schools.

### **Significance of the Study**

I believe this investigation of the intersectionality of students’ bifurcated identities and their experiences with social homelessness will provide school leaders with a deeper understanding of students’ experiences as they engage in anti-bullying work. Shields (2004) notes the importance of school leaders’ focus on the experiences of marginalized students and commitment to deconstructing systems of oppression as they work to create democratic schools. Theoharis (2007) recognizes educational inequities for marginalized students and puts the responsibility for changing the culture of schools on the shoulders of school leaders.

Because of the existence of normative systems that oppress marginalized and multi-marginalized students and because of how pervasive bullying is in schools, the type of change needed in education is whole-system change. Duffy (2006) describes whole-system change as the type of change that “requires educators to unlearn and learn mental models that inform their work, influence their internal social architecture, and affect their external relationships” (p. 35). Through the process of unlearning, educators will have the ability to grasp new concepts regarding building strong relationships in schools and employ new strategies that will ultimately provide spaces for their students to flourish academically and socially. This study will challenge the mental models or master-narrative within schools and provide educators with counter-narratives that highlight the unique experiences and challenges found at the intersection of Blackness and gayness. By exploring and unpacking these stories and uncovering a unique lens to view student relationships and identities in schools, I hope to provide school leaders with a useful theory that will assist them in engaging in critical discourse on debunking hegemonies.

### **Contextual Factors of Bullying**

According to Demaray and Malecki (2006), social support is a significant missing ingredient in current approaches to anti-bullying interventions that would further school leaders’ knowledge of the social milieu that allows bullying to thrive. In their discussion of school bullying and victimization, Espelage and Swearer (2003) highlight the importance of understanding the nature of peer relationships and identity on school bullying. Because of the impact noted above and the need for understanding the salient

contextual factors of bullying shaping the contours of this study, I will discuss the roles of relationships and identity in schools.

**Relationships in schools.** Effective elimination of bullying requires critical inquiry into the contextual factors that lead to bullying, the nature of relationships in schools, and the ways in which they promote or debunk the hierarchal tropes of the larger society that lead to discrimination, prejudice, marginalization, and alienation. There is a significant need for critical discourse on the destructive nature of social hierarchies in schools that exacerbate bullying and develops a more nuanced understanding of student relationships in school. To redefine the nature of relationships in schools, Shields (2004) argues for a focus on justice and care in schools because of their commitment to the welfare and success of all students. “Justice and care require [educators] to persevere with students...to develop relationships with them, and to find pedagogical approaches that help them succeed” (Shields, 2004, pp. 39-40). In other words, educators have a responsibility to develop and/or apply practices that are designed to ensure all students are successful academically and are provided a supportive learning environment that fosters students’ social and emotional well-being. This environment, which legitimizes the experiences of marginalized students and seeks to undo patriarchal, sexist, classist, and hegemonic norms that privilege the experiences of dominant groups, serves as the foundation for creating and re-creating positive relationships within schools.

**Identity in schools.** Relationships play a key role in determining one’s individual and group identity within an organization. Through the relationships formed in schools, students develop identities that shape their beliefs about themselves, influence their daily

choices and impact several dimensions of life including vocational plans, religious beliefs, values and preferences, political affiliations and beliefs, gender roles, and ethnic identities (Tatum, 1997). Students look to their peer relationships to form social groups that will answer the question, “Who am I?” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Membership in social identity groups helps students to discover and create places where they feel at home with themselves and with others.

In her study of mixed-race women, Bettez (2007) recounts her understanding of Anzaldúa’s new identity of *mestiza* and uses “home” as a metaphor to describe her new sense of solidarity with other mixed-race women: “She defines a new space, a new identity -the *mestiza* - a place where there is a tolerance for ambiguity and room for growth. In *Borderlands* I found a home, an identity where I could claim all parts of me, the identity of *mestiza*” (p. 6). Bettez’s metaphor locates home as a place of familiarity, comfort, and full acceptance. To say that someone is “at home” in a particular social identity group is to imply they are familiar with the experiences of fellow group members, there is a sense of solidarity among the group members because of the shared experiences, and there are common values and beliefs among group members because of these shared experiences. Despite her marginalized status as a mixed-race woman, Bettez felt at home within a *mestiza* identity because of her familiarity with mixed-race women’s experiences and because of the shared values and beliefs that allowed for ambiguity and growth. In this case, her marginalized identity group provided a home that helped her to negotiate multiple identities.

Building upon the “home” metaphor of identity, Harrison (2009) uses the term “social homelessness” to describe a precarious situation whereby someone who has multiple social identities finds them self with no social group for which they can call home. On the surface one might assume that such a person could choose a social home from several based on their membership in many groups. However upon further investigation, one discovers a nuanced situation whereby it is the membership in particular social groups that prevents membership in any of them. The only exception that would allow such a person to avoid social homelessness is for him/her to mask one or more aspects of his/herself in order to conform to the desirable traits of a particular social group. However, in being true to oneself, social homelessness is inevitable. This conundrum leaves a person with no home to assist in negotiating multiple identities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To investigate students’ identity development and the impact of having multiple marginalized identities that compete, compound oppression, and create the need for negotiations, I will proceed by conceptualizing the central elements explored within this research. The following discusses how the theoretical framework of my study of multi-marginalized students is shaped by concepts of identity negotiation and notions of intersectionality and critical race theory (CRT). I will also discuss relevant terminology as it is used in this study.

**Identity negotiations.** Negotiating multiple identities is especially difficult when an individual is pressured to choose one identity above another (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bettez, 2008; DuBois, 1994; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Although a mestiza identity

allows for ambiguity, other marginalized identity groups are constructed categorically with strict boundaries. In her book about African American identity among adolescents, Tatum (1997) discusses how speech patterns, music, dress, peer associations, and educational values coalesce to form an authentically African American identity. Likewise, Faulkner and Hecht (2011) discuss the challenge of simultaneously participating in a religious community and claiming a sexual minority identity because of the historical tension between religion and homosexuality. Anderson and McCormack (2010) discuss the problematic nature of a categorical approach to identity highlighting the danger of reifying cultural stereotypes. Despite the risks, they recognize that regardless of how marginalized identity categories are constructed, the oppression and discrimination experienced by its members are real.

Building upon this understanding, I recognize that although my understanding of identity is fluid rather than categorical and I would prefer to argue for the need to deconstruct essentialist notions of identity that categorize and compare, the social justice work of creating communities of difference requires me to employ an intercategorical approach to identity. To do so, I will utilize McCall's (2005) intracategorical complexity approach that "provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions" (p. 1773). In other words, I will focus on the intersections of specific identity groups in order to reveal the complexity of their lived experience.

**Intersectionality.** In her discussion on the concept of intersectionality in feminist theory, Carathathis (2014) notes the impossibility of separating race and gender by quoting Russell (2007): “Since ‘a real-life person is not, for example, a woman on Monday, a member of the working class on Tuesday, and a woman of African descent on Wednesday’, intersectionality...[reads] these categories simultaneously” (p. 307). For this project, I will take an intersectional approach to identity and engage in a critical inquiry of the nature of relationships in schools. My hope is that this inquiry will provide school leaders with a more nuanced understanding of student relationships that will facilitate the eradication of bullying and generate substantive theory that will inform principals’ understanding of multi-marginalized students. Because membership in a marginalized identity group often leads to discrimination and students who belong to multiple marginalized identity groups are at a greater risk of oppression and victimization, I will focus my intersectional investigation on individuals who belong to multiple marginalized identity groups. Although sociologists have most commonly explored the intersectionality of gender and race and/or sexuality by holding females as the focal point of their analysis (Anderson & McCormack, 2010), I will focus my study on adult males who identify as racially marginalized (African American) and sexually marginalized (SGL). Participants will be given the opportunity to retrospectively share stories related to their k-12 experiences.

Although students belonging to multiple marginalized groups risk enduring oppression inside and outside of school, the experiences of African American SGL students are unique because of the stereotypical notions of their racial and sexual

identities that pit their Blackness against their gayness (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Parks, 2001). While my intention is not to promote racial and sexual stereotypes, I recognize that they are reified in dominant discourse and shape the ways in which self-identity is constructed. Further, I agree with Anderson and McCormack's (2010) position that to ignore these cultural stereotypes is to further alienate members of these groups by not situating the discussion in the ways in which it is played out in the larger society. The constructed bifurcation of African American and SGL identities creates a unique tension for students who belong to both identity groups because the negotiation of these two identities often requires privileging one identity over another.

Anderson and McCormack (2010) note how this antithetical understanding of African American identity and gay identity conflicts with the social progress over the last 50 years: "Despite the gains of both the civil rights movement and the progress toward gay and lesbian social inclusion, the understanding in society remains that Black men come in only one sexuality and gay men come in just one color" (p. 950). Thus, while going through the identity development of adolescence and being shaped by societal norms, African American SGL students will likely feel that they are not fully accepted into either identity group. Further, by not feeling at "home" with either of their opposing identities, African American SGL students may experience increased stress due to the amalgamation of institutionalized racism, institutionalized heterosexism, and institutionalized sexism (Parks, 2001). Because of the fusion of these isms, these students seemingly have a more difficult time finding the familiarity, comfort and full acceptance found when an individual is at home with their marginalized identity group.

**Critical race theory.** This study is framed within critical race theory (CRT) and tenets of intersectionality. Rooted in legal studies, CRT recognizes the level to which racism and oppression is woven into the fabric of American culture and therefore provides a backdrop for the identity formation of adolescents. Students claiming marginalized identity groups are therefore developing and constructing their identity within a racialized context that ultimately creates an adverse educational climate (McCoy, 2013).

The primary purpose of the social construction of race is to create hierarchies in which White individuals are privileged above people of color. McCoy (2013) notes that within this socially constructed hierarchy, White skin places individuals at the top of the hierarchy and Black skin demotes individuals at the bottom. Another image of this racialized hierarchy centrally locates White individuals while African Americans are pushed to the margins. CRT provides a framework that provides space and opportunity for the stories and experiences of African Americans to be shouted from the margins in an effort to counter the centralized narrative of White people whose experiences are often viewed as normative, existing outside of a racialized context.

McCoy (2013) directly addresses the liberal narrative in education that posits students' upward mobility in education can exist outside of a racist and oppressive culture. In other words, the dominant ideology that asserts that public schools are environments where academic success is available for all students lives on unchallenged without the counter-narratives of students from the margins. These counter-narratives highlight that the social context of schools threatens the educational success and

emotional well-being of marginalized students and adversely impacts the development of their identity.

Although CRT is useful in providing theoretical principles that help me to make sense of social contexts of African American SGL men, it falls short of holding the sexual identity of my participants at the core of the study. To explore the lived experiences of African American male athletes who identify as gay, Anderson and McCormack (2010) heuristically use concepts of intersectionality to inform their study. In McCall's (2005) study of intersectional methodology, she situates intersectionality within two major fields of research—gender-based research and race-based research. According to McCall, intersectionality arose as a critique of gender- and race-based research that failed to account for the lived experiences at the neglected intersections of multiple identities: “It was not possible, for example, to understand a black woman’s experience from previous studies of gender combined with previous studies of race because the former focused on white women and the latter on black men” (p. 1780). Thus, intersectionality grew out of the need for a more nuanced understanding of identity and lived experiences within feminist studies. According to Abes, Jones and McEwan (2007), the framework of intersectionality born from feminist literature recognizes how socially constructed identities are experienced simultaneously, not hierarchically.

Researchers have critiqued a framework of intersectionality because of the danger of essentializing identity into fixed categories. Borgenson (2005) explores Judith Butler’s foundational work on queer theory, which posits that because identity categories are socially constructed and identity is performed, identity should be understood as fluid

differences rather than a unified essence. Queer theory presupposes that identities are in constant flux and that it is through enactments of identity (performance) that identity is constructed (Abes, Jones & McEwan, 2007). Therefore, viewing identity through a queer lens is useful in understanding how identity is constantly being defined. For this project, however, viewing identity through a categorical lens provides a better understanding of the oppression associated with the essentialized notions of racialized and sexualized identity. In other words, individuals with multi-marginalized identities are oppressed because of society's acceptance of these essentialized categories of race and sexuality. To dismiss these essentialized categories for the sake of this study, which is rooted in the social contexts of schools, would ignore the oppression that drives how multi-marginalized people negotiate their identities.

With this understanding of the benefits of a categorical approach in mind, I will locate my study within the framework used by Anderson and McCormack (2010) in their study of African American gay men in sports. They use CRT and concepts of intersectionality as their conceptual framework “not only to theorize the partial erasures of heterosexual Black male athletes and gay White male athletes, but also to focus on the interlocking categories of oppression that limit athletes who are both Black and gay” (p. 951). Further, they defend the use of categories within this marriage of CRT and intersectionality to examine identity formation because “when gender, sexuality and race are limited solely to the realm of poststructuralism, the contextual ways in which people experience the material realities of their identities can be ignored; as intersecting identity categories can result in intensified modes of oppression” (p. 961). In other words,

regardless of whether our understanding of identity is fluidly constructed, performed, essentialized, or categorical, the oppression experienced by marginalized identity groups is unquestionably tangible. As a result, I will utilize intersectionality and critical race theory to examine the lived experiences of marginalized groups—African American and SGL—in response to my ongoing challenge to dominant ideology and my commitment to social justice while simultaneously supporting the anti-essentialism of poststructural and social constructionist ideology. Further, because much of the foundational work on identity development is grounded in essentialism, I will search for meaning in identity and social identity theories that can be characterized as static in an effort to further understand the lived experiences of my participants and the ways they in which they understand their identity within our hegemonic social context.

Building upon CRT and concepts of intersectionality, the intent of this study is to generate a useful theory about social homelessness in schools as defined through the lived experiences of multi-marginalized individuals.

### **Terminology**

*Same-gender-loving.* Throughout my study, I use the term “same-gender-loving” (SGL) to describe African American individuals who identify as homosexual, bisexual, or non-heterosexual. Although the term is clunkier than more familiar terms like “gay”, “lesbian” or the all-inclusive acronym, “LGBTQ”, I chose “same-gender-loving” because of its attempt to debunk Eurocentric homosexual identities. The term “gay” goes beyond describing an individual’s sexual preference or orientation; it connotes a racialized culture that aligns with dominant groups (Sneed, 2010). Anderson and McCormack

(2010) note the cultural asymmetry with the term gay for African American men and highlight that African American gay men often find mainstream American gay culture “too White” for their inclusion, as it is primarily created for and managed by White middle-class men. Because of the racially loaded designation of the term “gay”, many African Americans have rejected the term “gay” and adopted “SGL”. This shift reflects activist Cleo Manago’s argument that “SGL” is a more appropriate description of African American homosexuals. Sneed (2010) notes that this shift signifies an attempt to come to terms with seemingly disparate and incommensurate identities.

***Oppressed and victim.*** Throughout my study, I discuss the marginalization of individuals and groups based on our hegemonic society. In discussing the experiences of individuals and groups, I use the term “oppressed” to describe the processes that systemically create roadblocks that hinder members of marginalized identity groups and pathways that privilege members of dominant identity groups. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) capture my use of the term in their description of the impact of oppression: “Whereas systems of oppression impose barriers for members of nondominant groups, concomitant systems of privilege and entitlement impose barriers for members of the dominant group” (p. 28).

The use of the term “oppressed” is difficult because of its negative connotation. Oppression often implies a state of being that cannot be changed. “Victim” is synonymous with one who is oppressed. This ideology is problematic because we associate a victim mentality with weakness. Therefore, when individuals acknowledge their oppression as a result of their marginalized group identity, it is easy to assume they

are simply being weak rather than responding to the ways society has systemically “othered” them. The oppressed are those individuals who do not possess the cultural capital necessary to be successful in a White, male dominated society. More specifically, those who are oppressed are not male, not white, not heterosexual and not financially secure and are dehumanized and devalued as a result (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Crenshaw, et al., 1996; Kumashiro, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McKoy, 2013). While oppression in the larger society is often masked or institutionalized, oppression in schools is not only unhidden, but it is accepted as the status quo (Kumashiro, 2000). Although I used the term “oppressed” throughout the study to speak to the experiences of marginalized individuals, I do not mean to imply they lack agency or are stuck in the state of being a victim. Rather, my Freirian understanding of oppression recognizes the capacity for marginalized individuals and groups to be agents of their own liberation.

### **Summary**

Despite valiant efforts at the school, district, state, and federal level to promote safe environments in our schools, reports of bullying and harassing behavior continues to rise (Demaray & Malecki, 2006; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). To effectively eradicate schools of bullying, schools leaders must create school climates that debunk the traditional hierarchies that exist within society and engage in critical discourse on the discrimination, prejudice, and alienation of marginalized and multi-marginalized students. As they re-create and re-shape their school’s climate, school leaders must also provide ongoing support for marginalized and multi-marginalized students as well as students experiencing social homelessness. My aim is that this research will provide

school leaders with a unique lens that will assist them in supporting their students.

Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, I will uncover the intersectionality stories of students with bifurcated identities—African American and SGL males—this qualitative study will generate heuristic theory that will be useful for school leaders as they construct socially just schools.

### **Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. In this introductory chapter I briefly provided an overview of this dissertation, including the dissertation topic, key concepts included in this investigation, and the specific aims and organization of this dissertation. I closed Chapter I with a discussion of the theoretical framework (identity negotiations, intersectionality and Critical Race Theory), and how such frameworks are essential for examining the identity negotiations of multi-marginalized students within school contexts. I begin Chapter II with an examination of existing literature about identity development and social identity theories. Next, I review the existing literature on group identity with a specific focus on marginalized identity groups and the ways in which these groups negotiate their identities. Finally, I situate this investigation of marginalized group identity within the context of schools by reviewing the existing literature on social identity groups, bullying in schools and school climate, and I highlight how this dissertation builds and extends existing literature to gain a better understanding of how African American SGL students negotiate their multi-marginalized identities. In Chapter III I explain my research design by providing an overview of grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory methodologies. I discuss my research participants,

data collection protocol, data analyses techniques, and I highlight the two ways I ensured trustworthiness in my study. Chapter III closes with a discussion of my reflexivity as a researcher. In Chapter IV I introduce the participants and provide a mini-portrait of the 14 African American SGL men I interviewed. Each mini-portrait includes information about the participant's background, the schools they attended, and their sexuality. In Chapter V I describe the grounded theory coding model I used to analyze the data followed by a discussion of the six major themes that emerged from the data. Finally, in Chapter VI, I propose the substantive theory associated with multi-marginalized identity negotiation and provide recommendations for school leaders. Next, I address implications of the study's findings regarding future research on multi-marginalized identity negotiations in school context as well as on bullying and school climate. Chapter VI closes with an explanation of the study's limitations and my final thoughts about the research and its relevance to school leaders.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Students who belong to marginalized identity groups are faced with challenges during their identity development. In addition to the oppression experienced by students from dominant identity groups, these students are often shaped by stereotypes of their identity groups that have the potential to create a negative perception of themselves (Kumashiro, 2000; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Tatum, 1997). While the possibility of developing a negative perception of the self is not limited to marginalized adolescents during their identity development, the risks increase for youth who belong to multiple marginalized identity groups (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). When marginalized identities intersect, forms of oppression and the possibility of self-loathing can intensify (Anderson & McCormack, 2010). Faulkner & Hecht (2011) cite fear of not fitting in as one result of the intersections of race identity and sexual identity. For example, an African American male who is same-gender-loving may simultaneously struggle with institutionalized racism that makes school challenging and heterosexist ideals that promote internal homophobia (Cover, 2010; Cox, Dewaele, van Houtte & Vincke, 2010; Fordham, 1988; Tatum, 1997;). The intersection of these particular identities—African American and SGL—creates unique challenges that impact the construction of their individual and social identities. Understanding and making meaning of the intersections of race and sexuality for African American SGL male students requires an exploration of traditional

theories of identity development as well as theories of identity based on race and sexual identity (Abes, Jones & McEwan, 2007). Abes, Jones and McEwan (2007) note only two contemporary theories, specifically those of Baxter Magolda (2001) and King and Baxter Magolda (2005), have considered the intersection of two or more of these domains of development.

This qualitative study on multi-marginalized identity within the context of schools was informed by the literature on individual and social identity development and related theories. According to Broido and Manning (2002), qualitative research “cannot be conducted without the conscious or unconscious use of underlying theoretical perspectives. These perspectives inform methodology, guiding theory, questions pursued, and conclusions drawn” (p. 434). This study drew from literature—empirical studies and theoretical research—that address identity. I begin by reviewing identity development theories that explore both individual and social identities. In this section, I highlight widely cited theories including Erikson’s (1968) identity development theory and Tajfel and Turner’s (1985) social identity theory (SIT). Next, I highlight literature that is focused on marginalized group identity and review racial and sexual identity theories. Because my research focuses specifically on racial and sexual identities, I review empirical studies that explore the unique challenges of individuals with marginalized identities and discuss the impacts of identity negotiation. Finally, I focus my attention on how identity plays out in the context of schools by highlighting relevant scholarship on social identity in groups, the lessons learned from both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies on bullying within the context of schools and research on school

culture. This review will bring attention to the gaps that exist in the literature aimed at understanding the intersections of race and sexuality. These gaps serve as the basis for conducting a study aimed at generating substantive theory around multi-marginalization in the contexts of k-12 educational spaces.

### **Individual Identity**

Exploring identity is one of the most significant tasks of adolescence. This feat is not accomplished independently; rather, identity development and/or identity construction is the result of engaging in a communal dance of reflections and negotiations in which an adolescent encounters individual characteristics, family, historical influences, and social and political contexts (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; Tatum, 1997). As young people develop, the amount of time they spend with peers significantly increases while adult supervised time decreases. According to Milner (2004) “This new autonomy and reduced control by adults usually means that the influence of peers is amplified dramatically” (p. 25). These new peer communities not only provide space for identity exploration, they assume an active role in the ways individuals name their identities. To answer the question, “Who am I” one must first ask “Who do my family and peers say I am?” and “What are the messages reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my surrounding society” (Head, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Although negotiating one’s identity is a life-long process that extends into adulthood (Cross & Fletcher, 2009, Faulkner & Hecht, 2011, Head, 2002), adolescence signifies the onset of identity development (Erikson, 1968). Psychosocial developmental theorists cite biological changes as the reason students begin identity development during adolescence. According to Tatum

(1997) identity development is “triggered by the biological changes associated with puberty, the maturation of cognitive abilities, and changing societal expectations, this process of simultaneous reflection and observation, the self-creation of one’s identity is commonly experienced in the United States and other Western societies during the period of adolescence” (pp. 19-20). Developmental theorists attribute the onset of identity exploration to the increased desire for autonomy as children develop (Head, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Prior to adolescence, children’s identities are inextricably tied to those of their primary caregivers (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Head, 2002). Most pre-adolescent children lack the necessary agency to make decisions about how their time is used, with whom they interact, and which social groups they prefer to engage. Their identity, therefore, is closely tied to the significant adults in their lives who are charged with making decisions about the aforementioned factors that will shape the child’s identity as he or she progresses into adolescence (Head, 2002). Over time, adolescents’ reliance on adults to name their identities lessens and is exchanged for an increased dependence on peer groups. This sense of group loyalty typically results in youth becoming conformists. Head (2002) highlights the role of groups in influencing adolescents’ choices in his study of high school students: “Members of a group wear similar clothes, enjoy the same music and support the same football clubs. The image of youth as independent pioneering spirits has little relevance at this stage” (p. 30). At this stage, identity is simultaneously defined by sameness (adherence to group loyalty) and difference (the extent to which adherence to group loyalty signifies an incongruence with other social groups) (Erikson, 1968).

There are multiple theories designed to provide insight into the development of identity during adolescence. Erikson's (1968) foundational work on identity development speaks to the fluidity of identity. Adolescents "try on" several identities throughout their development before settling on an identity that will carry them into adulthood (Erikson, 1968, Longest, 2009). Erikson's notion of "trying on" identities is less about exploration and more closely connected to the need for peer approval prevalent in the developmental stage of adolescence. As they attempt to find acceptance and recognition from peers, adolescents respond to their identity crises by redefining themselves (Longest, 2009). Erikson describes this process as "the persistent adolescent endeavor to define, overdefine, and redefine themselves" (p. 87). This theory, therefore, presumes that adolescents change their identity because of a personal desire, leaving little room for social predictors in explaining identity movement (Longest, 2009).

Erikson's identity theory is characterized by simultaneous reflection upon one's self and observation of communal culture. "In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him" (Erikson, 1968, p. 22).

Erikson's theory assumes there is equal access for each identity. Longest (2009) offers of critique of this notion of trying on identities in his discussion of the often restrictive nature of identity and the role of "crowds" cited in Milner (2004):

Milner (2004) found that crowds actively complicated the requirements of membership in order to limit the number of people who could take on that identity. Adolescents may not be able to change their identities because of the

social barriers to such alterations. In adolescence, peers play a significant role in controlling who is allowed to take on particular identities. Even if adolescents desired to change identities they may be unable to do so. (Longest, pp. 61-62).

Crowds limit the fluidity of adolescent identities because membership can be restrictive (Eder, 1995; Longest, 2009). Identity, therefore, is often less about choice; rather, adolescents are segregated into different identities based on their ability to conform to establish norms (Eder, 1995, Longest 2009). Non-athletic youth, for example, would not be able to meet the necessary “requirements” for inclusion in the “jock crowd.” Similarly, high academic performance is a prerequisite for inclusion in the “nerd crowd.” Eder (1995) highlights the ways in which identities can be exclusive regardless of choice.

### **Social Identity**

Personal identity exists within the realm of a larger social context (Head, 2002). Larson and Ovando (2001) recognize the marriage between individual and social identity and discuss how we make sense of the world around us through our ability to sort and classify others. Although the schemas are used to classify and sort others are based on stereotypes, they provide us with ways of understanding ourselves as well as others within social contexts (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Through their Experiential Simulations in which participants interact virtually and are unable to see each other or share individual identities, Brunner, Opsal and Oliva (2006) highlight the ways in which socially constructed schemas assist in making meaningful connections with others and how their absence disrupts the ability to interact “naturally”: “Interactions with others are unavoidably shaped by beliefs about who they and others are, by their categorical group membership in privileged or marginalized groups, and by the a priori assumptions about

those and other characteristics that bias their interaction” (pp. 225-226). Through this unconscious sorting and categorizing, individuals seek to identify commonalities and/or differences which serve as a strategy for making social connections based on three processes: separation (differences), combination (similarities) and linking (Milner, 2004). “Linking occurs through interaction across boundaries, mobility from one group to another, overlapping membership, and the use of common elements of culture” (Milner, p. 28).

**Social Identity Theory.** In their Social Identity Theory (SIT), Tajfel and Turner (1985) explore how individuals classify themselves and others into social categories such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender and age. Tajfel and Turner’s first began their research of groups in 1979. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) was designed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. According to SIT, identity is fluid and an individual’s personal self corresponds to their group membership. The aforementioned identities are connected to both individual identities as well as social identities. Social identity is the individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). SIT seeks to answer the question Who is the “we” that is spoken of? and How do individuals align themselves with others?

Another component of SIT highlights the categories of the in-group and out-group. SIT asserts that group membership creates in-group, self-categorization and enhancement in ways that favor the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Turner and Tajfel’s (1986) research showed the mere act of individuals categorizing themselves as

group members was sufficient to lead them to display in-group favoritism. After being categorized as part of a group, individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by differentiating their in-group from a comparison out-group on some valued dimension. Groups, like individuals, typically attempt to influence and maintain control over their surroundings (Milner, 2004). This quest for positive distinctiveness means that people's sense of who they are is defined in terms of we rather than I. "Social identification... is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Students link with students who share similar identifiers. To the extent the organization, as a social category, is seen to embody or even reify characteristics perceived to be prototypical of its members, it may well fulfill such motives for the individual. At the very least, SIT maintains that the individual identifies with social categories partly to enhance self-esteem (Ashforth & Mael, p. 21). Milner (2004) adds to the benefit of increased self-esteem and recognizes social identity as a source of power and status.

**Communication Theory of Identity.** Like SIT, the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) links individual identity to group identity by highlighting four layers or frames: (1) personal, (2) enacted, (3) relational, and (4) communal (Faulkner & Hecht, 2006). CTI argues that communities hold collective identities in addition to individual identities. "This layered approach to identity allows a multi-faceted and process oriented understanding because at any one time all four frames are present and, in a sense, a part of one another" (Faulkner & Hecht, 2006, p. 831). CTI does not assume that all identities

are created equally and coexist peacefully; rather, it describes the layers of identity as a negotiation recognizing the tension associated with claiming multiple identities.

The concept of identity does not require subscription to a singular individual or group identity. Identity is complex and provides space for claiming multiple identities (Erikson, 1968; Tatum, 1997). After asking college-aged students, Who are you? Tatum (1997) recalls how her students' identity disclosure highlighted patterns in the ways in which we negotiate identity. Tatum found that people do not mention their membership in dominant or advantaged social groups: "That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by the dominant culture" (p. 21). Membership in dominant identity groups goes unnoticed because they align with the White patriarchal narratives of society. "The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us...that which sets us apart as exceptional or 'other' in their eyes" (Tatum, p. 21). My identity as an African American male evidences the ability to simultaneously belong to both dominant and marginalized groups (Tatum, 1997).

### **Marginalized Group Identity**

Marginalized group identity can be better understood by examining racial identity models. McKoy (2013) highlights Cross's (1971) developmental theory of Nigrescence and the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) developed by Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley and Chavous (1998) as the most widely cited theories. Cross's (1971) theory of Nigrescence cites five stages through which African American adolescents progress as they develop their racial identity: pre-encounter; encounter-immersion,

emersion; internalization; internalization-commitment. The pre-encounter is the stage of identity where race is not recognized as an important factor. During the encounter stage, the individual has a racialized experience that occurs to or in the presence of African Americans that makes their race salient and forces them to acknowledge their minority status. One example of a racialized experience is being called or overhearing someone else being called a racial slur. There are two levels of development in the immersion-emersion stage. During the immersion level, the person, overcome with anger about the negative impacts of racism, immerses themselves in everything they perceive to represent their racial identity. In the emersion level, the individual pursuit of African American culture results in a self-defined resolution of what it means to be African American and work to balance their rejection of White culture. The internalization stage is characterized by the acceptance of what it means to be African American, which is internalized into their self-concept. Internalization may result in negative feeling about race based on the rejection of African American culture. Cross (1971) describes that in this case “they resort to a nihilistic, hopeless, even anti-people world view” (p. 21). According to Cross, not all African Americans progress through all five stages. Their progression is determined by how much their life experiences are shaped by race.

### **Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity and Theory of Nigrescence.**

Sellers, et al. (1998) developed MMRI, which is based on two foundational principles: race identity is defined by the meaning the individual attributes to race and by the racial experiences of the individual. Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) examines the simultaneous development of perceptions of race and the situational

integration of these definitions into African American identity. Sellers, et al. highlight four dimensions of racial identity development: racial salience, racial centrality, racial regard (public and private), and racial ideology (nationalist, oppressed minority, assimilationist and humanist). Although the Theory of Nigrescence and MMRI focus solely on race, I believe they provide assistance in unpacking the development of social identities for members of marginalized groups and moving towards anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000).

The Theory of Nigrescence and MMRI are situated in the notion that racial hierarchy within the contexts of White patriarchal society creates a dominant-marginalized structure of identity (McKoy, 2013). Dominant identity groups hold power and set the parameters for inclusion into social groups. Although the impact of the dominant-marginalized group hegemony is pervasive throughout education systems, it is most evident in the traditional curriculum that is at the core of student learning.

The relationship between dominant and marginalized identity groups is hierarchal thereby creating an environment in which marginalized groups are viewed as defective or substandard: “For example, Blacks have historically been characterized as less intelligent than Whites, and women have been viewed as less emotionally stable than men. The dominant group assigns roles to the [marginalized] that reflect the latter’s devalued status, reserving the most highly valued roles in the society for themselves” (Tatum, 1997, p. 23). When an individual is a member of a marginalized group and displays characteristics that typically represent those of its dominant counterpart, the individual is seen by dominants as an anomaly. For example, an African American student who is

academically gifted is seen as an exception to the widely-accepted belief that African Americans lack the academic ability of White counterparts.

Because marginalized group identity increases risks of psychological damage from dominant groups (Cox, Vanden Berghe, et al., 2010; Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2010; Longest, 2010; McKoy, 2013; Tatum, 1997), marginalized group identities can serve as a “support group” that fosters a sense of solidarity (Tatum, 1997). Often, this identity develops from negative encounters with a dominant group. Despite years of societal discourse on the negative impacts of systemic racism in American education and the general consensus that racism is wrong, students of color continue to be marginalized in schools (Tatum, 1997). Risener (2005) highlights the disparity between rhetoric and action in his study of the differences between students’ beliefs and treatment of gay and lesbian students. Although 85 percent of high school seniors believe in the equal treatment and acceptance of LGBT students, non-heterosexual students perceive schools to be hostile environments that promote verbal and physical abuse.

**Oppositional social identity.** Oppositional social identity is a form of resistance from assimilation into dominant culture. Resistance is widely defined by critical theorists as opposition with a social and political purpose (Abowitz, 2000). Abowitz applauds the work of resistance theories in education commending their work for “not only exposing the subtle and overt exclusions within schooling processes, but in formulating theoretical explanations for why and how individuals and groups resist oppressive or threatening situations, structural arrangements, and ideologies” (p. 878). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) conducted a study of African American high school students and found that the anger and

resentment they felt as they became increasingly aware of the systemic exclusion of African Americans from full participation in society led to an oppositional social identity. This oppositional social identity serves as a means of protection from psychological assault of dominant group oppression and keeps the dominant group at a distance (Tatum, 1997). Tatum's (1997) example of African American students' resistance and rejection of White norms shows how oppositional social identity impacts ideology and behavior: "Certain styles of speech, dress, and music, for example, may be embraced as 'authentically Black' and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain" (Tatum, p. 61). Abowitz studied a group of West Indian males that formed an oppositional social identity to resist the White middle-class norms of their high school which they perceive as irrelevant: "These students construct an identity of style (clothing, body decoration, attitude) and action (speaking patois around teachers who cannot understand the language, cutting class, yelling at teachers, breaking many school rules) to oppose school authority" (p. 881). Abowitz notes that although these two social groups, West Indian males and White middle-class authority, clash they both remain fundamentally unchanged by the interactions.

The creation of oppositional social identities as resistance is not exclusive to racialized identities. For minority identities, such as non-heterosexuals, ingroups are formed by persons who are likely to suffer the same deprivations because they share the same stigma—fellow sufferers—as opposed to people who do not share that stigma—the outgroup (Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2010; Cox, Vanden Berghe, et al., 2010). In fact, there is a growing population of students who resist the societal norms determined by dominant

groups. Shapiro (2005) recognizes the prevalence of oppositional social identities in all schools, describing students who “resist the behaviors, attitudes, and appearance of the student mainstream...[and] create, through their own dress, language, and rituals, a subculture of style that violates the institutional norms” (p. 168). According to Solórzano and Bernal (2001), resistance theories demonstrate the ways in which individuals negotiate and struggle with social structures and create meaning from these interactions. They critique traditional perceptions of student resistance, which often interprets students’ behavior as disruptive and lacking any critique of the social conditions to which they are responding. Solórzano and Bernal (2001) argue that when resistance situated within the tenets of a CRT and LatCrit framework, marginalized students’ actions can be viewed as transformational and motivated by an understanding that individual and social change is possible. Solórzano and Bernal’s study of resistance as transformational highlights the importance of investigating the underlying intensions of the resistance behaviors of marginalized students by seeking to better understand the social context in which they live.

Because our social context is wrought with hegemonies that essentialize the experiences of marginalized students into a singular monolith, oppositional social identity is based largely on cultural stereotypes and although it provides a buffer from dominant group psychological assaults, it often reinforces negative stereotypes (Kumashiro, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Head (2002) notes that “social identity develops from an internalization of the images, albeit stereotyped, of the groups to which one does and does not belong” (p. 35). As a result, membership in oppositional social identity groups can often lead to

negative behaviors as adolescents resist “acting like” the dominant group. In the case of oppositional social identities based on race, African American students’ resistance of “acting White” often produces a decline in academic performance since doing well in school is associated with Whiteness (Tatum, 1997). Oppositional social identities related to sexual identity subscribe to the resistance of heteronormative ideals. Just as racialized oppositional social identities reify negative stereotypes about African Americans and intelligence, oppositional social identities related to sexual orientation buy-in to the stereotype of the promiscuous gay man. This stereotypical image of the promiscuous gay man is reified in the construction of gay characters in television and movies and which often fails to include gay characters that are not young, middle class White men.

**Assimilation.** Membership in marginalized identity groups limits the amount of performance flexibility as compared to dominant groups whose members are not held to strict guidelines when “performing” their identity. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) studied 33 high school students in Washington, DC whose need of acceptance into their African American identity group caused them to downplay their academic achievement. Adolescents’ need for acceptance is not solely related to their marginalized identity group, but there is also a desire to find acceptance from dominant groups. Similarly to the ways in which adolescents “perform” in ways that “fit” the accepted norms of their oppositional social identity group, they also develop conforming strategies to gain acceptance from dominant social groups. A common strategy is assimilation (Fordham, 1988). Assimilation involves the forfeit of identity groups eschewed by the dominant culture in an effort to conform to White, male, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class

standards (Purpel, 2000). Assimilation into the dominant group by de-emphasizing characteristics that might identify an individual with a marginalized group is referred to by Fordham (1988) as performing racelessness. Harris and Marsh (2010) debunk the effectiveness of racelessness noting the negative impacts of such assimilation:

For example, while raceless students modulate their speech and behaviors and disaffiliate from activities sanctioned by the fictive kinship system to gain approval from their teachers, they also experience increased psychological isolation and feelings of depression; they find themselves marginalized as a result of being rejected by their black peers and not fully accepted by their white peers. (p. 1247)

In Harris and Marsh's example of the raceless student's attempt to assimilate, the student is likely unable to deny his African American racial identity in his quest to perform Whiteness. In their discussion of LGBT Jewish Americans, Faulkner and Hecht (2011) note the ability of some marginalized identity groups to fully assimilate into dominant groups. Despite their ability to "pass" as a member of the dominant social identity group, many LGBTQ Jews experience their identities as a bifurcated rather than integrated relationship creating an increased sense of stress (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). This assimilationalist notion also negatively impacts immigrant students pressured to abandon their native language (Portes, 2002).

### **Identity Negotiations**

As noted earlier, individuals can subscribe to multiple identity groups simultaneously (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bettez, 2008; DuBois, 1994; Erikson, 1968; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Tatum, 1997). Faulkner and Hecht (2011) recognize the difficulty of claiming multiple identities that peacefully coexist without negotiating:

“Identity negotiation processes point to areas where individuals feel conflict because of identity gaps, those places where their self-concepts and avowed identities conflict with others’ perception and understanding creating dissonance and a need to negotiate the competing and conflicting identities” (p. 832). In this section, I will highlight two negative impacts of identity negotiations—minority stress and alienation.

**Minority stress.** Stress associated with identity negotiations is characteristic of adolescent development (Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2011). Mild levels of stress are to be expected as adolescents define and redefine who they are, establish a more egalitarian relationship with adults, and expand their social network among friends and to include romantic partners (Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the aforementioned stress is compounded for youth who are members of multiple marginalized social identity groups. This notion of minority stress seeks to uncover the unique stressors that impact individuals who are members of marginalized social identity groups, and posits that persons from stigmatized social categories experience additional stress and negative life events because of their minority status (Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2011). Sexual minority stress is unique, chronic, and socially based and has a significant impact on mental health (Cox, Dewaele, et al., 2011; Cox, Vanden Berghe, et al., 2010). Gay adolescent males are extremely vulnerable to internalized homophobic attitudes shaped by society during their developmental years. The increase in stress is often the result of an internalized acceptance of dominant views of masculinity and lack of unbiased resources to explain same-sex attraction (Cox, Vanden Berghe, et al., 2010; Resner, 2005).

Beyond stress, simultaneous membership in dominant and marginalized identity groups and/or multiple marginalized identity groups increases the likeliness of identity gaps in which an individual's multiple identities conflict with one another (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). The impact of these gaps ranges from alienation to depression to lack of choice in identity enactments (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). To be alienated is to lack a sense of belonging, to feel cut off from family, friends or school (Purpel, 2000).

**Alienation.** Alienation is primarily the result of one feeling the absence of power in an organization, or the expectancy that one's behavior cannot determine the outcomes desired in that organization. A student's feeling of alienation is based on his/her perception of importance in school. In an alienation study of secondary students, Oerlemans and Jenkins (1998) found that students feel powerless when they have no control over their experiences in school, are unable to make choices, and feel that their interests are ignored in favor of the school's rules and policies (Oerlemans & Jenkins, 1998). Oerlemans and Jenkins' qualitative case study in a suburban high school reflects the opinions and feelings of 13 students chosen to participate because they are frequently absent, late or display disruptive behavior. The students gave suggestions for how to increase their positive feelings for their school environment. Oerlemans and Jenkins followed their study with a list of suggestions to the school as a result of their work. Previous studies of alienation center on individual students' reflection rather than their group experiences. Purpel (2000) cites alienation as one of the prices members of marginalized identity groups often pay in an effort to attain success.

## **Identity in the Context of Schools**

Students are acutely aware of the continuum of social identities and how each moves closer to or away from dominant social identities (Longest, 2009). One of the most recognized aspects of adolescent life is the presence of social identity groups in schools, such as Jocks, Preps, or Punks. Although this notion of social identity is based on students' construction of group identity, it illustrates the cultural capital associated with being a member of the ingroup. Further, the stratification of students in this well-known and implicitly accepted caste system is further compounded when it intersects with racial and/or sexual identities. In this section, I will explore identity within school contexts by reviewing literature of social identity groups, highlighting empirical studies of bullying in schools and exploring current research on school climate.

**Social identity groups.** The sorting of students into social groups (jocks, geeks, nerds, emos, etc.) is the subject of television, movies and books. While Hollywood often depicts the uniting of students from opposite sides of the tracks or opposite sides of the cafeteria, there are many examples of stories that characterize the existence of the above groups by the ways they function hierarchally in schools. In many cases, the story is presented like a modern-day Romeo and Juliet in which the audience is expected to accept and understand the feud between Montagues (jocks) and Capulets (geeks) that prevents true love. Shifting between these social identity groups is difficult because of the stringent requirements for entry, suggesting that these types of adolescent identities are better characterized by stability than change (Longest, 2009). Milner (2004) has shown that taking on most adolescent identities usually requires the individual to fulfill a

highly complex combination of traits and behaviors. The social hierarchy of these group identities is often signified by the descriptive name given, often by dominant identity groups. Milner (2004) found a plethora of labels for these identities including preps, jocks, nerds, Goths, cowboys, and normals. Youniss, McClellan and Strouse (1994) studied 905 American youths and created six descriptive categories of adolescents: populars (who enjoyed good looks, sociability and being seen to be cool), jocks (those with sports orientated interests and talent), brains (recognized as being academically able), normal (average, socially joining in), loners (felt disconnected and appeared alone, nonconformist), and druggies/toughs (demonstrably anti-social, aggressive, overtly using drugs). Three of the six categories can be further investigated to uncover students who may lack membership in any of the groups: *un*-populars, *non*-jocks, and *ab*-normals. Although “normal” is a self and peer identified group among adolescents described as being at or below average, scholars often use it to refer to students who are not explicitly placed into any other category (Kinney 1993, McClellan and Strouse, 1994; Milner 2004; Strouse 1999). “Researchers assume that normals cannot or do not meet the required expectations for any specific identity, making them ‘remainders of the adolescent identity world’” (Longest, 2009, p. 66).

While the above social identity groups reflect those typically associated with media portrayals of high school, there are significant identities that are missing from the research on how identity groups function in schools. Although race, gender and sexuality are woven into much of the research on identity, these variables are missing from much of the group identity research of adolescents, particularly in qualitative research seeking

to make meaning of social group identity in schools. The absence of race, gender, and sexuality in the above research suggests that individuals can detach from their inherited identities when joining social identity groups. Further, its absence implies that race, gender and sexuality are not actively impacting social identity groups and have no influence on the ways in which adolescents enter and exit the social identity groups named above. The exclusion of race, gender and sexuality in social identity group discourse evidences the need for further inquiry on how the intersections of race, gender and sexuality impact social group identities. More specifically, there is a need to uncover the stories of adolescents with multiple and competing marginalized identities. As a methodological tool, uncovering these unheard stories—as with counter-narratives—amplifies the voices of the marginalized, and require readers to “suspend judgment, listen for the story’s points, and test them against their own version of reality however conceived” (Stovall, 2006, p. 244).

Milner (2004) captures the counter-narratives of many students who have experienced caste systems present in American schools. As students are stratified into multiple identity groups, the inherent need for social progress creates a toxic school environment for many students. Successfully meeting the membership requirements for dominant groups is difficult. As a result, both dominant and marginalized social groups demean other groups in an effort to increase in social status. The desire for an increase in social status, serves as the impetus for daily put-downs and “small cruelties” enacted on other students. The departure from the margins and journey towards the mainstream

sadly requires a marginalized social group member to demoralize fellow marginalized groups; the oppressed become the oppressors.

Although marginalized identity grouping of adolescents serves as a coping strategy for the environmental stressors caused by dominant identity groups (Tatum, 1997), it does not prevent students from lashing out against other groups that are also marginalized. For example, in their study of African American SGL youth and families in urban settings, Carlton and Parks (2001) describe African-American SGL youths' racist encounters within the White gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. They note that "[gay] racism can express itself in political organizations, social settings, and more generally in the sexual stereotyping of African-American same-gender-loving youths" (p. 44).

Although I do not agree with the behavior, I can understand why groups would target those who threaten their acceptance by dominant groups. However, like Milner (2004), I question the benefit of demeaning those who offer no threat at all. Milner posits three possibilities:

First, in an atmosphere where put-downs and verbal aggression are common, there is probably a definite tendency to displace hostility by scapegoating the vulnerable... Second, in a context where verbal aggression is common and even admired, the vulnerable offer an opportunity to hone and display one's skills without risking significant retaliation. Third... value is placed on conformity. Deviance must be persecuted lest it call into question the basic assumptions of the normative structure. (p. 90)

Because difference in schools is seen as deviant, diversity is not celebrated but becomes fodder for abuse. The lack of solidarity among marginalized social groups may explain

research on marginalized group attitudes and perceptions of other marginalized groups. African American students report less positive attitudes toward sexual minorities than do White students (Gastic, 2012; White et al., 2010; Whitley, et al., 2011), Jews report negative attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), and racial minorities experience negativity when interacting with students representing other ethnicities (Tatum, 1997). Faulkner and Hecht's (2011) study of gay and lesbian Jews highlight the difficulty of achieving an "inner solidarity" and reconciling competing identities within one's self: "For those who do not lie at either extreme on the continuum where one identity dominated, being queer and Jewish represent marginal identities that can create conflict for individuals and communities" (p. 841). The phenomenon of oppressed groups targeting other oppressed groups in schools leaves little hope for change. In her discussion on womanist theology, Riggs (1994) identifies solidarity between marginalized groups as a prerequisite for liberation. Kumashiro (2000) highlights the need for changes in praxis and theory:

Critical pedagogy needs to move away from saying that students need this/my critical perspective since such an approach merely replaces one (socially hegemonic) framework for seeing the world with another (academically hegemonic) one. Rather than aim for understanding of some critical perspective, anti-oppressive pedagogy should aim for effect by having students engage with relevant aspects of critical theory and extend its terms of analysis to their own lives, but then critique it for what it overlooks or for what it forecloses, what it says and makes possible as well as what it leaves unsaid and unthinkable. (p. 39)

Kumashiro also suggests that this critical work of debunking hegemonies is the responsibility of schools. Although Kumashiro understands the impossibility of explicit teaching about every culture and every identity, schools must create democratic climates

that support this level of discourse, provide space for differences to exist (Shields, 2004), and “guarantee individual members a necessary level of freedom to be themselves, to pursue legitimate personal interests that might appear idiosyncratic, to speak out against community practices that are deemed unfair or discriminatory” (Starratt, 2004, p. 728). Employing an anti-oppressive pedagogy in a school requires the complete analysis of the school’s culture.

**Bullying in schools.** According to Greene (2006), bullying is the most pervasive form of aggression in schools. Although consensus in scholarly research now exists that bullying is a form of aggression in that it is intended to harm or cause distress in the victim and that there is a perceived or actual power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim there is inconstancy in definitions found in school communities (Greene, 2006). Madsen (1996) notes the discrepancies among preadolescent students’ definitions of bullying. As a middle school principal, I am aware of the many definitions of bullying that vary based on the location of the specific stakeholder. For example, victims of bullying, bullies and parents of alleged bullies define bullying in terms on their particular situations. There is no consensus in how to identify acts of bullying in school settings. Because a variety of methods are used in a variety studies to assess the incidence and prevalence of bullying, the current research has yielded startlingly different results (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004).

Despite the lack of definitional and identifying consensus on bullying, several research studies highlight the prevalence of bullying in American schools. Based upon nationwide surveys and ethnographies in the United States, students perceive bullying as

a major problem in their schools, and believe that it causes moderate to severe emotional pain. Further, they believe that it can and does lead to violence (Greene, 2006). Hughes, Middleton and Marshall (2009) discuss a national study of secondary American students which revealed 29.9% of the sample reported moderate involvement in bullying, either as a bully (13.0%), or one who was bullied (10.6%) or both (6.3%). Children who do self-identify as victims are typically those experiencing the most severe bullying, so any estimates are likely to be underestimates of actual experiences (Theriot, Dulmus, Sowers, & Johnson, 2005). Hughes, et al. (2009) report a steady decrease in the perceived hurtfulness of bullying behavior as student age, both by boys and girls. They attribute this phenomenon to the notion that many children become desensitized to its effects, having been exposed repeatedly to it, either by being bullied themselves, or seeing other children being bullied.

Moving beyond investigating the prevalence of bullying, several large-scale quantitative studies have sought to uncover the impact of bullying in schools. Hughes, et al. surveyed nearly 8,000 students in Oklahoma and found that 61.5% of students reported being bullied once in a while and 10.2% reported being bullied often or daily. As expected, the more often students are bullied, the more worried they are. Of every question they asked students, the effect size for this question about worry and stress was the largest, meaning it was the most significant statistical finding of the study. Children who are frequently or seriously victimized are stressed beyond that of their non-victimized peers.

In his qualitative study of how students cope with bullying, Valles (2007) attempted to capture the experiences of academically successful high school victims of bullying and to investigate the coping methods used by them, with the intent of helping other victims of school bullying. Throughout the study, students were given an opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings and perceptions about their experiences. Despite their encounters with bullying, the students interviewed minimize the impact of bullying describing the school environment was positive and did not identify issues of race, gender or sexuality in relationship to bullying.

When racial and/or sexual identities are the focus of the study, the impact of bullying behavior significantly increases. Wyatt (1990) argues that the reactions of ethnic minority children who experience multiple forms of victimization, can parallel the dynamics of child sexual abuse. D'Augelli (1998) focused on the developmental implications of victimization experiences upon SGL youths. Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, and Reid (1996) highlight the fear being ridiculed by others for being gay or bisexual appeared to be the most stressful issue for the African American and Hispanic SGL students they interviewed. According to Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995), 48% of SGL youths of color reported experiencing one form of victimization, 33% experienced two or more forms of victimization, and 56% of the SGL youths experienced more than one incident of verbal assault. An Ghalil (2000) recognizes the impact of students' environment on their sense of security citing the major problem in the schooling of African American SGL students is not their sexuality, but the phenomena of homophobia, heterosexism, and racism that pervasively circumscribe their social world. The increased

risks and unique challenges for African American SGL students calls for further research on the intersections of racial and sexual identities in relationship to bullying and a comprehensive analysis of the culture of schools.

**School climate.** Despite the review of literature highlighting the negative impacts of social stratification and bullying in schools presented herein, much of the current literature on school culture and climate remains silent on issues of marginalized group identity. Acknowledging this gap in the literature, Kumashiro (2000) calls for examining “not only how some groups and identities are Othered, that is, marginalized, denigrated, violated in society, but also how some groups are favored, normalized, privileged, as well as how this dual process is legitimized and maintained by social structures and competing ideologies [in schools]” (pp. 35-36). To do so, is to investigate the overall climate and culture of schools. School climate is typically defined as the values, beliefs and traditions of a school which include the rituals, unspoken rules and expectations of stakeholders (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). School norms do not exist independently; rather, they reflect the values and beliefs of stakeholders (Engels et al., 2008). Smith and Engelsen (2013) cite the culture of a school as a vital part of the success of school. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, there are slight differences between school culture and school climate. While the culture of a school is shaped by the values, beliefs and norms, the climate of the school is determined by the quality of school life. Cohen et al. (2009) defines a school’s climate by the quality of school life:

School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. A sustainable, positive school climate

fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182).

Like the research on identity, school climate looks at the experiences of individuals while also engaging the phenomenon of group experiences. The result of this group-determined notion of school climate is a perception of school that is colored by the experiences of the majority (Cohen et al., 2009; Freiberg, 1999). School climate is determined by four major aspects of school life: safety, teaching and learning, relationships and environmental/structural (Cohen et al., 2009). Two of the four domains (safety and relationships) are closely related to the current study. Safety refers to physical and social-emotional well-being. Relationships refer to adult-adult relationships, adult-student relationships and student-student relationships (Cohen et al., 2009). The perception of safety and the nature of the relationships within schools join as parts of a web of significance that defines a school's climate (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

School climate can be a major factor in any form of school violence, as was suggested by Aronson in *Nobody Left to Hate: Teaching Compassion After Columbine* (2000). Aronson stated, "It is reasonably clear that a major root cause of the recent school shootings is a school atmosphere that ignores, or implicitly condones, the taunting, rejection, and verbal abuse to which a great many students are subjected" (p. 70).

McFarland & Dupuis (2001) highlight the inconsistencies in teacher discipline—while they often punish students for making racist remarks, they seldom address students who make homophobic remarks. According to Williams (2008), "[it] is the tolerating and/or ignoring of this type of behavior, and any behavior that belittles a person, that must not

take place in schools that are truly safe environments where students are respected and accepted for who they are as individuals” (Williams, 2008, p. 25).

Although research on school climate and its effect on student learning began over 100 years ago (Cohen et al., 2009), its salience has been resurrected in the current educational milieu characterized by pressure to raise student achievement and create bully-free environments. Researchers have investigated the relationships between positive school climate and attendance (Purkey & Smith, 1983); climate and adolescent health and academic achievement (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Shochet, Dadds, Ham & Montague, 2006), and climate and student motivation (Eccles et al., 1993; Goodenow & Crady, 1997). These findings highlight climate as a vital component of school success and provide a salient backdrop to the research on principals’ responsibility shape the culture and climate of a school (Smith & Engelsen, 2013). Hallinger and Heck’s (1996) research review from 1980—1995 cite the significance of principals in influencing school climate and because school climate either promotes or hinders students’ academic achievement (Cohen et al., 2009), it is understandably why school leaders are expected to attend to “this powerful, pervasive, and notoriously elusive force” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 2).

Given the ephemeral nature of a school’s ethos, principals’ charge to identify and positively influence the climate of a school is a tall order. Principals’ ability to assess the climate is vital to gauge and understand the diverse needs of the school. The process of assessing school climate is varied and multi-faceted yet Clayton and Johnson (2013) posit principals should focus on the aspects of school climate that will create the most impact

on improving student achievement. This top-down approach to assessing school climate potentially privileges the majority over the minority and risks viewing the perceptions of school climate held by dominant groups as normative (Kumashiro, 2000). Not all principals identify as transformative leaders who “are willing to engage in critical self-reflection as well as to critically interrogate institutions, such as schools, in order to uncover as well as construct strategies to combat the rituals and forms of institutionalized oppressions these organizations perpetuate” (Marshall & Oliva, 2006, p. 20). Without critical inquiry, principals’ climate assessments may fall short of investigating the experiences of marginalized individuals and/or groups of students. Although research supports the notion that positive school climate “promotes student learning, academic achievement, school success, and healthy development, as well as effective risk prevention, positive youth development efforts, and increased teacher retention” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 187), several studies highlight significant differences in school climate perceptions both within schools and between schools (Koth, Bradshaw & Leaf, 2008). Students’ race (Battistich et al., 1995; Griffith, 2000; Kuperminc et al., 2001, 1997) and gender (Battistich et al., 1995; Griffith, 1999, 2000; Kuperminc et al., 1997) significantly impact their perceptions of school climate. Given the research identifying differences between students’ and adults’ perceptions of school climate (Mitchell, Bradshaw & Leaf, 2010), the need to capture students’ views is essential.

### **Summary**

Students who belong to multiple marginalized identity groups are faced with multiple challenges. Their identities put them at risk of unhealthy self-perceptions based

on an inherent desire to assimilate to dominant group norms, demeaning treatment from dominant groups who create and police the rules that promote social hierarchies, and demoralizing treatment from marginalized peers that should exchange slander for solidarity. Most importantly, they are at risk of suffering in silence as they negotiate the slipperiness of trying to “box-in identities and the difficulty with managing competing and conflicting identities” (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011, p. 841). It is clear from review of literature presented herein that the identities students claim impact their individual and social lives. It is also evident that while research recognizes how the stratification that exists in the larger society plays a significant role in how students manage their identities in schools, researchers have not adequately investigated the complexities of identity gaps when individuals are multi-marginalized (Cox et al., 2010). Despite the role played by outside entities in creating an oppressive culture in education, school leaders are charged with balancing society’s pressure to increase achievement with creating a school climate that supports student learning. Creating a positive school climate begins with an analysis and assessment of the climate that privileges marginalized voices and eschews reifying social hierarchies by perceiving dominant group perceptions as the norm. Thus, principals must give voice to the stories of multi-marginalized students that are socially homeless.

The intent of this literature review has been to highlight gaps and/or biases in existing knowledge and inquiry of the risks associated with individual and group identities of adolescents and the necessity of school leaders to intervene, thus providing a rationale for a grounded theory study (Creswell, 1998). As a result, the information

presented herein has been categorized and reviewed to provide a basis for conducting a study designed to generate new theory about social homelessness in schools as defined through the lived experiences of multi-marginalized individuals.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

Relationships impact students' ability to learn and experience success in schools. To provide students with optimal learning environments, school leaders must engage in practices that reduce and ultimately eliminate bullying in schools. To effectively accomplish this goal, school leaders must create climates that debunk the marginalization of students based on their racial and sexual identity. Creating this safe and supportive school environment requires a deep understanding of how students' identity impacts the nature of their peer relationships. More specifically, uncovering the stories of multi-marginalized students regarding their experiences in k-12 educational spaces can provide practitioners, particularly school principals, with substantive theory around multi-marginalized identity. My hope is that this theory, grounded in the research collected in this study, will provide school principals with new ways of engaging in critical discourse on debunking hegemonies in schools and creating bully-free environments.

The findings generated by the review of literature reveal that although there is a great deal of theoretical and empirical research on identity and bullying in schools, there has been little research that engages in an intersectional approach to understanding bifurcated identities in educational settings. Further, although there are global theoretical frameworks that help to make sense of racial identity, sexual identity, and their intersections, no substantive theory has been developed to be used heuristically by school

principals in their construction of socially just and bully-free school environments. The purpose of this study is to uncover the stories of African American SGL males that relate to their past k-12 experiences of identity negotiations and generate substantive theory around multi-marginalization and identity negotiation. My research is guided by two broad questions.

1. How do African American students who identify as SGL males negotiate their multi-marginalized identities in educational spaces?
2. What impact—if any—does their identity negotiation have on the relationships they build with other students, particularly students who belong to only one of their marginalized identity groups?

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my methodology, describe my research methods, explain how I will ensure trustworthiness, and discuss my positionality, subjectivity and ethical considerations.

### **Overview of Methodology**

Because I am interested in the stories of my participants, a qualitative approach seemed appropriate and necessary. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in how participants interpret their experiences. Through this study, I want to uncover my participants' stories of intersectionality that are related to their marginalized identities and learn about their experiences of feeling at home with either marginalized identity group. In determining the most appropriate type of qualitative study to pursue, I considered who I am as a researcher and chose an approach that best aligns with these ideals and the intended outcomes of my study. I believe that our life

experiences and our ways of knowing the world around us are situated within an historical reality that does not begin with our initial reactions to outside stimuli; rather, our own actions within our world are shaped by our historical views.

As a researcher, I subscribe to the critical/feminist paradigm described by Hatch (2002). The ontology of my research approach grows from the understanding that race, gender, and class shape the realities of an individual's relationship to the world around him/her and that the above signifiers play significant roles in determining an individual's cultural capital. As a critical theorist, my epistemology provides me with the space to politicize my research by critiquing the "truths" that often have been widely accepted and problematizing the political influences that perpetuate the castes designed to subjugate groups based on race, gender and/or class. My allegiance to both theory and praxis situates me squarely in Fine's (1994) definition of activist research: "Some researchers fix themselves self-consciously as participatory activists. Their work seeks to unearth, disrupt, and transform existing ideological and/or institutional arrangements" (p. 17). Viewing myself as a researcher/practitioner leads me to ask critical questions that will create conversations within the halls of academia while also providing next steps for educators in public schools. In this section, I will explain why I selected grounded theory methodology and provide my rationale for employing a constructivist approach to grounded theory.

**Grounded theory.** Based on my self-reflection as a researcher and practitioner and the aim of my study to provide school leaders with a heuristic lens or theory that emerges from the data, I chose grounded theory as my approach. Glesne (2005) describes

the usefulness of grounded theory highlighting its ability to provide an “understanding of direct lived experience instead of abstract generalizations” (p. 27). I chose grounded theory over other qualitative methodologies because of its explicit purpose in generating a “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process, informed by the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Although there are critical theories that address race, sexuality, and racial and sexual identity development that already exist, they fall short of addressing the simultaneity and complexity of negotiating multiple marginalized identities (Carastathis, 2014). The emergence of intersectionality from African American feminist research responds to the theoretical demands of reading African American identity and female identity categories simultaneously (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Carastathis, 2014; Collins, 2000), but its practical application in the construction of socially just schools is missing from the research. In light of my intent to generate a substantive, working theory that would provide practitioners with tools to address the social hegemonies that foster bullying in schools, I believed grounded theory is the best approach. Because theories resulting from grounded theory studies are grounded in data, they can offer insight, understanding, and practical guidance. Further, grounded theory’s focus on process, structure, and context make it particularly appropriate for exploring socially constructed phenomena such as identity development (Charmaz, 2000).

Grounded theory methodology was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later enhanced by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Its focus is to build substantive theory that has a specificity and usefulness to practice over theories—like CRT and

intersectionality—that are more globally focused (Merriam, 2009). Grounded theory is based on the following assumptions:

1. The need to get out into the field to discover what is really going on (i.e., to gain firsthand information taken from its source).
2. The relevance of theory, grounded in data, to the development of a discipline and as a basis for social action.
3. The complexity and variability of phenomena and of human action.
4. The belief that persons are actors who take an active role in responding to problematic situations.
5. The realization that persons act on the basis of meaning.
6. The understanding that meaning is defined through interaction.
7. A sensitivity to the evolving and unfolding nature of events (process).
8. An awareness of the interrelationships among condition (structure), action (process), and consequences. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 9-10)

Strauss and Corbin (1990) note the relationship between the new theory the data: “A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (p. 23).

The theory I generate from my study will be tied directly to the data that is collected from my participants.

**Constructivist grounded theory.** Since the introduction of grounded theory in 1967, several permutations have evolved over time (MacDonald, 2001; MacDonald &

Schreiber, 2001). I chose grounded theory not only because of its theoretical end product, but also because of its appropriateness given my critical constructivist epistemological paradigm (Charmaz, 2006).

According to McCann and Clark (2003), the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs often guide their methodological choices. Traditional grounded theory requires the researcher to enter the field of inquiry with as few predetermined thoughts as possible, so they will "remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypotheses and biases" (Glaser 1978, p. 3). Constructivist grounded theory, however, reshapes the interactions between the researcher and the participants and brings the researcher to the foreground as the author. In other words, using constructivist grounded theory as my chosen methodology does not require me to attempt to be objective in my data collection or analysis. Instead, I will seek to clarify and problematize my assumptions about the collection and analysis of data and make those assumptions clear to my readers (Charmaz, 2005). As I employ constructivist grounded theory methodology, I will engage in reflexive practices—recording my thoughts about the data I collect in my field reflections—and not only state my assumptions and perspectives upfront, but I will also intentionally seek data that will contradict those assumptions and perspectives to foster theory development. Glesne (2005) notes how field reflections or analytic notes are a type of data analysis that is conducted throughout the research process, and help researchers develop further questions, understand patterns and capture researcher assumptions about the data.

## **Research Methods**

Although using the constructivist approach provides more flexibility in the ways I interact with the research during the data collection process (Charmaz, 2006), my use of grounded theory methodology requires me to collect data from individuals who identify as multi-marginalized. To generate substantive theory, Creswell (1998) cites interview data as the primary source of data for grounded theorists. By collecting data through multiple interviews, researchers conducting grounded theory studies seek to develop substantive theory that is useful in everyday practice. In this section, I will discuss the specific methodological procedures related to grounded theory studies. This discussion will provide rationale for the sampling procedures I used to select research participants, explain the methods I used for collecting data, and describe the data analysis that I employed in my research, which is consistent with grounded theory methods.

**Research participants.** A variety of sampling procedures are available for qualitative research. Often, it is best to select sampling methods that allow for the identification of a group of individuals with diverse experiences (Patton, 2002). Other times, it is advantageous to employ a sampling strategy that involves choosing participants who are information rich because they are “unusual or special in some way, such as outstanding successes or notable failures” (p. 231). Creswell (1998) recognizes the importance of choosing the correct sampling strategy and suggests examining several strategies. For a phenomenological study or grounded theory study, Creswell suggests a narrow range of sampling strategies. In a phenomenological study, criterion sampling is a salient approach: “‘Criterion’ sampling works well when all individuals studied

represent people who have experienced the phenomenon. All individuals meet this criterion” (p. 118). Similarly, in a grounded theory study, the researcher chooses individuals who meet specific criteria and have the ability to contribute to an evolving theory. After initially collecting and coding data, the researcher returns to the field to collect additional data related to the initial themes that emerge. Creswell refers to this approach as theoretical sampling, which means that the researcher collects data from information rich participants who can contribute to the evolving theory.

To uncover stories of identity negotiation within k-12 educational settings and generate substantive theory around multi-marginalized identity, I recruited adult (over 18-years of age) participants who identify as African American SGL males and invited them to reflect on their educational experiences. I considered interviewing African American SGL students that are enrolled in k-12 settings, but I was concerned that students who are currently living in the context of bullying and violence would not be honest in their responses because they feared their answers would be used against themselves or others (Coggeshall & Kingery, 2001). While choosing to work with adult participants decreased the risks of the study, it raised concerns about the participants’ ability to accurately remember events from childhood (Schafer, et. al, 2004). Brewin, Andrews and Gotlib’s (1993) study of the reliability of autobiographical reporting helped to ease my concerns. They found that most adults are reasonably accurate and stable in their recollections of childhood, especially when they recall highly salient and emotionally charged events.

Although there are no firm guidelines for the number of participants in qualitative research, I chose to select a sample size appropriate to the research questions and the methodology (Patton, 2002). Because of the theoretical sampling strategy in grounded theory, I recruited a small initial sample (Patton, 2002) of five participants and continued seeking participants until data emerging from the participants reached saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and no new concepts or categories emerged from the data. Edwards (2007) justifies targeting 10 participants by reviewing other grounded theory studies related to identity:

Based on other similar grounded theory studies on women's multiple identities (10 participants) (Jones & McEwen, 2000), gay identity development in the college environment (11 participants) (Stevens, 2004), wisdom development (10 participants) (Brown, 2004), self-style of college students with learning disabilities (9 participants) (Troiano, 2003), and leadership identity development (13 participants) (Komives et al., 2005) it was anticipated that approximately 10 participants would participate in the study. (p. 71).

Following this approach as a guide, I expected to have 10 individuals participate in the individual interviews but later chose to increase the number of participants to 14 to ensure I had rich data for my analysis.

Through my personal and professional contacts with members of LGBT organizations in the area, I solicited participant referrals that meet the four criteria—African American, SGL, adult, and male. I also asked participants to refer others who meet the criteria. Creswell (1998) discusses the need for carefully selecting participants: “An important step in the process is to find people or places to study and to gain access and establish rapport so that participants will provide good data” (p. 110). I believe this

approach of recruiting participants through personal contacts will assist in establishing rapport at the early stages of the data collection process.

Throughout the data collection process, I expected my participants to share stories that critique their k-12 institutions. Glesne (2005) recognizes that ties to an institution or agency may impact what data gets collected and reported. To avoid this potential issue of withholding experiences that may potentially paint the participants' schools in a negative light, I collected data from adult participants and asked about their experiences prior to their graduation from or completion of high school. By choosing adult participants who are 18-years-old or older, I hoped to alleviate concerns about revealing information about their school contexts. Further, because there is temporal distance between the participant and their k-12 educational experiences, I believed there will be no possible ramifications from their school community.

**Data collection.** To uncover the stories of my multi-marginalized participants, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews of each participant. During the interview, I asked my participants to reflect on their multi-marginalized identity negotiations during their k-12 educational settings. Although, as Glesne (2005) points out, additional questions emerged during the course of the interviews, below is a collection of the prepared questions or topics and a brief rationale for why I chose it as an area of focus.

*Tell me about yourself. Why did you agree to participate in this study?* By beginning with a relatively a simple question, my goal was to establish a level of trust that will allow the respondent to be open and expansive as the interview continues. Also,

this question allows the participant to talk about the identities that are the focus of the study—African American and SGL and provides me with a sense of how comfortable he is with his identities.

*I want you to go back to a time in your personal life that you may not think much about very often. Let's talk about your k-12 educational experiences. What was school like for you? Suppose I was walking the halls with you at school, what would I see and what would be going on?* Through these questions, I hoped to capture a portrait of the participant's schooling experience, which includes information about the demographics of the students and staff, the school's culture and how they position themselves within the context of the school. For example, their description of their school could locate them as a central figure in the school or as an onlooker on the periphery. I believed that this would be important information when they reflected on how they related to others later in the interview.

*Tell me some significant stories that capture your k-12 experiences. What significant people, places, or events (good or bad) were critical in shaping your experiences? In what ways, if any, did your identity as an African American same-gender-loving male play a role in these stories?* My aim in uncovering these stories of identity was to better understand the experiences of multi-marginalized students, particularly those whose bifurcated identities can make identity negotiation difficult.

*Tell me about how you related to, connected with, or engaged with others and when you felt most at home. Did you ever feel disconnected from others based on your identity as an African American same-gender-loving male? Have you ever felt that it was*

*necessary to focus more on one identity over another in order to fit in with others? What was that like? How did you connect with other African American students? How did you connect with other same-gender-loving students? Did you experience conflicts because of your identities? How did you manage them?* During this portion of the interviews, I was interested in finding out if there were spaces where the participants experienced solidarity, comfort and familiarity of home within their marginalized identity group as well as their whether or not they experienced the isolation and alienation of social homelessness within schools.

**Data analysis.** Because I am conducting a grounded theory study, I used the constant comparative method in which data analysis informs future data collection until a theory emerges and saturation is reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this initial data collection process, I intentionally kept my research design flexible and stayed open to following the direction the data led to account for emerging themes and patterns as the inquiry evolved (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Consistent with grounded theory methodology, I conducted my research using a constant comparative approach in which the data collection and analysis happened simultaneously, constantly being compared and influencing the next round of data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

All individual interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed. The questions, recording equipment, and protocol were tested during a pilot interview with my peer reviewer—a colleague whose research interests include identity and Black masculinity. To capture non-verbal communication, my thoughts, and my observations (field reflections) during the data collection process, I took notes during the interviews. All

collected data, including my field reflections were analyzed and coded. Strauss and Corbin (1998) outlined the goals for data analysis in grounded theory.

1. Build rather than test theory.
2. Provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data.
3. Help the analysts to consider alternative meanings of phenomena.
4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously.
5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of the theory. (p. 13)

Because I am using a constructivist approach to grounded theory, I implemented a flexible coding process (Charmaz, 2006). Although a rigid adherence to the coding procedures outlined in grounded theory methodology may be appropriate for a more objectivist approach that claims to “discover” the phenomena in the data (Charmaz, 2002), its application in my study was contrary to my aim of inductively deriving theory (Edward, 2007). By using a constructivist approach to generating substantive theory, I am acknowledging that I, as the researcher, am defining what is happening through shared interpretations with the participants (Charmaz, 2002, p. 684).

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Glesne (2005), researchers should consider trustworthiness during the design of the research as well as during the process of collecting data. Spending time in the field with participants, triangulating the data by examining it from different perspectives or through multiple interviews, and remaining alert to bias through researcher reflexivity are strategies used to address trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba

(1985) highlight four criteria through which trustworthiness can be evaluated: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Creswell (1998) describes eight verification procedures used by qualitative researchers to ensure trustworthiness and recommends that researchers engage in at least two of them in any given study. In this section, I highlight the two ways I ensured trustworthiness in my study—member checks and peer review.

**Member checks.** According to Glesne (2005), sharing interview transcripts and drafts of the final report with participants contributes to the trustworthiness of the study. Because I am using grounded theory as my methodology, I naturally solicited my participants' opinions of the credibility of the findings as I analyzed the data and framed the substantive theory. As part of my research design, I provided research participants with data, analyses, interpretations and conclusions during follow-up conversations and solicited critical observations and interpretations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) cite member checking as “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Because I am using a constructivist approach to grounded theory, there is an underlying assumption that the interaction between me and the participants are producing the data together (Mills, et al., 2006). Therefore, I believed it was essential to engage my participants in member check to ensure I was accurately capturing their stories in a way that is representative of our co-construction of the data.

**Peer review.** Creswell (1998) describes a peer reviewer as an external checker who “keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations” (p. 202). He also notes that the peer reviewer may provide “the

researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researchers feelings” (p. 202). To ensure trustworthiness, I shared the data I collected during interviews, my field reflections, and the categories that emerged during the data analysis process with a colleague whose research interests include identity and Black masculinity. During the data collection and analysis process, I met twice a month with my peer reviewer for peer debriefing sessions and to record salient points of our discussion in my field reflections.

### **Positionality, Subjectivity and Ethics**

Because I understand that the role of a qualitative researcher is empathetic and understanding rather than objective and disconnected as in quantitative research, I make no attempt to bracket myself out of the research. Many qualitative researchers write themselves into research by discussing the ways in which they relate to the problem or to the participants. These experiences contribute to biases and assumptions that impact researchers. In their discussion of constructivist grounded theory, Mills, et al. (2006) highlight how closely connected some qualitative researchers are with their research, describing them as a “part of the research endeavor rather than objective observers” (p. 2). Further, they recognize the need for researchers’ connections to be acknowledged by themselves and by their readers.

My personal interest in this topic is the result of informal conversations with students and reflecting on my own experiences in school. There is a need for a new way of discussing bullying that looks deeper than the behavior of the bully and questions why our schools’ culture is structured in ways that reify oppressive behaviors. I believe

exploring identity can provide a different framework to discuss the nature of these relationships. As a public school principal and former teacher, I am well aware of how the identities of a student have a significant impact on their capacity to be successful in school. It is important to note that I do not equate success in school with high test scores or college admission; rather, success in school is measure by the level of individual growth a student makes on his or her journey towards becoming a lover of learning. Like many other lessons taught in school, my view of success is not usually taught explicitly. Through informal conversations with students and by reflecting on my own experiences in school, I am constantly reminded of the hidden curriculum in schools (Vallance, 1973) that underwrite social injustices. Couched in the day to day lessons, homework and assessments are the intangibles of the social identity that, though unnamed, play a significant role in our students' lives by promoting a fixed understanding of identity and a hierarchal approach to social groups. As a result, I have chosen to study the ways in which individuals identify themselves and how those identities shape their social realities. In this section, I will describe my positionality, discuss my subjectivity in relationship to this study and describe how I intend to make ethical decisions during my project.

**My positionality.** I am gray. Lincoln (2010) emphasizes the need to “let go of our lingering posture of color blindness and resensitize ourselves to difference and most importantly, to self-named and self-claimed difference” (p. 5). In reflecting on my positionality, I have been forced to name the identities that cause me to live in gray areas. Although I am many persons, I have not been able to name one identity that feels most comfortable. I am African American, but not always in the traditional sense of what that

means to others. In my speech, I was told I talked white, until I was an adult and then I was told I was articulate. My dress is usually “country club” rather than “night club”. I am male, but not always in the traditional sense of what that means to others. Because I identified as a single parent for a number of years, I find that it is important for me to be both mother and father; nurturer and disciplinarian and I do not subscribe to traditional gender roles. I am middle class (now) and grew up middle class, but I have experienced what it feels like to live from one check to another and I know what it is like to not feel safe in my own neighborhood. I am in a committed and monogamous relationship with a woman but I do not identify as straight. Although I was married with children, I have been in loving same-sex relationships. After 30+ years of grappling with naming my sexuality, I have finally become comfortable with naming what I’m not.

Although it is often perplexing to me and those around me, the grayness of my identity is the reason I view the world as both an insider and an outsider. Having identities that represent majority groups has not shielded me from the stress of negotiating life as an oppressed person. Just as hybridity “signaled the demise of the ‘great white race,’” those who share my grayness often stand in opposition to dominant groups of which they are members (Bettez, 2008, p. 218). The emotional fatigue that is the result of my struggles through life with unjust systems has caused me to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and those who identify as multi-marginalized. As a practitioner, I have adopted a social justice ideology. To *view* society under the influence of a social justice ideology is to recognize: that oppression exists and is rampant in our class based society; that the culture, histories, characteristics and goals of white middle-

class males are seen in our society as normative and; that the liberation of the oppressed is necessary for both the oppressed and the oppressor to live into their full humanity. To *act* in society under the influence of social justice is to acknowledge: that it is my responsibility to lead people to be agents in their own liberation; that without intentional strides towards changing the ways in which people interact and debunking the systems of injustice, I am reifying the oppression and; that my actions should reflect my efforts to reclaim the dignity and humanity of those in our society that have been left voiceless. Because of my adoption of Shapiro and Stevkovich's (2005) ethic of critique, my leadership approach begins in critical theory and ends in social activism. As a principal with an ethic of critique, the school building is simultaneously my research project; a society in which justice and equality are needed; a Petri dish in which critical theories are born and practiced; and a pulpit from which sermons on high achievement and the love of learning can be preached.

I am a critical theorist. I believe that our life experiences and our ways of knowing the world around us are situated within an historical reality that does not begin with our initial reactions to outside stimuli; rather, our own actions within our world are shaped by our historical views. As a researcher, I subscribe to the critical/feminist paradigm described by Hatch (2002). The ontology of my research approach grows from the understanding that race, gender and class shape the realities of an individual's relationship to the world around them and that the above signifiers play significant roles in determining an individual's cultural capital. As a critical theorist, my epistemology provides me with the space to politicize my research by critiquing the "truths" that often

have been widely accepted and problematizing the political influences that perpetuate the castes designed to subjugate groups based on race, gender and/or class. My allegiance to both theory and praxis situates me squarely in Fine's (1994) definition of activist research: "Some researchers fix themselves self-consciously as participatory activists. Their work seeks to unearth, disrupt, and transform existing ideological and/or institutional arrangements" (p. 17). Viewing myself as a researcher/practitioner leads me to ask critical questions that will create conversations within the halls of academia while also providing next steps for educators in public schools.

**Subjectivity.** I am connected to my research. Glesne (2005) stresses the importance of qualitative researchers' attention to subjectivity and encourages researchers to identify the parallels between the study and the researchers' lives: "Some hint of which subjectivities might be called into play during your research can be foreshadowed by reflecting on how your research is autobiographical" (p. 120). Situating myself in the critical theorist paradigm has been a process that I have grown into not as an intentional practice but as a reactionary means of survival. The use of the word "survival" calls attention to how the way an individual thinks and processes their ability to live freely without experiencing a social, mental, emotional or even physical death are closely tied. My shift from thoughtlessness to thoughtfulness or from careless disregard to critical reflection happened in an instant. The moment just after "coming out" and celebrating my commitment to authenticity, two truths became abundantly clear: 1) The privilege enjoyed from socially locating myself as a heterosexual man would never be authentically embraced again. As a result, my perspective of the world, the ways we

interact and the importance of a social ethic that includes everyone was no longer just an existential notion but a reality that would affect my daily life. 2) My world view prior to my first breath of self liberation was skewed and myopic because to see actual truth around me would have incited me to recognize actual truth within me. The inability to readily see *and* name the systemic injustice around me that was not directly tied to racism was not due to my lack of understanding; rather it was an unconscious and sometimes conscious resistance to see myself outside of the dominant culture.

While the purpose of this paper is not to write an autoethnography, my subjectivity is related to the similarities between how my participants and I see ourselves interacting with the world. Since my choosing an authentic life resulted in the death of my former self and my introduction to social homelessness, the aim of my research is to call attention to the need to move from compartmentalized identity to a fluid understanding of the self and others. Schools have the opportunity to play a significant role in the above endeavor by exposing the hidden curriculum.

A pervasive hidden curriculum has been discovered in operation. The functions of this hidden curriculum have been variously identified as the inculcation of values, political socialization, training in obedience and docility, the perpetuation of traditional class structure—functions that may be characterized generally as social control (Vallance, 1973, p. 5).

By discussing self and group identity with participants and asking them to reflect on their experiences in high school and observing the ways in which people group themselves in a public setting, I hope to walk away from this current project with a clearer sense of how

to use my sphere of influence as a principal to improve the learning environment for my students.

**Ethics.** During the entire process of collecting and analyzing data, I will maintain appropriate ethical research standards. Prior to beginning each interview and focus group, I will assure my participants that I will maintain confidentiality and inform participants of the relevant risks and benefits of the study. To increase participants' willingness to participate honestly, participant confidentiality will be maintained using a pseudonym in all published research materials, including this dissertation as well as during peer debriefing sessions.

According to Jones, Torres and Arminio (2006), unanticipated ethical concerns about participants revealing themselves during the research process is not uncommon in qualitative research. To reduce the likeliness of ethical concerns arising, I will engage in reflexive practices that promote ongoing analysis of my relationship with my participants. Given that my research critiques the hegemonies both in schools and in the larger society, I will be conscious of potential imbalances in the relationships between my participants and me based on my age, since I am at least 15 years older than my participants; based on their assumptions regarding my sexuality, since I am married with children and wear a wedding ring; based on their assumptions about my socioeconomic status, or my profession as a middle school principal.

### **Summary**

Understanding the lived experiences of students is an ambitious endeavor that requires authentic listening. This type of research does not lend itself to a quantitative

approach requiring clinical exactitude and statistical precision. If I had approached my research topic from a quantitative perspective, I would not be able to appreciate the nuances in the identity experiences of my participants. When describing quantitative studies I conducted as music education researcher, I use terms like “clean” and “exact”. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is anything but clean. By choosing the “messiness” of qualitative research over the “cleanliness” of quantitative research, I hope to uncover the stories of African American students who are SGL males related to their k-12 education and gain a better understanding of their lived experiences. My focus on the intersections of race (African American) and sexuality (SGL) is intentionally narrow. I considered expanding my focus to include other multi-marginalized participants but I prioritized depth—gaining a deep, rich understanding of the intersections of Blackness and gayness—over breadth—gaining a wide, surface level understanding of many different intersections of marginalized identity. Further, my aim is to generate a theory that is extracted from the data that will be used as a heuristic by school leaders.

Any significant effort to change the culture of schools and establish a bully-free learning environment is simultaneously exciting and daunting. To make the world more caring and just by reconstructing schools into democratic centers of inquiry that debunk the hierarchal tropes that exist in society may be viewed as a radical step. However, I believe continued increase in the reports of bullying in schools, the introduction of the term “bullycide” into our periscope to refer to students who commit suicide because of bullying, and the absence of large-scale shift from traditionally hegemonic school climates is evidence that the current ways in which we educate children is in need of

change. On its best day, a modern approach to education will not be able to debunk the societal injustices that have been deemed as normative. Rather, because it is so neatly positioned in White paternalistic norms, schools reify the oppression faced by students each day. My hope is that this study will provide school leaders with a unique lens or heuristic theory that will be useful in understanding the lived experiences of multi-marginalized identities and assist them as they construct socially just schools.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE PARTICIPANTS**  
**WHO IDENTIFY AS SAME-GENDER-LOVING**

As a reminder, the purpose of this qualitative study is to uncover the k-12 stories of African American SGL males and learn about how they negotiated their marginalized identities within the context of schools. To achieve this goal, I interviewed 14 participants who identified as African American and SGL. Although all of the participants currently live in North Carolina, several attended schools outside of North Carolina during their k-12 years. Beyond the three qualifying characteristics for participation in the study (18-years-old and above, African American and SGL), there was great variety among the sample. Represented in the sample were public schools, private schools, neighborhood schools, magnet schools and two boarding schools. Participants' socioeconomic statuses during childhood ranged from economically disadvantaged to affluent and the size of families ranged from zero siblings to 13 siblings. Although all 14 participants are sexually attracted to males, they identified their sexuality in four different ways: five identified as gay, five identified as SGL, three identified as bisexual and one did not identify his sexuality. The following descriptions are intended to provide mini-portraits of the 14 participants who were interviewed for this study. During the interviews, participants—identified by pseudonyms—reflected on their k-12 experiences and shared stories about the tensions they felt because of their multi-

marginalized identity. Appendix A provides a list of all participants and relevant information related to their age and identity. Each mini-portrait is designed to provide the reader with introductory information about the participants' k-12 experiences, how they identify their sexuality, and the reason(s) they were interested in participating in the study. The participants are grouped by their self-identified sexuality.

### **Gay Participants**

**DeMarcus Privy.** DeMarcus Privy is a 27-year-old African American male from a North Carolina. He began his public school career in a racially and socioeconomically diverse elementary school near his home. Throughout his elementary and middle school years, DeMarcus' parents had significant marital issues that later led to divorce. Seeking a more peaceful environment, DeMarcus went to live with his great grandmother after eighth-grade. Although she lived just one town away from his parents, the racial demographics were very different from DeMarcus' previous experiences. In high school, DeMarcus attended a majority White school known for its athletics. He did well academically but excelled as an athlete leading his track and field team to regional and state level fame.

While DeMarcus now identifies as gay, he was primarily interested in girls throughout his k-12 years and he had two significant girlfriends in high school. DeMarcus discovered his same-sex attraction during his junior year after having a sexual encounter with his male teacher/track coach. Although the initial relationship between DeMarcus and his teacher/coach was solely physical, he began to develop romantic

feelings. During his senior year, DeMarcus continued to date older men and he eventually came out after graduating from high school.

After high school, DeMarcus moved to a nearby city to work and pursue a relationship that eventually ended. Currently, DeMarcus is working in retail but has aspirations of becoming a fireman in his neighboring town. He has been in a committed relationship with Stephen Dawson for the last four years. DeMarcus recognizes some of the challenges he experienced during his k-12 years and hopes that participating in this study will help others.

**Stephen Dawson.** Stephen Dawson is a 30-year-old African American male who was raised in a small, urban North Carolina city. Despite the diverse demographics and wide range of socioeconomic statuses of his hometown, Stephen attended predominately “poor and Black” schools. After his parents divorced during his fourth-grade year, Stephen transferred to a predominately White school just a few miles from where he previously attended. Before he matriculated to middle school in sixth-grade, Stephen and his mother moved back to their original neighborhood, and he was once again surrounded by African American students. During high school, Stephen became very interested in the performing arts. He auditioned and was accepted to a performing arts high school located on the campus of a nearby university.

Stephen identifies himself as gay—a term he has used since coming out during his junior year of high school. Prior to coming out, Stephen exclusively dated girls in middle and high school. After a short stint in college, Stephen and his previous partner exchanged vows in a private ceremony. For the past four years, Stephen has been in a

committed relationship with DeMarcus Privy. The couple has no children but share a significant bond with their elementary age cousins who they are helping to raise.

After high school, Stephen studied theatre in college for a brief period. Although he currently works as an administrative assistant in a medical office, Stephen continues to pursue his passion for performing as a fitness model. Stephen is a life-long learner and is currently studying psychology at his local community college. His motivation for participating in this study was his interest in getting his voice (and others like his) heard and potentially helping others.

**Christian Stapleton.** Christian Stapleton is a 36-year-old attorney who lives in a large, urban city in North Carolina. Christian grew up in a small, Virginia town whose racial demographics were fairly evenly distributed between African Americans and Whites. Growing up, Christian recognized a fairly significant economic gap in his town between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Christian describes his school experience as diverse. The school was divided 50% Black and 50% White and there was a pretty wide range of socioeconomic statuses. He attended public schools from kindergarten throughout 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Christian was a very dedicated student who focused on academic achievement. As a result, he was in upper-level classes surrounded by White students who were from the upper middle-class neighborhoods of his small rural town. Christian’s African-American peers were typically scheduled into lower-level classes. After graduating from high school, Christian attended a small, private university in his hometown. He later completed a joint jurist doctor (JD)/master in theological studies (MTS) from a prestigious southern university.

Christian identifies his sexuality as gay although he is not out to everyone. Throughout middle and high school he had a slight attraction to boys but did not fully understand what it meant. Throughout his k-12 school career, Christian dated girls and he did not recognize his homosexuality until his freshman or sophomore year of college. In his religious home, living as an openly gay male was not an option for Christian. Growing up, his religious upbringing led him to believe that it was possible and necessary to be “delivered” from homosexuality. Although his Christian beliefs are comparatively more liberal today, Christian is still haunted by the struggle to reconcile his religious beliefs with his sexuality.

Currently, Christian works at the Department of Justice in North Carolina. Since completing his graduate studies, he has focused his career on social justice and civil rights. Christian views his participation in this study as a way to promote social justice in schools and to help to equip leaders to handle the unique challenges faced by African American students as they come to terms with their sexuality. He is in a committed relationship with Jonah Curry.

**Jonah Curry.** Jonah Curry is a 25-year-old male who recognizes the uniqueness of his life experiences. He is a first generation African American who was raised by his Nigerian father and was one of two Black students at his k-8 White Catholic school in a North Carolina suburb. Jonah’s family was religious and in addition to daily mass at school, he and his family regularly attended a nearby church on Sundays. His younger sister was the other Black student in his school and he eventually learned to be comfortable as the racial minority in school. In high school, Jonah attended a public

school that was racially and economically diverse. The demographics of his high school represented the small town in which he was raised.

Jonah is gay and currently in a committed relationship with Christian Stapleton. In high school, Jonah had sexual encounters with other male students that he kept a secret until his younger sister walked in on him. After catching him “in the act” Jonah’s sister outed him to their father. As a result, Jonah came out to friends and family and has identified as gay since his sophomore year of high school. He recognized his same-sex attraction early in his childhood and had several “crushes” on boys and girls throughout his elementary and middle school years.

After high school, Jonah attended an arts college before transferring to a state university. Presently, he works for the Democratic Party and is interested in exploring his interest in politics. Jonah’s interest in participating in the study was initially based on the urging of his boyfriend. During the interview, he expressed that he hoped his stories would help other students who faced similar situations.

**Tyrell Chambers.** Tyrell Chambers is an 18-year-old African American male from central North Carolina. Tyrell describes himself as a “military brat” who was born in Germany and lived in Texas, Virginia, and Tennessee before settling in North Carolina. Tyrell recently graduated from high school and is taking a year off before going back to school or joining the Army. He admits that school was a struggle for him and attributes many of his challenges to the constant migration of his family. Throughout his k-12 years, Tyrell attended six schools in four states (Texas, k-2; Virginia, 3-4; Tennessee, 5; and North Carolina, 6-12). Although Tyrell’s family moved between two

school districts while they lived in North Carolina, and he was able to stay with the same group of students throughout his middle school. Despite the wide range of school locations, Tyrell said that all of his schools were very similar. He described them as urban Black schools where the students were focused on things other than academics. He regrets not being more attentive to his studies and feels like his future is limited as a result.

Tyrell is gay and has been open to his family since he came out during his freshman year of high school. He has always been attracted to boys and remembers getting “married” to his male childhood friend during first-grade while playing “house.” Tyrell kept his sexuality secret during middle school and told his North Carolina friends that he had a girlfriend back in Tennessee. To keep up appearances, Tyrell created a fictitious Facebook profile for his imaginary girlfriend and posted loving messages for his friends to see. Concerned about her son, Tyrell’s mother asked him about the fictitious posts as he was transitioning into high school. Their conversation led to a discussion about his sexuality and Tyrell eventually came out.

Tyrell is still trying to “figure this whole sexuality thing out” and believes that participating in the study will teach him things about himself. Knowing that others will read this study, Tyrell hopes that he can help other young people deal with the “double whammy” of being Black and gay and get through the challenges.

### **Same-Gender-Loving (SGL) Participants**

**Dayquan Martin.** Dayquan is a 27-year-old African American who lives in an urban, college town in North Carolina. Dayquan was born and raised in a rural Georgia town. His hometown was approximately 60% White and 40% Black. From first- through third-grades Dayquan attended a predominately White public school. In fourth-grade, he transferred to a fine arts magnet school where he cultivated his love of visual and performing arts throughout middle school. In high school, Dayquan continued to participate in band and drama while also focusing heavily on academics. After graduating from high school at the top of his class, Dayquan attended a prestigious southern university.

Dayquan identifies as a SGL male. Although Dayquan became aware of his same-sex attraction in middle school, he continued dating girls and had a serious girlfriend in high school. There were openly gay students in Dayquan's high school but he was not one of them. His first sexual encounter with a guy was in college when he studied abroad. Since college, he has dated men exclusively.

Dayquan is presently a marketing director at the university he attended as an undergraduate. While he has had a successful career thus far, he is aware of the unique difficulties he encountered as an African American SGL man. He agreed to participate in the study because he hopes to provide others with practical tips that could help them avoid many of his pitfalls. He is currently in a romantic relationship with a White male. Throughout their nine-month relationship, they've had discussions about the challenges associated with being a biracial gay couple.

**Sean Keaton.** Sean Keaton is a 40-year old African American male from Mississippi. The youngest of seven children, Sean was raised on the plantation where his ancestors had worked as slaves. Education was important in Sean's family and after learning that he was a dyslexic, Sean's parents decided to send him to Catholic school to ensure he got the education that he needed. He remained at that school until eighth-grade. Throughout his elementary and middle school years, Sean was the only African American student in his school. In high school, Sean attended a boarding school for boys near his hometown and he was the only African American on campus until 11<sup>th</sup>-grade when another Black student enrolled and the school hired a Black custodian.

Although he knew that there was a "strange feeling" that he felt towards other boys in elementary school, Sean was not fully aware of his sexuality until he developed feelings for another student during ninth-grade. During his sophomore year, Sean and his classmate started having sex and their friendship eventually grew into a romantic relationship. Despite their connection, both boys continued to date girls. During the interview, Sean identified his sexuality as SGL—a term he discovered during our conversation. Prior to his encounter with the term, Sean identified as gay although he continues to have physical and emotional relationships with women.

Sean overcame the learning challenges of his childhood and pursued his passion for singing in college. Throughout his adult life, Sean has worked as a professional stage manager and director. Currently, he is a teacher at an urban middle school in North Carolina where he works with special education students. Through his work as an

educator, Sean hopes to provide his students with the tools he received to overcome his learning challenges.

**Caleb Andrews.** Caleb is a 25-year-old African American male from a moderately urban town in North Carolina. Caleb attended public school during his k-12 career. He began kindergarten at a predominately African American school and later transferred to racially diverse elementary school after it opened during his third-grade year. In sixth-grade he matriculated to his neighborhood middle school whose racial demographics mirrored those of his elementary school. In eighth-grade, Caleb transferred to a predominately White middle school where he was “surrounded by rich kids.” During his freshman and sophomore years, Caleb attended a large high school with over 2000 students; he was one of 50 African American students in his school. He excelled academically in school and took rigorous courses in high school. After high school, Caleb attended a historically Black university in his hometown for two years.

Caleb identifies as SGL but is very closeted. As a k-12 student, Caleb exclusively dated women. During high school, he had a serious girlfriend. He didn’t recognize his same-sex attraction until his freshman year of college when he developed feelings for a close friend. After college, Caleb dated men and women. Presently, he is in a committed relationship with woman.

Caleb currently works in the operations division of a large, urban school district. Although he doesn’t work directly with students, he recognizes the impact he has on students through his work at the district level and is proud of his contribution to the overall mission and vision. Although he is interested in supporting students as they are

enduring their formative years, Caleb's interest in the study was primarily focused on the benefits to him. Caleb agreed to participate in this study because of its potential to help him better understand his sexuality.

**Levi Smart.** Levi Smart is a 36-year-old educator living in an urban area of North Carolina. Levi began school in a military town in North Carolina. His elementary school was ethnically diverse with students from all over the country. A child of educators, Levi's parents instilled in him a love for learning, which translated into academic success. Just before fifth-grade, Levi's father accepted a middle school principal position and his family moved to a rural town in North Carolina. Levi's new school lacked the ethnic diversity of his previous experiences causing him to quickly learn how to succeed in an environment with only Black and White students. Despite the change, he continued to thrive academically and developed into a talented student-athlete. Levi was very social in high school and although he had many White friends, he was closest to four or five African American students who he called his clique. During the periods of school when Levi was teased because of his assumed sexuality, Levi felt insulated from the insults by his clique.

Levi identifies as gay and although he is out to most people, he has not disclosed his sexuality to his father or extended family. Levi became aware of his same-sex attraction when he was eight-years-old and developed a crush on a classmate in fifth-grade. Although Levi worked diligently to conceal his sexuality, as he got older, he found ways to experiment sexually with friends in middle and high. Throughout this period, Levi dated girls and had a serious girlfriend in high school. At the beginning of

his senior year, Levi entered into a sexual relationship with a 30-year-old teacher at his school. Even though Levi and the teacher had no feelings for each other, their affair continued throughout the year. Levi successfully hid his sexuality through high school and he attended a state university with plans to follow his parents' lead and become a teacher.

Throughout his career in education, Levi has worked as a teacher, a school administrator and is now serving at the district level. For years, he has been committed to social justice and improving learning conditions for students. Levi believes that participating in this study will help others to develop ways to better support all students, especially marginalized students who are bullied because of their race or sexuality. Currently, Levi lives in an urban city in central North Carolina and is in a committed relationship.

**Doug Crane.** Doug Crane is a 27-year-old student living in central North Carolina. Shortly after beginning elementary school, Doug was teased for having effeminate mannerisms, which he attributes to growing up in a house with two older sisters. Although Doug attended predominately White schools in rural North Carolina, the students that bullied and teased him were African American. After enduring the heterosexist slurs for a couple of years, Doug became an introvert and avoided building relationships with his peers. As he progressed through school, the bullying increased and progressed from verbal abuse to physical altercations. In an effort to give him tools to defend himself, Doug's father enrolled him in karate during middle school. The teasing stopped once Doug entered high school and he used the musicality he inherited from his

parents in the school choir. Choir was not only a highlight for Doug, it afforded him an opportunity to cruise to the Bahamas for a choir competition where his school won first place. Throughout school, Doug admitted to being an unfocused student, which caused his grades to suffer. After high school, Doug attended community college and later transferred to a North Carolina university in the western part of the state.

Doug knew he was different than other students after beginning elementary school but attributed his differences to gender norms and not to sexuality. In middle school, he unsuccessfully tried to date girls and “admired” several boys in his classes. Doug continued to have secret crushes in high school and finally questioned his sexuality during his junior year. Outside of building nurturing relationships with a school custodian—who happened to be his cousin—and the librarian, Doug did not have close friends throughout school to rely upon as he came to terms with his sexuality. He came out to himself in college and waited six years to share his sexuality with his family. Currently, Doug identifies as gay and lives in an urban city in North Carolina with his husband.

For several years, Doug has worked in a hospital. He is presently taking classes to become a nurse and is interested in making a difference in people’s lives. Doug’s desire to help others combined with the challenges he experienced during school has led him to fight for gay rights. Doug sees his participation in this study as advocacy work and believes it will be a good learning tool for others.

## **Bisexual Participants**

**Ashton Stewart.** Ashton Stewart is a 22-year-old grocery store clerk who was born and raised in an urban North Carolina city. Throughout school, Ashton had a strong interest in science that was sparked at a young age. In elementary school, Ashton's mother entered him in a magnet lottery and he was chosen to attend a science-focused school from kindergarten through the fifth-grade. Although he lived in a predominately Black neighborhood, Ashton's elementary school was racially diverse. After fifth-grade, Ashton moved to a new area and attended a tough middle school known for its academic and social challenges. Students regularly ridiculed Ashton because of his speech impairment and he often responded to their insults with physical violence. By high school, he began to build strong relationships with other students and his interest in popularity overshadowed his academic focus. As a result, Ashton was required to repeat his freshman year and spent the rest of his high school years "playing catch-up" and working to amass the number of credits needed to graduate.

Ashton identifies as bisexual although he also referred to himself as DL (down low) throughout the interview. Throughout school, Ashton dated and had sexual relations with many girls prior to having his first sexual encounter with a boy during his junior of high school. After five years of friendship with two of his neighbors who were stepbrothers, Ashton began having a secret physical relationship with both boys. Since high school, he has continued to date women while having semi-anonymous sex with men.

During the interview, Ashton regretted his behavior towards adult staff and disregard for learning in middle and high school. He was regularly suspended and spent many days isolated from peers in in-school suspension. Ashton plans to use money saved from his part-time clerk position and enroll at his local community college. After successfully completing an associate degree, Ashton would like to continue his studies at a four-year university with a major in nursing. He hopes that participating in the study would help other students make better choices and open up a dialogue about issues of race and sexuality in school.

**Tony Lorenz.** Tony Lorenz is a 20-year-old student from a Philadelphia suburb. He is currently a sophomore at a large, public university in North Carolina majoring in psychology and minoring in African American studies. Tony attended Catholic schools during elementary and high school and public school during his middle school years. Tony's father is African American and his mother is White. Tony's parents divorced shortly after his younger sister was born when he was five-years-old. Their mother raised him and his younger sister alone and Tony did not have a close relationship with his father following the divorce. Although he is biracial and the majority of his family is White, Tony has always identified as African American. Tony grew up in a racially diverse community, although the Catholic schools he attended were predominately White.

Tony identifies as bisexual. As a young child, Tony was keenly aware of his attraction to both boys and girls. During his elementary years, he became aware of the negative ways society views SGL people and he decided to hide his sexuality. Tony had

his first sexual experience with a girl in the spring of his freshman year, and his first sexual experience with a boy one month later. He continued physical relationships with girls and boys until his junior year in high school when he finally fell in love with a male classmate.

Throughout his formative years, Tony has had difficulty negotiating his identity as an African American male. His life experiences sparked his interest in exploring issues of race and studying psychology. Tony wanted to participate in the study as a way to explore issues of race and sexuality from an academic perspective. He hopes that his participation will help others learn from many of the experiences (positive and negative) he had during school.

**Elias Cage.** Elias Cage is a 34-year-old African American male who grew up in a rural town in the northeastern region of North Carolina with “good traditional southern values.” For Elias, school was a great experience where he excelled academically and had positive relationships with his teachers. As a self-proclaimed nerd, Elias struggled to make close connections with classmates during his elementary years and was teased at times. Although his elementary school had a higher percentage of African American students, Elias’ middle and high schools were racially and socioeconomically diverse. In his community, most African American students were from lower income “blue collar” families. Wanting more for her son, Elias’ mother encouraged him to excel academically. Ultimately, his focus on his schoolwork paid off and he attended a HBCU near his home in North Carolina majoring in history.

During the interview, Elias identified himself as bisexual although he does not disclose his sexuality to family or friends. His mother—a very religious woman—raised Elias in a single-parent home where she instilled in him a belief that homosexuality was wrong. Although he had his first same-sex experience in the third-grade, Elias did not consider the idea of being in a same-sex relationship until high school. Despite his feelings, he was not comfortable sharing his interest in boys with others and continued to date girls.

Throughout his k-12 years, Elias privileged his African American identity over his bisexual identity because he believed he would be a bigger help to other Black people. After graduating from college, Elias' desire to support the Black community led him to work for a HBCU in North Carolina where he is responsible for raising scholarship dollars and unrestricted funds. Elias hopes that his participation in the study will help to alleviate concerns of other African American students whose sexuality is “outside of the norm.” He is currently single but open to meeting the right man or woman.

### **Undefined Sexuality Participant**

**Trey Jackson.** Trey Jackson is a 45-year-old African American male who was born and raised in a moderately urban area of North Carolina. He comes from a very large family and he is the 14<sup>th</sup> of 15 children born to his parents. Trey attended public schools during his k-12 career. He began kindergarten at a neighborhood school that was predominately African American, resembling the community in which he lived. After third-grade, Trey transferred to a predominately White school along with several other African American students who were bussed in. After elementary school, Trey

reconnected with peers from his neighborhood and attended his neighborhood middle and high schools. His high school is the one of the historically Black high schools in Trey's hometown with a long list of distinguished alumni, and it boasts a long-standing partnership with a nearby historically Black university. Trey entered high school college-bound with aspirations of attending a four-year university.

Trey first knew he was attracted to boys in junior high school but did not share his feelings with others. He was previously married to a woman and has had significant romantic relationships with men throughout his adult life. Currently, he is married to a woman with no children. Trey does not openly identify as SGL and has never come out or had a romantic relationship with another man that was public. When asked specifically about how he defines his sexuality, Trey responded, "I have never placed a label on it."

After attending a college, Trey began a career in education and is now an administrator at a public middle school. Religion has always played a large role in his life. In addition to his leadership work in school, Trey serves his community as the pastor of a small, but growing church near his suburban home. As an educator and minister, Trey recognizes the potential of this study to help students in schools and church gain a better understanding of the challenges for African American SGL youth.

### **Summary**

Through individual interviews with the participants highlighted above, I sought to uncover the stories of African American SGL males and learn about how they negotiated their marginalized identities in a k-12 setting. While these participants were all a part of the same racial and sexual identity groups (African American and SGL), there was great

diversity among the sample regarding type of school, age, socioeconomic status and family dynamics.

Despite the aforementioned diversity among the participants, there were many similarities among the stories of identity negotiations described during the interviews. Even though participants went to school in different parts of the country across four decades, they experienced similar feelings regarding their racial and sexual identity in school. These similarities, along with all of the information shared during the interviews were analyzed and categorized in order to generate substantive theory around multi-marginalized identity. In the next chapter, I will discuss the results from the study and explain the grounded theory coding process used to analyze the data.

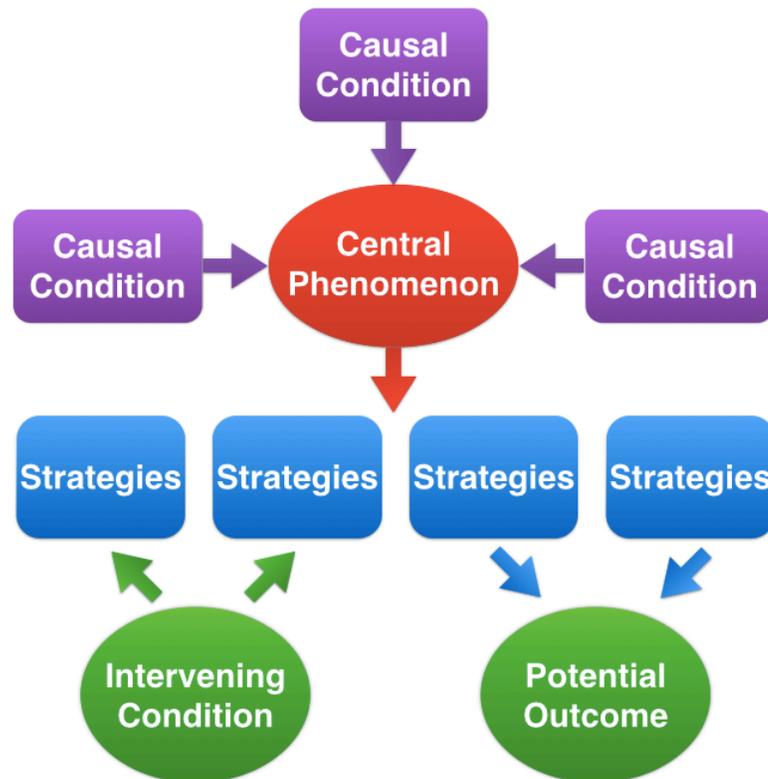
## **CHAPTER V**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to uncover the stories of African American SGL males who relate to their past k-12 experiences of identity negotiations and to generate substantive theory around multi-marginalization and identity negotiation. As I collected and analyzed the data, I maintained a clear focus and remain closely connected to my research questions. I continuously reminded myself that people do not speak in straight lines; therefore, I anticipated coding challenges as I extract meaning from participants' stories and listened for the meaning they draw from their lived experiences. In this chapter, I will organize my results in conjunction with the process for analyzing data in grounded theory research (Creswell, 2007). Figure 1 is a visual representation of the grounded theory coding paradigm I used to analyze the data. This visual representation was designed to represent the reciprocal and reflective nature of the data. While this coding paradigm served to guide the data analysis and presentation of results, it also reflects how each component of the participants' experiences are interconnected. Moreover, this paradigm illustrates the opportunity for intervention in order to generate different outcomes. Results will be presented in terms of this model to keep within the grounded theory tradition of data analysis. In discussing each of the themes, I've included direct quotations to assist in illustrating the emergent theory and

highlighting how I made meaning of the data. As discussed in the methods chapter, each participant was given a pseudonym and quotes are coded under this name.

Figure 1. Grounded Theory Coding Paradigm



At the beginning of the first three sections in this chapter, I will provide an example of open coding in table form to demonstrate the progression from initial codes to themes. During the open coding phase, I formed initial categories of information about my participants' experiences by segmenting the information they shared. During the axial coding phase, I positioned the categories generated in open coding within the theoretical model. I then created a "story" based on the interconnections of these

categories in selective coding (Creswell, 2007). Because I used a constructivist grounded theory approach to my study, I recognize how the data and analysis are co-constructed in the interactions between the participant and me (the researcher) (Charmaz, 2006).

For ease of compiling information, I created a small number of categories, then narrowed them down to the five major themes of the project, as recommended Creswell (2007): central phenomenon, causal conditions that influence the central phenomenon, strategies in response to the phenomenon, the intervening conditions that impact the strategies, and the potential outcome of the intervening conditions. The initial codes presented in this chapter are included to highlight the development of the theory throughout the data analysis process. Some of the codes became subthemes, while others were integrated into different themes.

The grounded theory coding paradigm will be presented through a process in which the central phenomenon (the central category of social homelessness) will be identified. After the central phenomenon is discussed, causal conditions will be explored (categories of conditions that lead to social homelessness in African American SGL men) and strategies used to deal with social homelessness will be indicated. Finally, I will discuss how the intervening condition of adult support impacts the consequences for socially homeless African American SGL men.

### **Central Phenomenon of African American SGL Men**

**Social homelessness.** As previously mentioned, social homelessness is a term used to describe a precarious situation whereby someone who has multiple social identities finds him/herself with no social group s/he can call home. On the surface one

might assume that such a person could choose a social home from several based on their membership in many groups. However upon further investigation, one discovers a nuanced situation whereby it is the membership in particular social groups that prevents membership in any of them. The only exception that would allow such a person to avoid social homelessness is for him/her to mask one or more aspects of him/herself in order to conform to the desirable traits of a particular social group. However, in being true to oneself, social homelessness is inevitable. This conundrum leaves a person with no home to assist in negotiating multiple identities.

As African American SGL males are a part of two marginalized identity groups, they have an increased risk of experiencing social homelessness. This heightened risk is not only because they are a part of more than one marginalized group; rather, it is because of the bifurcated nature of their racial and sexual identities. All 14 of the research participants (100%) experienced difficulties with fitting in and 13 of the 14 participants (92.9%) recall not feeling fully accepted by their racial or sexual identity group. After Jonah came out in 10th grade, he felt that declaring that he was gay was limiting because he did not fit comfortably in that box. Although he knew he liked men, he was also attracted to females. This perception of sexuality caused him to work extra hard to fit into just one box: "It was all just confusing...the boxes and the labels, it just wasn't that cut and dry. And so, it was all just very confusing; [pause] it still is." Because of the existence of the boxes, individuals are led to believe they should fit comfortably into some box. When one does not fit comfortably into an identity box, instead of critiquing the existence of box or the associated parameters, he/she beats himself/herself

up and wonders why they are different. The existence of these metaphorical boxes exacerbates the problem of social homelessness. If no boxes existed and one did not feel at home, it would be easier to handle. However, because the boxes do exist within our society, there is an expectation of fitting in somewhere.

Tony captured this notion during a discussion about coming out as a bisexual man: “After I came out, it was like I was suddenly a complete outsider, you know? I mean I just didn’t fit in anywhere. Honestly, it [the isolation] was probably there all the time. I just didn’t realize it until it started to matter me.”

As previously mentioned in Chapter IV, there was great diversity among the participants. Despite the differences in ages (18-45 years old), socioeconomic statuses and geographic locations, there were several similarities in the feelings and experiences the 13 participants experienced as a result of their social homelessness. During the coding process, I grouped these feelings into three themes: outsider, incongruency, and isolation. Table 1 is an example of how data related to the central phenomenon of social homelessness was coded. It highlights four quotations from the interviews and provides examples of how I moved from initial codes to subcategories during the data analysis process. Using these quotations in conjunction with stories shared during the interviews, I will explore the theme of social homelessness and its three subcategories—outsider, incongruency and isolation—further.

Table 1. Central Phenomenon Example

<b>THEME</b>	<i>Subcategory</i>	<b>Initial Code</b>	Example Sentence
<b>SOCIAL HOMELESSNESS</b>	<i>Outsider</i>	<b>Seeing differences</b>	“I tried to hang out with the students I thought I wanted to be with all my life and that didn’t work out either because those kids didn’t...I wasn’t like them.”
	<i>Incongruency</i>	<b>Rejecting labels</b>	“Gay is so White, you know I mean?”
	<i>Incongruency</i>	<b>Labeling</b>	"It was all just confusing...the boxes and the labels, it just wasn't that cut and dry. And so, it was all just very confusing; [pause] it still is."
	<i>Isolation</i>	<b>Feeling alone</b>	“I didn’t grow up in the same environments as they did so they didn’t accept me as I thought they would because they felt I acted ‘White’ or spoke ‘White’ or other things.”

*Outsider.* Often, social homelessness was discussed in terms of feeling like an outsider, both as an outsider because of racial identity and outsider because of sexual identity. Stephen Dawson shared an experience in which he felt like an outsider:

Don’t get me wrong, it was a good school but I felt like a complete outsider that entire year. I was the only Black kid in the class and everyone, including the teacher, made me feel so stupid all the time. It was like one big inside joke and I was the only one who didn’t get the punch line.

Stephen grew up in a predominately African American neighborhood and had developed a sense of camaraderie among his Black peers in school. Throughout elementary school, his parents’ marriage deteriorated and led to divorce just before he began fifth-grade. As a result, he moved to a new neighborhood and attended a predominately White school to finish elementary school.

This notion of feeling like an outsider was often discussed in terms of fit. Trey, who had a similar experience to Stephen's when he left the comfort of his neighborhood school and was bussed across town to a predominately White school during elementary school, described his feelings in terms of fit: "I went with the hope of making new friends but it just didn't happen that way. I would ask myself, 'Where do I fit in?'" Although his experience related to feeling like an outsider with Black peers, Jonah also discussed his inability to fit in. All throughout elementary and middle school, Jonah attended White Catholic schools. Although he was a good student who worked hard in class and took his education seriously, Jonah felt like an outcast in elementary and middle school: "Whenever things went wrong [in school], people always looked at me." Early on, Jonah said that being African American was difficult for him because he was surrounded by White faces all of his life. Jonah yearned for more relationships with African American students. He felt that those relationships would help to define him and make him feel more comfortable. Unfortunately, Jonah's wish for feeling like an insider went unfulfilled when he matriculated to a diverse high school with a large population of African American students: "I never fit in...and even when I should have fit in, I didn't." This inability to fit in is not limited to racial identity. Tony discussed the challenges of being openly bisexual in high school:

I decided to join the LGBT group at my high school. I didn't really know the purpose of it and now that I think about it, I guess I still don't [laughs]. It was mostly girls and most of them were straight. The guys that were there just weren't...we were just really different. I thought that I could go and make friends but I just didn't fit in. They were kind of bitchy and...uh...that just didn't work for me.

*Incongruency.* Although many students struggle to fit into social groups at one point or another during their k-12 years, participants who experienced social homelessness felt that their inability to fit in went beyond other students' traditional experiences. Tyrell, fresh out of high school, aptly captured this notion:

I would look at myself in the mirror and be like, "Chile please! How you going to be Black and gay, fierce and fabulous? No ma'am! That don't make no kind of sense [laughs]. I was walking around school feeling like one big oxymoron and ain't nobody got time for that!"

I strongly considered naming the term "oxymoronic" to describe the inner feelings of angst participants experienced, but decided to describe these feelings as incongruent. I borrowed the term from a story told by Tony about his middle school sexual education class:

The PE teachers separated the boys from the girls and the male teacher, who was also the football coach. So here we are in this little room getting ready to talk about sex. I looked around the room and here we were, a group of Black boys looking like we were about to hear the Sermon on the Mount [laughs]. They couldn't wait to hear what coach was going to say about the girls' lady parts [laughs]. Why are middle school boys so damn horny? I wasn't thinking that at all...I wanted to hear more about the boys. In my head I was singing that Sesame Street song, "One of these things is not like the other!" I felt like I was *similar* to the other dudes but I didn't match. [Pause] Even on the inside, there were parts of me that didn't match.

Other participants shared Tony's description of the incongruency of his feelings as he measured himself against his peers. In middle school, Stephen was trying to figure out who he was. He didn't feel like being Black and gay made sense: "It just didn't seem like the two went together." When Stephen further reflected on his identity, he felt as if

his race and sexuality was a double negative. Although he is now 27-years-old and school is a distant memory, Dayquan Martin continues to struggle with the incongruity of his racial and sexual identities and believes that much of the terminology used to identify gays and lesbians is polluted because of the ways they are used pejoratively. “That’s why I prefer the term SGL...being Black and gay is still crazy but at least the term helps a little.” He also feels like the traditional terminology fails at capturing his life experiences as an African American man. Dayquan summed up the beliefs that underscored his incongruent feelings and caused him to see his Blackness and gayness as bifurcated identities:

Gay is so White, you know what I mean? I had distanced myself so much from my Black identity in the gay sense, but was very much proud of my Black identity and that was the impetus for a lot of me wanting to do well academically and socially.

For Dayquan, the inability to “show up” simultaneously Black and gay he experienced in high school has continued into his adulthood. Despite having a successful career in marketing and graduating from a top university, Dayquan continues to search for affirmation and for someone to help him reconcile his identities.

*Isolation.* A significant component of social homelessness is the associated feelings of isolation sparked by an inability to find solace from others with similar experiences. This isolation was familiar to Stephen who, during fifth-grade, transferred to a new school and felt alone: “My parents divorced in the fifth-grade and I went to an all White school and...I had to work harder”. He spoke of a teacher that made sweeping comments about Black hair texture and how her treatment of him added to Stephen’s

isolation: “She treated me different...she treated me like I was the bad child. She didn’t help me with math stuff or anything. Like, I didn’t get help in school.” Although his experiences may simply be the result of an ineffective teacher whose pedagogy is questionable, Stephen’s reality is that his treatment was related his race. This perceived judgment was revisited many times during the course of our time together. Stephen discussed feeling severely isolated while in the fifth-grade and he described himself as an underdog. He shared a story of how he and a fellow underdog who was also Black bonded:

There were two other Black kids, um...Clarence and Shanelle. Shanelle was always kind of...um, she looked a little weird. She didn’t have a lot of hair [laughs] and she was picked on a lot and we just kind of bonded because I felt that underdog feeling with her.

While Stephen still felt isolated in elementary because of being one of very few African American students in the school, he was able to find comfort in Clarence and Shanelle. Many times, the feelings of isolation shared by participants were exacerbated because there were very few (if any) students who openly identified as SGL. Trey Jackson didn’t know anyone else that felt the same as him. Although he is the one participant that did not believe he experienced social homelessness, DeMarcus discussed his feelings of isolation during high school even with other students who were having identical experiences as him. During a period in high school DeMarcus was in a sexual relationship with a teacher. He later found out that for other students at the school including his cousin were also in a sexual relationship with the same teacher. Instead of leaning on each other and creating a sense of solidarity, their relationships became

strained and fractured: "They were so afraid of their reputation and I was too." As a result, DeMarcus started to feel more and more alone.

These feelings of isolation seemed to be the biggest challenge related to social homelessness for participants. Of the 13 participants who experienced social homelessness, nine (69.2%) felt so alone during periods of the k-12 schooling that they considered suicide. Just five minutes into the interview Jonah referred to his k-12 experience as fun even though he was unable to fit comfortably with his peer groups in elementary school and high school and felt alone. Jonah contradicted the statement towards the end of the interview when he reflects on what was missing from his schooling experience and talked about his contemplation of suicide.

### **Causal Conditions of Social Homelessness**

The causal conditions or categories of conditions that determine whether or not participants experienced social homelessness and the degree to which that experience negatively impacted their k-12 lives have to do with how participants viewed themselves within the larger framework of their schools. Using storytelling as their communication tool, participants recalled difficult experiences with both peers and teachers that left them feeling alienated, ashamed and unaccepted. Tony recounted a story from seventh-grade that epitomized his sense of powerlessness and lack of protection within his school community:

My picture was posted in the school's library with my name written underneath because I had read a certain number of books. Even though I tried to act like it wasn't a big deal, I was pretty proud of myself. A few days later, I went to the library to return a book and noticed that someone added an "A" to the end of my first name and changed it from Tony to Tonya. I felt so stupid because I had no

idea who did it or how many people saw it. What made it worse was that the librarian acted like she didn't even care. I snatched the picture down and never checked out another book.

Tony's story was the result of his inability or unwillingness to buy into the gender norms created by society and reinforced his peers. Participants also shared stories of exclusion because their mannerisms, speech patterns and interests fell outside of the norms for African American people. Sean shared a story about how his siblings enforced the rules for being authentically Black. During the four years he attended boarding school and was the only African American student on campus, Sean adopted the speech patterns of his White classmates. During one of his visits home, Sean's brothers and sisters sat him down to remind him that he was Black and told him to stop acting White.

In the next section, I will explore the feelings participants' experienced during their bouts with social homelessness. Stories and experiences related to social homelessness shared during the interviews were analyzed and organized into three categories of conditions that lead to social homelessness in African American SGL men—alienation, shame and lack of acceptance from African American and/or SGL peers. Table 2 demonstrates how data related to the causal conditions of social homelessness were coded. In Table 2 I present five quotations that relate to these three categories of conditions and highlight how I moved from initial codes to subcategories during the data analysis process. In the following section, I will define and explain each of the three categories, explore related sub-categories and highlight participants' stories that capture their experiences with alienation, shame and lack of acceptance.

Table 2. Causal Conditions Example

<b>THEME</b>	<b><i>Subcategory</i></b>	<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Example Sentence</b>
<b>ALIENATION</b>	<b><i>Powerlessness</i></b>	Feeling unimportant	“For a while, I stopped going to school altogether. Part of me just wanted to see if anyone would notice...[pause] they didn’t.”
	<b><i>Lack of Control</i></b>	Having no power	“She [the teacher] was standing right there when he said it and I felt like, if she’s just going to stand there and let him call me a faggot, there’s no point in me complaining anymore.”
<b>SHAME</b>	<b><i>Self-Loathing</i></b>	Regretting	"I was wondering, ‘why am I doing this [having sex with other males], why do I like this?’ So it was like, I would do it, but then after the fact, I would regret doing it”
<b>SHAME</b>	<b><i>Self-Loathing</i></b>	Bullying SGLs	“I probably belonged to a group that were ring leaders in bullying other kids who we perceived to be gay.”
<b>LACK OF ACCEPTANCE</b>	<b><i>Bullying</i></b>	Being teased	“If I tell you this secret about myself and let you in, you might not like me...and I didn’t want them to pick on me anymore.”

**Alienation.** The term “alienation” refers to students’ feelings of estrangement within their school community. Participants who reported experiences of alienation during their k-12 experiences describe moments of feeling disconnected, distant or unimportant. Stories associated with feelings of alienation were punctuated by three main themes that were common throughout the participants’ experiences—powerlessness and lack of control.

*Powerlessness.* Throughout the data collection phase, several of the participants expressed their desire to have more power during their k-12 experiences. In this context,

“power” is not used to connote strength; rather it refers to having agency. Throughout their stories, participants described situations in which they perceived no sense of agency over their own actions or will. Tyrell shared a story in which he tried to fit in with peers on the playground during a kickball game to no avail: “Everyone was yelling ‘Run! Run!’ as she was running to first base so I started yelling too. I tried to sound butch but it didn’t work. Everyone was looking at me like and laughing like I was dancing around in a tutu.” Tyrell’s comical vignette captures many of the participants’ lack of power to change in ways that would make them more palatable to their classmates. Tony reflected on his desire to be different in school:

There were times, lot’s of times that I wanted to be, uh, just be straight or normal but it didn’t seem like anything that I did made much of a difference. When I played football, they said I ran like a girl. When I had a girlfriend, they said she must be a lesbian. When I focused on my schoolwork, they said I was acting White...It was like the end result was already set regardless of what I did to try and change it.

Despite his specific efforts, Tony was unable to change his outcomes. Stephen’s parents’ negativity towards homosexuality was evidenced in their verbal and physical abuse towards him. Although several of the participants considered suicide, Stephen specifically related his suicidal thoughts to his feelings of powerlessness:

Before I started to accept myself, I tried hard to change. I stopped looking at boys, I tried to pray, got involved in sports; all kinds of stuff but nothing [changed]. I felt like I was out of control...not out of control like crazy but...I couldn’t control what I thought or felt. That was around the time I thought about killing myself. If I couldn’t control anything else, I could control myself.

While Stephen's response to powerlessness was extreme in comparison to others, several participants took action to gain more power. Doug was repeatedly called heterosexist slurs because he "was a mama's boy" and had "effeminate qualities" when relating to other students during elementary school. Despite having coaching sessions with his father to be more masculine, Doug felt his untraditional gender performance was natural and would not change. Since he was unable to change how he interacted with others and continued to be bullied by boys as a result, Doug stopped talking to other students and became an extreme introvert. Contemplating suicide and choosing to shut down social interactions were just two ways participants responded to their inability to control what was happening internally or their inability to change their feelings.

*Lack of control.* The phrase "lack of control" could be used to define powerlessness. During the early stages of my data analysis, I combined these two categories until I noticed small distinctions between the participants' stories that I believed were significant. As described above, powerlessness refers to lack of internal agency or the inability to control or change one's own actions. Lack of control refers to lack of external agency or the inability to control or change others' actions. In most cases, the participants described their lack of control as life happening to them despite taking steps to create change.

Tony, like several participants, experienced a lack of control in school. He described his experience in school as a cog in a machine: "It just kept going and going and I couldn't do anything to stop it. It was almost like being caught in a current and being dragged out to sea." Although Ashton had periods of academic success in

elementary school, he experienced a lack of control over learning about subjects that interested him or studying people who were like him—African American, bisexual or from a rough neighborhood. Similarly, Sean expressed frustration that his White boarding school failed to teach him any Black history: “I had to wait until college to hear about people like Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman even though I wanted to when I was in high school.”

In sharing stories that portrayed their lack of control in school, several participants described their feelings of meaninglessness. Tyrell remembered the challenge of staying focused in class:

I just kind of sat there waiting for it [the lesson] to be over since it didn't really matter anyway. They [the teachers] ain't give a shit about me so why should I give a shit about so why should I give a shit about them?

Tyrell did not understand the purpose for coming to school each day. He felt completely detached from the learning process since none of it represented any of his interests. For others, the struggle to see school as a meaningful endeavor was exacerbated by negative interactions with adults. Ashton recalled an experience in high school: “I was actually recommended to drop out and go to [community college] by a teacher before. I was mad. I was angry. I was pissed. I was just kind of wondering what kind of teacher would tell a student that.” Despite Ashton's effort to recover lost credits in high school in order to graduate, his teachers and counselors didn't believe he had what it took to succeed.

Although most of the participants shared experiences in which they felt a lack of control, two discussed how they attempted to regain control. As an elementary student,

Christian was disinterested in school and displayed defiant behaviors with his teachers. He often felt singled out by teachers and he continued even when he tried to behave. In the interview, he described a situation where his behavior escalated and things became physical between him and his elementary PE teacher. Christian's third-grade class joined the rest of the school in an assembly where students were receiving bumble bee T-shirts as a reward for their positive behavior. When the assembly was over and Christian hadn't received a shirt, he complained to his friend.

Then she gonna, with her crazy self, she gonna come screaming, "That's why you don't have a shirt! [laughs] That's why you don't have a shirt, Christian Stapleton! Because you don't know how to act!" So then she tried to tell me to do something and it was in front of everybody, so I didn't do it. So then she like came over here and grabbed me, and I was like, "Get off of me! Get off of me!" And she drug [sic] me to the office.

Although Christian laughed during the story, he recognized that it was not funny at the time. He explained that his defiant behavior was his effort to gain control when he felt like he had no voice. Like Christian, Ashton felt he had no control during his middle school years unless he was acting out. During this period, Ashton was teased significantly because students perceived him to be gay. Recognizing that he couldn't control how others viewed him, Ashton became "the bad guy everyone wanted to be but was afraid to [become]." During that period, he stole a car, broke into a house and was banned from the mall near his home for stealing. After urinating in a condom and leaving it on his teacher's desk, Ashton successfully regained control of his reputation and stopped students from focusing on his sexuality.

**Shame.** In many of the stories shared, the ways in which participants felt about themselves determined how they viewed themselves within the school setting. As Doug discovered his sexual identity, he recognized that although he was different than others, he knew there was nothing wrong with him. Doug says that he was comfortable with himself and he drew upon this self-confidence when faced with the challenge of negotiating his identity: “If I didn’t feel comfortable doing something, I wasn’t going to do it just to please someone else...I have always stayed true to myself.” Doug’s positive feelings of self-worth were very different than those of other participants. Although the ages they began to realize they were different varied, most participants’ experiences resemble those of Levi who realized he was attracted to boys when he was eight-years-old. “I knew that I had [same-sex feelings]...but then I also knew that...it was supposed to have been wrong. It was a wrong thing and that wasn’t anything that you were supposed to be feeling, so that was the conflict.” For many participants, this conflict caused them become ashamed.

The term “shame” can be defined as the negative feelings individuals have of themselves because of their inability to measure up to social norms. Although the term is similar to embarrassment, feelings of shame are based on an internal judgment of one’s self, while embarrassment is the result of not measuring up in front of others. Therefore, while embarrassment can be avoided by carefully keeping secrets from others, the internal feelings of shame are unavoidable. Ashton described the period in high school when he was ashamed of acting on his same-sex attraction: “I was wondering, ‘Why am I doing this? Why do I like this?’” Although no one else knew of his feelings or sexual

encounters, Ashton's feelings of shame and guilt caused him to feel unworthy of true love. As Christian discovered his sexuality, he was also ashamed of not "being like the other guys who liked girls." Christian's believed his attraction to boys was deviant: "I knew that I was attracted to guys, but I just thought that I was perverted." Viewing himself as a deviant pervert caused Christian's feelings of shame to intensify.

In some cases, participants' feelings of shame related to their sexuality led to negative relationships with others. DeMarcus' horrible treatment of openly gay students in high school evidences the contempt he had for himself as he wrestled with his same-sex attraction. DeMarcus says that he connected well with lesbian students and they would "cut up together in class." With gay students, however, he felt that it was just "ill" and he refused to associate with them. He was especially mean to effeminate boys in school, which ironically, he admits are the type of guys he now finds attractive.

DeMarcus' negative treatment of gay students was not unique. Six of the 14 participants (64.3%) admitted to bullying other SGL students because they saw aspects of themselves in others. Although the shame being SGL was experienced by all 14 of the participants at some point during their k-12 years, it presented in two different ways—inferiority and self-loathing.

*Inferiority.* Experiencing feelings of shame requires individuals to compare themselves to others and determine their self-worth based on the opinions (real or perceived) of others. Feelings of inferiority occur when one feels like they do not *and* are unable to measure up to the basic standards of others. Throughout the data collection process, participants recalled implicit and explicit examples of inferiority related to their

sexuality. In some cases, they shared stories that hinted at their feelings of inferiority. For example, during his discussion about feeling ashamed of his sexuality during elementary school, Trey inserted an interesting vignette about his birthday:

Around the same time I was feeling bad about myself, I had a birthday. All the other kids had parties in school and I had never had one until then. My mother brought in cupcakes...[long pause] and I felt important. I felt like a normal kid.

Trey's birthday cupcakes offered him a temporary reprieve from feeling inferior to his peers. In other cases, participants shared experiences that directly related to feeling inferior to others. Caleb shared how he viewed himself in relationship to others. Caleb was very social during his junior and senior years of high school and had close friends who were heterosexual. Although he never disclosed his SGL identity, he believed his sexuality put him lower than his peers. "Now that I've identified this [his sexuality] about myself like [long pause], I guess, subconsciously you put yourself in a position lower than them. I did. I did. I can't speak for anybody else, I did." I asked Caleb what it looks like to be "lower" than someone else and although he was unable to give a definitive answer, he used his hands to explain: "I have a friend named Craig and he is straight and he is here [positions right hand in front of him at eye level] and now, since I have this same-sex attraction, here I am [positions left hand in front of him at chest level]." As Caleb described Craig he spoke in the present tense, which evidences his current struggle with inferiority. Tony also felt inferior to his straight friends, even though several of them also had same-sex experiences with other guys.

One of my best friends growing up was this guy named Dudley. Our families were really close and did a lot of things together. I had the biggest crush on him and would always drop hints to see what he would do. For the longest time, he would ignore my comments or play it off and I remember feeling like he was so much better than me. I even thought my dad liked him more than me and it made sense to me because he didn't have this, uh, black mark. Years later, I threw it out there [propositioned him] and Dudley took the bait [laughs]. He was my first sexual experience with a boy or a girl. It's crazy but after that, I still felt like he was better than me.

Although Tony's experience of feeling inferior to a fellow SGL guy was ironic, it wasn't unique. Several participants felt inferior to other SGL students. Tyrell felt inferior to gay students who were White. "I felt like the White boys were better than us [Black gay males] and they knew it...sashaying down the hall like they owned the place." Both Elias and Stephen discussed feeling inferior to the gay guys who were masculine. Feeling inferior to other SGL students because of race or gender performance were indicators of the hierarchies that existed among SGL students at participants schools. As participants navigated their sexual identity in homophobic environments that pressured students to adhere to heterosexual norms and caused them to feel inferior to their straight peers, they were often faced with additional struggles for not adhering to the masculine norms of their schools.

*Self-loathing.* Self-loathing occurs when an individual has an extremely dislike or hatred towards an identity group to which the individual belongs. Although it is similar to having low self-esteem, self-loathers believe they have little to no self-worth, while individuals with low self-esteem believe they are not good at doing something. As I analyzed the data, I distinguished self-esteem from self-worth by gaging whether or not the feeling was temporary (low self-esteem) or deeply engrained (self-loathing). This

subtle difference is illustrated below: After being humiliated for not being able to successfully shoot a basketball during middle school PE, and being picked last during neighborhood games, Trey had low self-esteem about his athletic ability. Growing up, Caleb not only believed that gay people *were* destined for hell, he believed they *should be* destined for hell. As a result, he hated himself and struggled to reconcile his sexuality with his faith.

During the interviews, participants shared stories that implicitly and explicitly provided evidence of their self-loathing. Although Trey never said that he hated himself for being SGL, his discussion about having a crush on Erik that began in middle school and extended into high school provided evidence:

I really believe the crush for him or towards him, was because he was a boyish boy. So he was not what, in my mind, I was. So during that whole husky stage, I was really hippie, um, had lots of effeminate mannerisms and so, Erik was the opposite of who I was or who I thought I was.

If Trey liked Erik because he possessed the characteristics Trey did not possess and was thin, athletic and masculine, then it is reasonably to assume that Trey did not like himself because he was husky, not athletic and effeminate. While Trey implicitly shared about his self-loathing, Stephen explicitly recalled hating himself and traced his self-loathing to his early elementary school years when his stepfather called him a faggot, sissy and queer. Stephen believes that experience was the moment when he started to hate himself. As he repeated the insults over and over in his head, Stephen “started to believe all those shitty things [his stepfather] said were true.” Years later, after Stephen ended a sexual relationship with a boy who lived across the street, their argument became physical:

He was a jock, okay? He was a basketball player...we got into a fistfight and I remember him throwing rocks and hitting me in my face, like multiple times with rocks and I ran home. And I felt, um, there was no one there. My mom saw me crying and my stepdad saw me crying and there was no one there to comfort me. I guess they felt like I didn't deserve to be comforted and to be honest, um, I hated myself so much at that time, I really didn't believe I deserved it either.

Stephen's recognition of his own self-loathing was unique. In most cases, participants evidenced self-loathing through negative comments or reactions to other students who possessed the qualities they disliked in themselves. Jonah did not want to be associated with the "flamboyant queens" of his high school. He grew up during the time that the Matthew Shepard story was in the news and feared that the association with gay people particularly flamboyantly gay people would open him up to verbal and or physical abuse. Jonah described his negative feelings towards the "queens" as his internalized homophobia.

**Lack of acceptance from peers.** Peer acceptance in k-12 schools is not determined by a logical and quantifiable formula. Experiencing periods of lack of acceptance from peers is a part of the master-narrative of schools because of how the phenomenon is relevant to students from dominant and marginalized identity groups. Stephen recounted feeling unaccepted by his classmates because of his strong work ethic, perseverance and goal-focused approach to school: "People assumed I thought I was better than them because I was focused and worked hard. What a stupid reason to shut someone out!" Similarly, Tony felt that students didn't accept him when he transferred from Catholic school to public school in the seventh-grade: "Kids started a rumor that I was a narc [undercover narcotics agent] because I was taller and no one knew me from

elementary school. It was ridiculous, I spent the first month of school as a total outcast.” As I analyzed the data, lack of acceptance was discussed in two ways—perceived and overt. Caleb recounted how his expectations of other students impacted his perception of acceptance. Because he believed his friends would shun him if they knew his parents were divorcing in elementary school, he kept their struggles a secret. Trey—who described himself as a *husky* child with big hips—experienced a lack of acceptance because of his weight. In elementary school, his unacceptance was overt and he was teased as a result.

While the above stories of unacceptance added an additional layer to the challenges of school, the lack of acceptance related to race and sexuality participants experienced was directly related to their social homelessness. All participants had moments when they perceived they were not or would not be accepted by others because of their race or sexuality. Their perceptions of how students would respond to their race and/or sexuality played a significant role in participants’ identity negotiation in school, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Within this current discussion of the causal conditions of social homelessness, I will focus on overt examples of lack of acceptance.

*Bullying.* During my initial line-by-line coding, I noticed there were fewer uses of the term “bullying” than I expected. As I began to combine codes throughout the analysis process, I employed the operational definition of bullying I use as a middle school principal to make interpret participants’ experiences. Bullying is defined as harassing behaviors—verbal or physical—that demean and/or belittle others and are pervasive *and* persistent. Both Tony and Caleb were called a “nigger” in high school and

initially, both examples were coded as “being called racial slurs.” As I combined codes into themes, I interpreted Tyrell’s experience as “solidarity” and Caleb’s experience as “bullying” because of the context provided during their interviews. Tony shared a story about a lesson on culture in middle school social studies. Although he is biracial (his father is Black and his mother is White), Tony was raised in a White household with his mother and identifies as African American.

As I was explaining my background to the class, this White kid named Wayne hollered out, “So what... You still a nigger!” The class lost it and even though a lot of the Black kids treated me like shit a lot, they were madder at Wayne than me.

Although Wayne’s behavior was harassing, there was no indication that it was persistent or pervasive. Caleb’s story, on the other hand, indicated ongoing behavior that had a significant impact on his first two years of high school:

I went to Washington High School ninth- and tenth-grade. I was the worst time of my life...over 2000 kids, and only 50 being Black. The racism was across the board...it was pretty blatant. It was nothing to walk down the hall and hear “nigger” at Washington, something I was never used to.

Although Caleb was made it onto the baseball team during his freshman year, the unchallenged racism of the team caused him to quit. While he continued to excel academically, Caleb cited the racist culture of his school and poor treatment by White students as significant barriers he had to overcome. The bullying Caleb experienced because of his racial identity was persistent and pervasive. Neither participant specifically said they were bullied in school because of their race, however, in the tradition of

constructivist grounded theory, I engaged my background knowledge to interpret participants' experiences.

Most instances of bullying were related to the participants' identity as SGL. Although some participants experienced bullying at home by family members like Stephen—who was harassed by his parents' through verbal and physical abuse—most were bullied in school. Periods of bullying were not limited to a specific school level. After just a couple weeks into kindergarten, Doug Crane said he was repeatedly called “gay” and “faggot.” Although the abuse tapered off, as he got older, it caused him to be an “extreme introvert” and had a significant impact on his ability to build relationships with other students. Several participants recounted being bullied and called a “sissy” and/or a “girl” because they were effeminate and did not fit within accepted gender norms. While these slurs were not directly related to their sexuality, participants, like Dayquan Martin interpreted them as the result of their SGL identity. When he matriculated to high school, Dayquan continued pursuing the passion for the arts sparked in middle school but was confronted with homophobia from peers. Students' view of the arts were fueled by heterosexist and gender normative ideologies. As a result, Dayquan was teased a lot in ninth-grade and was called gay and a sissy. High school reified the stereotypical roles of cool jocks and band geeks and the belief that the arts are for girls. “I had been in the music and arts [in elementary and middle school], but in high school that stuff is less cool...if you're not playing sports then something must be wrong with you.” Dayquan, like several of the participants, discussed arts and sports as if they were mutually exclusive and spoke of them in gendered ways where the arts represented

femininity and athletics represented masculinity. As a jock, DeMarcus Privy says that he bullied gay students and admits that it was expected of him to say mean things to the fem guys in choir because he ran track. Because of the connection between sports and masculinity, bullying that was related to athletic ability was also interpreted by participants as related to their sexuality.

**Summary.** As I analyzed the data shared during interviews alongside field notes and memos, I discovered commonalities among the feelings associated with the feelings associated with the central phenomenon of social homelessness. As a result, the stories and experiences related to the feelings associated with social homelessness were analyzed and organized into three categories of conditions that lead to social homelessness in African American SGL men—alienation, shame and lack of acceptance from African American and/or SGL peers.

### **Strategies Used in Response to Social Homelessness**

Experiencing the alienation, shame and lack of acceptance from peers of social homelessness caused participants to respond in a myriad of ways. In very few cases, participants experienced long periods of depression after acquiescing to their status as socially homeless with little to no motivation to change. These participants also reported a greater sense of powerlessness. Doug, for example, went to great lengths to increase his ability to perform masculinity but was unsuccessful in his effort causing the bullying to escalate. Because of his heightened sense of powerlessness, Doug Crane retreated socially and his severe introversion left him depressed with very few friendships. Unlike Doug, most participants responded to their social homelessness in ways that were

intended to provide a reprieve from the alienation, shame and lack of acceptance they experienced because of their racial and/or sexual identity. In this section, I will highlight the four most common responses to the feelings associated with social homelessness—over-achieving, seeking peer validation, becoming invisible and privileging identities.

The first two responses—“over-achieving” and “seeking validation”—presented in both positive and negative ways in the data. The nature of the response, positive or negative, will be explored through subcategories under each theme. Participants seeking long-term responses to their socially homeless status were drawn to the above responses, which, in many cases, required a greater investment of time and energy. For example, although Trey Jackson’s focus on academic achievement provided him with external accolades that were used to counteract his self-loathing and feelings of shame, it required great commitment and focus. Similarly, while Stephen Dawson’s rise from social obscurity to homecoming court helped him to feel more accepted by peers (although he continued to be bullied), it required him to strategically develop “friendships” with unfamiliar students and classmates that he disliked—a process that he described as exhausting.

The second two responses—“becoming invisible” and “privileging identities”—are more closely related to traditional understandings of identity negotiation. These responses, like identity, were much more fluid and represented ways the participants responded in social contexts. For example, in response to the homophobia of his circle of friends, Elias Cage discussed changing pronouns from “he” to “she” when discussing his sex life with friends. Similarly, Stephen’s responded to the hyper-masculinity of his

neighborhood's African American barbershop by bringing his very active younger brothers with him to detract attention away from his effeminate qualities. Elias' and Stephen's responses were strategies they developed to cope with their day-to-day challenges, but provided no long-term fix. Like Trey and Stephen, some participants shared examples that also required an investment of time, however, the participants were not expecting long-term solutions to their social homelessness. Dayquan Martin's feelings of inferiority stemmed from his limited success in the online gay chat rooms. He believed he hadn't had any "hits" from other guys because he was Black. As a result, he adopted a White identity and created a fictitious profile, which included a picture of a White teenaged boy with brown hair that had graduated from his school a couple years earlier. He met other teens online, exchanged photos and spoke on the phone under his assumed identity. Dayquan's commitment to creating his online persona—complete with a lengthy background story—yielded a temporary relief to his socially homelessness.

As previously stated, initial codes were combined into categories, then further combined into themes. Table 3 demonstrates how I coded the ways in which participants' responses to social homelessness and highlights the four most common responses found in the data. Although the four themes included in this section do not represent a comprehensive list of every response to social homelessness provided by the participants, they represent the most common responses found in the data. I chose to keep the four themes in their gerund form to highlight the notion that these responses are enacted processes, which, although participants may not have been fully conscious of the causal relationship, are motivated by the participants' encounter with the central

phenomenon of social homelessness. Throughout this section, I will share extended stories shared by participants that capture their enacted processes and highlight the relationships between their feelings of alienation, shame and lack of acceptance and the ways in which they responded. In some cases, the participants discussed the antecedent feelings and the consequential response in close proximity or within the same story. In other cases, I made connections between antecedent feelings shared throughout the interview and consequential responses as I interpreted their actions within the grounded theory coding paradigm (Fig. 1). Because participants employed multiple strategies simultaneously to respond to social homelessness, the stories shared below are likely to “flirt” with some of the other categories of responses. Since my intent is not to illustrate static responses to alienation, shame and lack of acceptance that socially homeless students engage in serially, I believe the overlap of categories help to illustrate the fluidity of identity and the organic ways students negotiate their marginalized identities.

Table 3. Responses Example

<b>THEME</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Example Sentence</b>
<b>OVER-ACHIEVING</b>	<i>School Activities</i>	Seeking status	“I was the president of FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes]. It was a pretty big deal at my school.”
<b>SEEKING PEER VALIDATION</b>	<i>Social Status</i>	Seeking status	“So then I decided to run for president [of student council] and things turned around for me. Everyone knew me after that.”
<b>PRIVILEGING IDENTITIES</b>	<i>Identity Choice</i>	Promoting race	“I hid one [my sexuality] and promoted the other [my race] and figured I’d learn how to be really good at being Black.”
<b>BECOMING INVISIBLE</b>	<i>Appear Normal</i>	Fitting in	“Having a girlfriend was important because...I guess I thought people would think I was like everyone else, you know, normal.”
<b>PRIVILEGING IDENTITIES</b>	<i>Acting “White”</i>	Being teased	“That was the first time I was introduced to terms like ‘White boy’ and ‘Oreo’ and people said things like, ‘you think you better than us.’”

**Over-achieving.** The difference between achieving and over-achieving is subtle.

Several of the participants excelled academically and reported having high academic achievement in school. Levi Smart, for example, described himself as a great student who was good at school. Although he saw school as a “necessary evil” that was a “means to an end” (making money), Levi took his studies seriously and worked diligently to meet his educator parents’ high academic expectations. Although I was already familiar with the term, I borrowed “over-achieving” from a discussion with Stephen

about his unnatural quest for high achievement that is motivated by his desire to prove the stereotypes about his marginalized identity group wrong. During the discussion, he asked about my academic background and I shared that once I completed my Ed.D, I will have four graduate degrees. We talked about the stereotypes around Black men and education and he related his drive to overcome the stigma of being gay by over-achieving in high school to my desire to dispel the myth of uneducated African American men by over-achieving in higher ed. As a result, I defined “over-achieving” as an individual’s need to achieve in school, which is *internally* motivated by 1) *their* desire to overcome the societal limitations placed on them because of one or more of their marginalized identity groups, and 2) their desire to find relief from the pain of social homelessness. All of the participants—including DeMarcus Privy who challenged the existence of racism because he never had a racist experience—felt pressure to exceed the low expectations society has for Black males in school and recognized the stigma of being openly SGL. Despite this shared feeling, not all participants responded with an intense focus on over-achieving like Trey Jackson whose over-achieving presented in his drive for school offices and Dayquan Martin whose over-achieving presented as he strove for academic achievement.

*School offices.* By the time he reached high school, Trey, who was picked on for being “husky” and “athletically challenged,” had become the prom king, was voted Mr. Yearbook, was appointed the drum major of the marching band and received numerous awards for academic achievement. Recognizing the shame he felt about his SGL feelings, Trey made a conscious choice as he entered high school to strive for positions

that offered him the social connections he wanted. Trey wanted to wear his achievement as a mask to hide his sexuality. Trey also saw his choice to focus on school as way to highlight the positive aspects of the Black community. Although he attended a predominately African American high school, Trey gravitated towards Black students that shared his academic drive and saw themselves as college bound.

I really felt it was necessary for me to focus in on my identity as an African American male, um, and achieving, um, as an African American male than over any other aspect of myself as I was growing up. So I had to be smarter...I had to be more social, um, than others. And a large part of it was the masking of the SGL aspect of my life. So if I'm the top African American male, I don't have to worry about people wondering about this speck that is a part of me.

Of the 14 participants, 10 (71.4%) held some type of office in high school that is determined based on student vote or student choice. In addition to Trey, seven participants held multiple offices during their k-12 experiences.

*Academic achievement.* Dayquan's drive for success was deeply rooted in his identity as an African American male: "I was trying to combat this stereotypical, like, I didn't want to be a statistic. So I had a lot of pride in my Black identity and I wanted to um [pause], I didn't want to be a statistic, I didn't want to fall into the norm." Despite his racial pride, Dayquan's encounter with the incongruity of his racial identity and sexual identity led him to assume a White online persona. Dayquan attended "good schools" that had a strong academic focus. He was one of three African American students who was in gifted classes, and he participated on the academic bowl team at his school. As we talked, he shared his experience of first walking into his high school in ninth-grade and seeing the pictures of the top graduating senior for each year. There was only one

African American male pictured on the wall that had graduated in the mid-90s. Rather than seeing the disproportionality of high achievement for African American students as a roadblock to his academic success, Dayquan simply decided that he wanted to be on the wall. To achieve his goal, Dayquan took advanced level courses that challenged him academically. His over-achieving paid off and he graduated at the top of his class and was pictured on the wall. In addition to graduating magna cum laude, being on the wall also meant extreme popularity and social success. Dayquan's journey to the wall led him through difficult times as he tried to come to terms with his sexuality. For Dayquan, the wall and its lack of African American males represented the incongruity between his racial identity and his focus on academics. By overcoming the aforementioned incongruity he experienced as an African American male scholar, Dayquan eased the pain he felt because of the incongruity he experienced as an African American gay male. In total, seven participants (50%) shared similar stories of over-achieving academically.

While it was most prevalent in stories of school offices and academic achievement, over-achieving was also associated with extra-curricular activities like the arts or athletics. A few participants focused on sports to dispel the myth that SGL students are non-athletic. In some cases, participants' focus on sports was intended to provide their peers with "proof" that they are heterosexual.

In our conversation about over-achieving, Stephen and I discussed the benefits of over-achieving and he credits his academic success in school to his inner drive to overcome the negative feelings associated with his identity. For others, the desire to over-

achieve caused participants to set unachievably high standards for themselves and they were plagued by the defeat of perfectionism. Tony had become so accustomed to being described as “gifted” or “advanced” that when a standardized test referred to his academic ability as average, he became unnerved: “Knowing that I was advanced all those years helped me to cope with feeling like shit about myself and being called average made me feel like a failure.” Often, this internal drive of over-achieving caused participants to overcommit and became a source of anxiety as their perfectionism caused undue stress. During Christian’s interview he shared a story of running track and trying to balance athletics, extracurricular activities, and his grades. Eventually, track became too much to handle and Christian had to quit the team.

**Seeking peer validation.** In his discussion about what was missing from his k-12 school experiences, Trey expressed his need for validation: “I needed someone to tell me I was okay.” As I analyzed the data related to the ways in which participants responded to the central phenomenon of social homelessness, I grouped responses that were intended to help participants feel that they were okay based on perceived validation from others. Tyrell Chambers’ feelings of alienation extended beyond the school walls. As a gay Black male, he has felt isolated from his White military family for a long time: “With my family, especially my extended family, it’s like we just live side by side. They not [sic] connected to me and I’m not connected to them and it’s been like that as long as I can remember.” As he talked about how nothing he did was good enough for his family, Tyrell shared his experience with junior ROTC in high school and his plans to join the army:

...but when I told her [my mother] that I was going to join ROTC, she was so happy. The first time she saw me in my uniform she was all choked up and stuff...[laughs]. Then I started getting choked up...I still don't know why she was crying but I was 'cause it was like she finally cared. They [my family] gonna [sic] throw me a big party before I go to basic training...[laughs]..I never even had a birthday party. I'm the only person I know who's gonna [sic] have a bon voyage party before I have a birthday party.

Tyrell recognized that he participated in JROTC in order to be validated by his family. While there were a couple of other examples, like Tyrell's, that were also categorized as "seeking *family* or *adult* validation," there were significantly more instances in which participants sought validation from peers.

Like over-achieving behaviors, peer-validation seeking behaviors had both positive and negative ramifications. As a gay Black boy who struggled with dyslexia in a predominately White school, Sean Keaton often felt inferior to his classmates. In kindergarten, he was given his first solo as the ringmaster for the circus and in first-grade he was given the opportunity to sing during dental hygiene week. Everyone, including Sean, realized he was a gifted singer. Shortly after his second performance, he volunteered for other solos. As he continued to sing, Sean not only discovered his passion, he discovered that singing provided him with approval from his peers and relief from the pain of inferiority. Sean's decision to continue singing after his first solo set him on a positive musical path that ended in a degree in vocal performance.

*Social status.* As I talked with participants, one of the first questions I asked was about their overall school experience: *What was school like for you?* Participants made meaning of their experiences in school socially. They described their experiences in school by how many friends they had or how social socially connected they were. If they

had lots of friends, theirs was a good experience. If they only had a few friends or they had struggling relationships with others, theirs was a bad experience. Since it was seen by many of the participants as an integral component of the “normal” high school experience, being popular was a coveted achievement. Despite the shame he felt because of his identity as a bisexual male, Ashton Stewart was committed to aligning his identity with the master-narrative of his school. In high school being popular was a top priority for Ashton:

I had to have every pair of Jordans, every new outfit, go to every party, that's all I wanted to do. I didn't care about grades or anything, I just cared about what was going on, and having sex with girls and all of that.

These things were important to Ashton because "in going to high school that's all you really hear about, so being that that's all that I heard, that's all that I wanted to do."

Despite the verbal abuse and emotional challenges he faced when he began high school, Dayquan persevered and won the lead role in the Black history play during his freshman year. This role was significant for him and changed the trajectory of his high school career: “I gained my status through these extracurriculars [sic], and by 10<sup>th</sup> grade I was actually class president [laughing], which is kind of funny.” Dayquan went on to receive many other accolades during high school. He was the class president in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, captain of the step team, drum major, homecoming court escort, Mr. LHS, prom king and was voted “most respected” by his peers. In the interview, Dayquan talked about gaining status and it was really clear that, for him, having status among your peers was like social capital. At one point during the interview, Dayquan specifically

mentioned that he was popular. I asked him if popularity was important to him and he said, "It just happened."

By my junior year in high school, the girls that I had grown up with from like second-grade all the way to tenth-grade were dating some football players. And so, just by virtue of hanging out with her, we all were in the same friend group...and so, we all would sit at the same lunch table and so I had somehow gotten status. We were like the cool kids, which is so crazy when I think about my ninth-grade year [when I was] teased for being gay but it was almost dismissed because I was doing all this other stuff and was recognized.

Dayquan's quest for social status and its relationship to the lack of acceptance he'd previously experienced because of his sexuality was a phenomenon that he was not aware of in high school. As he reflected on his experiences in high school during the interview, he realized how his tangential relationships with the "big men on campus" provided him with social status and validation from his peers.

*Risky behavior: Drugs, alcohol and sexual promiscuity.* Unlike Dayquan, most seeking peer validation examples either resulted in negative outcomes or put participants at risk of physical and/or emotional harm. DeMarcus Privy described his high school as having a focus on athletics. Although he did well academically, DeMarcus was most known for his ability on the track. Through track and field, DeMarcus' closest social connections were with other athletes and he spent the majority of his social time "hanging out with the jocks." After working with the same coaching staff for three years, DeMarcus' track team got a new coach who was also his math teacher. Because they were spending time together in practice and in class, DeMarcus and the teacher became close and eventually their relationship became physical. Because he had not shared his

sexuality with anyone, DeMarcus had no one to talk to about his feelings of shame that resulted from having sex with his 34-year-old teacher. After several weeks of seeing each other, DeMarcus was introduced to friends of his teacher. Shortly after the introduction, DeMarcus began dating one of his teacher's friends, which sent the teacher into a jealous rage—crying, screaming and throwing things. Unable to handle the incongruity of his new relationship or the isolation of having no one to talk to, DeMarcus built an emotional wall that protected his secrets. The once jovial and capricious DeMarcus struggled socially until he turned to alcohol. In high school, he used alcohol to help him feel more comfortable with other people and to relax. DeMarcus admitted that he did not negotiate his identities well. As a result, when he would drink he would become very angry and express that anger physically by throwing things: "[When I drank], rage came out. I've never been a fighter but in those situations I would be kind of aggressive".

While DeMarcus engaged in risky behavior to make connections with others, Tyrell engaged in risky behavior to connect with himself. During the interview, Tyrell admitted to using sex to combat the shame and lack of acceptance he experienced as an out gay student in high school.

There was a group of boys that would try and come for me [tease and bully me] at times and it would really bother me. Over time, I got used to the name-calling but I hated that they would only talk shit when they were all together. When they made their little comments on the sly, I would be like, "Well, I wasn't a faggot last week when I was at your house was I?" [Laughs].

Of the seven boys that bullied him repeatedly, Tyrell was regularly having sex with five of them. Tyrell initiated the relationships with the boys hoping it would bring an end to the bullying. When asked why he continued to have sex with them even after the bullying continued, Tyrell captured the essence of seeking peer validation:

I didn't really expect it to stop. I guess...I guess I just wanted them to like me so I could like myself. And after we had sex, and they would text me all kinds of sexual stuff during school, I knew they really liked me, so I don't give a damn what they said.

After being teased about his lisp in elementary and middle school, Ashton had lots of friends in high school. Two of his closest friends were a pair of stepbrothers who lived next door. During his junior year, the three boys discovered they were all having sex with the same girl and they, along with the girl, decided to have sex as a group. As the boys grew more comfortable with each other, they began having sex with each other without involving their female companion. Although he felt ashamed after sex, Ashton's sexual encounters with his neighbors were breaks from the incongruity he felt as an African American bisexual male. As a result, he regularly cut school to meet his neighbors for sex. Over time, Ashton began using drugs and alcohol to numb his feelings of shame. He regularly threw parties in his uncle's garage, which gave him an excuse to smoke marijuana and drink alcohol while also gaining social status: "I was skipping school, I was smoking, I was doing whatever I wanted to do. I did it just to be cool or whatever. Then I became known for my parties because we always had good stuff [drugs and alcohol]." Ashton was able to turn his risky behavior into social capital by using it to help him become popular.

**Becoming invisible.** Throughout his interview, Stephen Dawson discussed his experiences in school and his ability to relate to and connect with his peers as a process of being “seen” or “unseen.”

When I walked down the hall, I felt like everyone was looking at me...you know, like, judging the way I walked or even how I was dressed. That’s what drove me to singing and acting...then I could be judged for what I *want* you to see.

Stephen’s understanding of identity negotiation, like several of the participants, was based on the premise that students were constantly judging and evaluating others’ racial and sexual identity performances and weighing them against a White heteronormative identity performance. Stephen referred to the judgment as being “seen” and recognized that he had the power to construct the identity that he wanted to be seen. Tyrell Chambers had a similar approach to negotiating his identities:

Honestly, I should have had my own theme music ‘cause when I would be walking down the halls, it was like I was on stage. Looking and watching. Watching and looking. It got real old. I was tired of being judged all the damn time so I tried to disappear. Basically, my whole goal was to be invisible and just coexist like everybody else.

Tyrell’s desire to become invisible was shared by several other participants. Although they spoke about it using various terms, the goal was to construct a “generic” identity that essentially rendered them invisible. Invisibility released the participants of the judgment from other students that reinforced their feelings of alienation and shame and prevented them from being accepted by peers. Although the story above captures his feelings in high school, Tyrell began his quest to become invisible in elementary school:

When I moved to Virginia in the third-grade, the kids were either Black or White and I didn't want anyone to know I was mixed. I tried to hide it and when my mom would come and pick me up from school, I would tell the kids she was my babysitter... When I got older, I still felt like the Black kids was [sic] judging me so I tried to be more Black [laughs]. I thought if I grew my hair and braided it up, people would overlook my White mom or my green eyes and I could look like a "normal" Black kid.

Tyrell's attempts to eliminate the judgment from peers highlights the two ways in which participants tried to become invisible—hiding and acting normal.

*Hiding.* Although most of the stories participants told about to hiding related to their sexuality, there were some, like Tyrell's story above, that related to race. Although he is biracial, Tyrell identifies as African American. In school, he was afraid of the stigma of being a "half-breed" and chose to deny his White heritage. "When they [other students] looked at me, they knew I was something but they weren't sure if I was Black." During the interview, Tyrell discussed the challenges of keeping his biracial identity hidden:

When I was by myself, I could kind of pull it off. I might be the color of a vanilla latte and my hair might be a little curlier than some but I definitely had the swag [laughs]. Everything would be going fine until my mom showed up. I could see the wheels turning in people's heads. They would be like, "Who the...I thought you was Black, like for real Black." Sometimes, they would be like, "Oh, okay. We was wondering if you was mixed."

According to Trey, students had suspicions about his racial identity and he knew that his mother's appearance would be the "smoking gun." Several participants attempted to hide their sexuality utilizing a similar approach—because people already had suspicions about their sexuality, the participants carefully hid any and all evidence that, like Tyrell's

mother, would confirm their doubts. In reflecting on his same-sex attractions in middle school, Tony highlighted his approach to hiding:

I can remember a bunch of us being at the basketball courts. By this time, some of the girls thought I was gay because they would catch me checking out the same guys they all thought were really cute. Anyway, they [the boys] were playing three-on-three, shirts against skins, and Dominic had to take off his shirt. He was *the* best looking kid at school, hands down. As they started to play, some of the girls were looking to see if I was looking at Dominic and I was trying so hard not to...I had to be so careful to hide anything that would prove I was into guys.

Like Tyrell inability to quell the suspicions surrounding his racial identity, Tony recognized that he could not stop others from questioning his sexual identity. As a result, Tony focused his energy on hiding any evidence that would provide an answer to the questions. During his high school years, Elias connected with other gay Black males online after his parents went to sleep. After chatting with new friends, Elias would carefully delete the browser history to ensure his secret was kept safe. In high school, Tony had a very close friendship with another student that students suspected was gay.

Me and Eddie would hang out on the weekends or after school but we had to make sure we weren't seen with each other. Eventually we started hanging out at this park on my side of town and just talk. We would spend hours in the park isolated from the rest of the world...the few times we went to the same party, we would go separately and barely speak all night. Now that I think about it, I realize that that was so stupid.

Although the friendship provided much needed solidarity for both boys, Tony and his friend believed that a public friendship would confirm the rumors about their sexuality, so they avoided each other during school. I asked if they visited each other's houses and Tony shared that his family also suspected Eddie was gay:

The one time he did come over, my dad said he acted a little fruity and I was nervous that he was going to think the same thing about me so that was the end of that [pause] I wonder if that's why he never invited me to his house.

Tony's experience highlighted the convoluted nature of becoming invisible. Hiding required participants to monitor *their* identity performance while simultaneously monitoring the actions of others to ensure that neither their behavior nor that of others was incriminating. For Tony, hiding caused the stress he felt from dealing with his sexuality to significantly increase.

One time a mutual friend saw me getting into Eddie's car after school and asked me about it. I blew it off and told him that I just needed a ride home 'cause my parents were out of town and that it was no big deal. The next day, another friend told me that I should have had a party while my parents were out of town and I was like, "My parents weren't out of town," and then I remembered. It was too much to keep track of and I was stressed out.

With hiding requiring so much mental agility and forethought, I can understand why most participants negotiated their identities by trying to appear normal.

*Appear normal.* Elias bragged about his ability to hide information that would point to his sexuality and believed that his ability to hide in "plain sight" afforded him many social opportunities. Over time, Elias honed the necessary skills to appear normal. Throughout the interviews, the term "normal" was used interchangeably with "regular" and "average." For Dayquan, *normal* students were in *regular* classes rather than in the gifted classes he attended. For DeMarcus and Caleb, *normal* students didn't understand what it was like to have divorced parents because the *average* kids didn't come from broken homes. It was also used to describe phrases like "most of the kids" and "everyone

else.” Although no participant gave a definition of “normal,” the term was used to describe the students who were heterosexual and whose stories aligned with the master-narrative of school.

For many of my participants, the first step to becoming normal was to have a girlfriend. Dayquan had a serious girlfriend in high school that he began dating during his junior year. Tara was a year older and was sexually experienced. Although he had kissed her, Dayquan was afraid that Tara would tell others that he wasn’t interested in sex. Dayquan recognized that *having* a girlfriend was not enough; rather, to be seen as normal he would be required to engage in the behaviors and activities that normal students engaged in. Christian did not fully become aware of his sexuality until college but he recognized he was attracted to guys during high school. After realizing the girls in high school were mostly attracted to athletes, Christian decided to join the track team. During the interview, he shared a story of being humiliated at a track meet when he was almost lapped during a middle distance race. He recalled receiving a “pity clap” from the fans in the bleachers when he finally crossed the finish line. For Christian, joining the track team, in spite of all of the other extracurricular activities in which he participated, evidences how far he went to be normal and impress the girls. Christian says that even though he regularly dated girls in high school, he still did not fit in with the straight guys who were all about women.

Other participants sought normalcy by adopting the ways in which the normal students interacted with others. In high school, DeMarcus didn't give gay students "the time of day" because he thought they may be interested in him and he was afraid for his

reputation. DeMarcus attributes this negative behavior towards gays students to his need for fitting in with his social group and his desire to be normal. Knowing how his clique treated other students, DeMarcus was careful not to let any of his close friends know of his sexuality and that he was having a sexual relationship with his teacher. When talking about the juxtaposition between being a homophobic jock and having a romantic relationship with an older man while in high school, DeMarcus said, "I knew how to turn it on and turned it off. I would shut down my feelings and just act normal around my friends." He was afraid that he would be forced to endure the negative treatment that he imposed on other gay students if he was open about his sexuality. His choice to be normal allowed him to quiet the feelings of shame crept up when he considered embracing his sexuality.

Finally, a few of the participants tried to be normal by displaying traditionally masculine behaviors. Ashton discussed how he responded to being teased in middle school: "Yeah, I fought a lot. I mean, I may be small but I had to let them know that I wasn't no punk or no sissy." For Ashton, fighting was a way to highlight masculinity when sexuality was questioned. Doug began taking karate classes to fight back when students bullied him for being effeminate. He, along with his father, hoped acting more masculine would decrease students' suspicions about his sexuality. Trey was the prom king, a role that had typically been held by hyper-masculine boys at his school. After much campaigning, Stephen was selected to be on the homecoming court during high school. In previous years, the homecoming court was reserved for boys who were loved by all of the girls and were known for their athletic ability. Stephen reflected on this

feeling during the interview and was unable to contain his smile as he reminisced: “When I made it onto the homecoming court, I had this moment where I felt like I had arrived...I felt like they [the students] really liked me.” Both Trey and Stephen and talked about being the prom king and being on the homecoming court as big accomplishments while they were in high school. During the interview, it was clear that both were still proud of their accomplishments and their ability to appear so normal that they were able to fit into the masculine stereotype of high school boys and receive the full acceptance and acknowledgement of their peers.

Accomplishing the goal of being normal, however, did not come without a cost. Tony’s desire to be normal ruined his friendships with others:

For a while, I got pretty good at being like everyone else and I would go to a lot of the football player parties at Darryl’s house...I was in the school musical, and this one weekend, instead of going to Darryl’s, I decided to go to the cast party. I was hoping none of them knew I went, but somehow they found out. They were calling the party “nerd fest.” I tried to pretend that I didn’t want to go or that I just went to make out with some girls and right in the middle of me bashing the party and everyone that went, some of the cast walked into the room. I felt horrible ‘cause those guys [from the musical] were my “real” friends and they were pissed. [Pause] It’s really sad that I felt like I had to be an asshole in order to be normal.

Tony revisited the stress and guilt associated with the poor treatment of his friends throughout the interview evidencing his belief that the benefits of being conditionally accepted are unable to compete with full acceptance:

Even though I didn’t tell the kids in the play I was bi, I still felt like they really liked me. I mean, at least I didn’t have to worry about sounding too gay or acting to gay ‘cause I knew they had my back.

While the consequence of Tony's attempt to be normal negatively impacted others, Stephen recognized the pain he caused himself by trying to act normal:

When the curtain falls and the lights go out, you are exhausted from being this character on stage for only two hours. Imagine what it's like when the curtain never comes down and you are forced to act all the time.

Stephen shared his theatre analogy when he was talking about his choice to become comfortable with his sexuality. Over time, Stephen became aware of how choosing to act normal was damaging to his well-being. Therefore, coming out was less about his sexuality and more about ending a performance and finding emotional rest.

**Privileging one identity over another.** Previously, I have described social homelessness as a conundrum. Referring to the necessary identity negotiations of social homelessness as a conundrum highlights the complexity of the issue.

It wasn't like I made the decision to focus on my sexuality over my race or vice versa just one time. I had to keep making those kind of decisions over and over...It was like each new situation made me come up with a new balance between the two [marginalized identities] and I was always trying to get the balance right [laughs]. I sound like a mad scientist working on some kind of experiment don't I?

In the quote above, Tony expressed the complexity of his identity conundrum, which required him to make "on-the-spot" adjustments to his identity performance. Stephen described his identity negotiation as an ongoing internal conversation with himself. As he was interacting with others, he reminded himself how to craft his identity performance based on his audience: "Depending on who was around, I would tell myself, "Don't give them too much. Don't be too flamboyant. Don't give them too much. Don't be too Black."

Tony, who had a similar inner-dialogue that helped him “read the room,” shared an example of how he had to make adjustments to his identity performance based on who was present:

There was this one time that I went to an away basketball game with some of my White friends. This was before I officially started dating Curtis [Tony’s White boyfriend in high school] but we were super flirty with each other. I was standing in line waiting to get snacks for me and him and in walks a few of my Black friends who was supposed to be at the movies and for a second, I freaked ‘cause I didn’t want them to see me bringing Curtis his drink; that would’ve been a little too gay and even though I was planning to go back and sit next to him, I didn’t want to give them too much. So, like an idiot, I left the soda on the counter and pretended not to hear the [concession] lady when she was calling for me to come back.

Tony explained that because he wasn’t expecting to see any of his African American friends at the basketball game, he was hoping to build upon his budding romance with Curtis. After their arrival, Tony was forced to make snap decisions about which identity was most important in the moment—racial identity or sexual identity. Tony, like most participants, felt it was impossible to simultaneously be African American and SGL. Because of their perceived identity limitations, participants were often forced to privilege one identity over the other. Tony captured this idea as he reflected on his actions at the basketball game: “I had to decide whether I was gonna act “White” and kick it with Curtis or act “Black” and pretend like I wasn’t bisexual.” Tony’s vignette provided me with two subcategories—Acting “White” and Acting “Black” that helped me explicate participants’ identity negotiations in response to their social homelessness.

*Acting “White.”* As previously stated, most participants experienced feelings of incongruity as they wrestled with their racial and sexual identity. Because of the

incongruency, participants felt both internal and external pressure to either be authentically “Black,” which meant denying their same-sex desires, or embrace their SGL identity, which was perceived as denying their racial identity and choosing to act “White.” After coming out in high school, Stephen and his best friend Anthony, who was also gay, began wearing mascara and lip-gloss in an effort to take pride in their sexuality. Schoolmates accused Stephen and Anthony of acting “White” and they became the talk of the school. The rationale of the students’ accusation was not because Black students didn’t wear mascara or lip-gloss, rather it was because openly “flaunting your sexuality and going against the grain” are behaviors which are more aligned with students’ perception of White identity.

After attending predominately White schools in elementary and middle school, Jonah Curry attended his neighborhood’s public high school whose demographics better represented the diversity of his southern, suburban town and included a significant number of African American students.

I tried to hang out with the students I thought I wanted to be with all my life and that didn’t work out either because those kids didn’t, I wasn’t like them. I didn’t grow up in the same environments as they did so they didn’t accept me as I thought they would because they felt I acted “White” or spoke “White” or other things.

Although he was excited to see students that looked like him when he got to high school, Jonah was not accepted by his African American peers and found the difficulty of not fitting in with the Black community to be a painful experience. Jonah was raised by his Nigerian father who had negative opinions of Black people in America. During the

interview, Jonah discussed being sheltered from Black people at a young age and shared that the only African American faces he did see, he was told by family specifically not to emulate those behaviors.

After grappling with the alienation he felt from African American students during his freshman year, Jonah felt that he had little to lose and he decided to come out of the closet. While his choice to act “White” and be openly gay provided him with acceptance from his White peers, he continued to struggle with the pain of not being “Black” enough to be accepted by African American students. Once Jonah came out to his peers and felt accepted by other gay students, he was faced with a new hierarchy within the homosexual male community of his school. This hierarchy privileged Whiteness over Blackness and masculinity over femininity. Although Jonah was effeminate, he wasn’t seen as one of the “flamboyant queens” he avoided. Jonah feared that the association with gay people particularly flamboyantly gay people would open him up to verbal and or physical abuse from his friends. After Jonah’s friends would bully the flamboyant queens, they would reassure him of their friendship by saying, "Okay, he's a faggot, but Jonah, you're not like that." Similarly, Jonah's White friends would also say things like, "I hate when niggers do this or that. Jonah, they should be more like you. You're a nice Black guy." While Jonah’s choice to act “White” initially provided him with the space to embrace his sexuality, it did not protect him from further discrimination based on his racial or sexual identities.

Dayquan Martin discovered his same-sex attraction in middle school but felt that the allegiance to the Black community instilled in him by his family prevented him from

accepting his sexually identity and coming out. Despite feeling that his racial and sexual identities were incongruent, Dayquan wanted to explore his same-sex attraction and meet other guys that were like him. Dayquan began chatting online but found that the guys he found attractive did not reciprocate his interest. As a result, Dayquan assumed a new persona and created a new online profile, which pictured a White male. Suddenly, Grayson—Dayquan’s fictitious name—received a great deal of interest online and chatting on the computer eventually led to conversations on the phone. When I asked Dayquan if anyone ever said that he sounded Black while he was on the phone, he provided an answer that hinted at the difficulty of that period and included his self-critique: “Nope [pause]. ‘Cause I was actually trying to sound White...um [long pause]. That’s crazy.” He continued to further describe his assumed identity:

This guy, who I posed as, he had dark hair...I want to say he was a baseball player... kinda big, broad, uh, he almost looked like he could have been Greek or Italian... The name I was using was Grayson [laughs] um...yeah [pause]. That’s wild. That’s wild when I think about it. You know what I mean?

Dayquan’s adopted identity continued to be a topic throughout the interview and he shared that the creation of Grayson was to assist him in negotiating his identity:

“[Becoming Grayson] is what I needed to do to break through... You know what I mean? Um, and I think it’s almost like that’s that double consciousness with the Black gay man.” Despite the pride that he felt as an African American male, Dayquan was unable to fully “show up” as a gay Black male. When faced with conundrum of negotiating his multi-marginalized identities, Dayquan tried to live in two worlds. In his day-to-day life, Dayquan was a proud African American student whose focus on academic achievement

was intended to reshape the way people saw Black males at his school. After the final bell rang, he distanced himself from his Black identity and became Grayson—an 18-year-old White baseball player who was gay. While choosing to act “White” offered Dayquan an outlet to explore his sexuality, it also reified the inferiority and self-loathing he experienced when he first perceived he was different from his peers.

*Acting “Black.”* For many of the participants, being a part of an African American identity group was not just about being a member of a racial identity group, it was about being a part of a movement. Trey accepted the responsibility of being Black: “I really felt that it was important for me to focus on my, um, identity as an African American male and achieving, um, as an African American male than, over any other aspect of myself.” Identity negotiation for Trey was very simple. After a long pause and a sigh, Trey said, “I hid one and promoted the other... That was my coping strategy.” Trey paused again reflectively, and added, “even now as an adult.” Throughout his k-12 career, Trey chose to act “Black,” which meant keeping his sexuality a secret.

Raised in a neighborhood adjacent to public housing by parents who were fully aware of the pervasiveness of racism in the south, Christian was taught the importance of fighting for racial equality at an early age. In kindergarten, Christian’s teacher recognized his academic ability and pushed him to reach his full potential.

She told my parents that I was one of the brightest students in the class. “But,” she says, “I know how things happen in school and I guarantee you by the fourth- or fifth-grade, they’re [Christian and an Asian student] going to be pushed aside and put back and people are going to pass over them ‘cause they’re not White and teachers who know them are going to focus on other people. I promise you that.”

By the third-grade, the teacher's prophecy had become true and Christian was isolated from other students in a separate section of the classroom because of his behavior. By middle school, Christian saw his drive for academic achievement as a potential win for him and for other African American students who had been "passed over." When he began having same-sex attractions, he dismissed his feelings as perverted and avoided being derailed from his ultimate mission.

Ashton Stewart's choice to act "Black" and subjugate his bisexuality was based on how gay people were depicted within the African American community:

When you're growing up as a Black man what do you hear? "Faggot, faggot, faggot. Blah, blah, blah. Gay gay gay." For men, you don't hear gay people being praised, so that's all I knew. "That's bad. That's not right. Jesus and church," so I was thinking this is not right.

Although he did not feel the internal pressure towards academic achievement based on the drive to debunk the negative stereotypes of African American men like Christian, Ashton still wanted "praise" from the Black community. While choosing to act "Black" in school provided Ashton with acceptance from African American peers, he continued (and still continues) to suffer from the shame of his secrets.

Elias also saw his racial identity as paramount and, although he began experimenting sexually with boys at eight-years-old, he believed (and still believes) that publicly acknowledging his sexuality would have a negative impact that extended far beyond him and his family. For Elias, choosing to be openly gay and Black would add a stigma to Black people that would hinder the progression towards racial equality for the African American community. "White people could do that. They could march in a gay

pride parade this Saturday, and next Saturday, march in the Italian pride parade and the two not cancel each other out." Elias relates the differences in these experiences to the ways in which racial identity groups perceive sexuality. Elias believed that for White people, sexuality was a facet of who they were; and for African Americans, sexuality was a defining quality of their identity.

Despite Elias' pro-Black agenda, he had African American friends *and* White friends in high school and was able to find space to discuss his sexuality within his circle of nine friends.

Although we never talked about sexual orientation, um, there was some measure of comfort that you had with the group and I think it's because we all had concluded that we had this particular thing [same-sex-attraction] in common and even if you hadn't already identified yourself as being that way, you had some measure of curiosity.

Within his group of nine friends, Elias was closest to two of the other African American boys. He believes that he was unable to become closer to any of the White students, even though he assumed they shared his sexuality, because "the experience was not perceived as being the same. We felt that they're being White gave them the opportunity to go against the norm and no one would question." Elias, like several participants, viewed White students' ability to challenge social norms and embrace their gayness as a form of White privilege that, despite their sexuality, was afforded to them:

White people tend to be a little more embracing than Black people. And...for us as African Americans, that [SGL identity] is perceived as another strike against you...so why are you making this road harder for yourself? But, for the two White guys, at the end of the day, you'll be okay. And I don't perceive they felt

that they had as much skin in the game as we did as African-Americans. I mean, their struggle is not like ours.

Elias believed that *being* Black, experiencing racism, and bearing the load of fighting for the racial equality of his community was a daunting task, and he did not need the added pressure of also being gay. As a result, Elias negotiated his racial and sexual identity by *acting* “Black.”

While analyzing the stories shared by participants, I was clear that this notion of acting “Black” related to more than just sexuality. Participants applied the concept of acting “Black” to music preferences, style of dress, religion, food and academics. In many of the schools and families represented, African Americans whose behavior or preferences did not align with other African American students were accused of acting “White.” While it negatively impacted a couple of the participants’ ability to connect to and engage with other Black students, the “White” accusation was challenging for Christian, despite his conscious choice to act “Black” regarding his sexuality. As previously stated, Christian was a dedicated student who was committed to high scholarship academically. As a result, he was consistently in upper-level classes surrounded by White students who were from the upper- and middle-class neighborhoods of his small rural town. Christian’s African-American peers, however, were typically scheduled into lower-level classes. This created a disconnection between Christian and African-American students while further creating a divide between Christian and his White classmates with whom he could not relate because of their differences in socioeconomic status and culture. Even though Christian’s academic accomplishments

were seen by some as acting “White,” he still earned the respect of his African American peers who appreciated how he “overcame the limitations and fought against the stereotypes of Black people.” Tony’s experience was similar:

Some of the kids gave me shit for being in advanced classes and called me White boy and other nonsense like that, but it wasn’t a big deal. I mean, it was annoying at times, but I knew I wasn’t gonna lose my “Black card” just for being smart...But, when people found out me and Curtis was messing around, my “Black card” was snatched in a heartbeat [laughs].

Tony’s vignette shows that there is a hierarchy within the confines of acting “Black” and that, while it may be atypical of the expected African American identity performance, being smart was viewed a positive quality that was appreciated. Like the aforementioned privilege to go against the grain afforded to White gay men, Tony’s understanding of the performance of African American identity allows Black people to upset the status quo regarding intelligence (positive) but not sexuality (negative).

**Summary.** Throughout their k-12 careers, participants underwent difficult periods because of their multi-marginalized identities. Because of their identities as African American and SGL, they experienced alienation, shame and lack of acceptance from peers. In an effort to find temporary and/or permanent relief from the pain caused by social homelessness, participants responded in a myriad of ways. The varied responses gleaned from the interview data were grouped and categorized into four themes: 1) Over-Achieving, 2) Seeking Peer Validation, 3) Becoming Invisible, and 4) Privileging One Identity Over Another. As I analyzed the data, I found no evidence to suggest that the above responses occurred serially or sequentially. Instead, the stories shared by

participants indicate that responding to social homelessness is a “messy” process that a) happens both consciously and subconsciously; b) is shaped by and grows from previous life experiences; c) although it is intended to improve conditions, can produce new identity negotiation challenges; and d) can yield positive and/or negative results.

Responding to social homelessness does not happen in a vacuum, but is influenced by the individual’s social context and shaped by their interactions with others.

### **Intervening Condition that Influences Social Homelessness**

**Adult responses.** Throughout the data collection phase, there were several instances where participants discussed adults that played significant roles in their lives and shaped the ways in which they responded to being socially homeless. In some cases, the impact of the adult was detrimental to the overall well-being of the participant because their presence in the participant’s life added to their feelings of alienation, shame and/or lack of acceptance from peers as a result of their racial or sexual identity. Caleb shared about an adult that made elementary school especially challenging:

Elementary school was a time of loneliness and confusion [long pause]...Um...because I was molested and I couldn’t rationalize what was going on then but still knew it wasn’t normal or right.

Caleb shared that a college-aged adult male, who was a distant relative, molested him during the break between second- and third-grade. Caleb never told anyone that he was molested when he was younger and it was the first of many secrets that he kept from others throughout his adolescent years. The shame resulting from Caleb’s molestation continued to grow as he developed and led to his belief that because he was SGL, he was

inferior to his heterosexual friends. Although he is now 18 years past his molestation, Caleb still harbors feelings of inferiority and described himself as “sexually despondent.”

Some participants’ experiences with significant adults helped them in their response to social homelessness even though the interaction was initially very painful.

Stephen discussed the long-term affects of his stepfather’s rant when he was very young:

For some reason, we got into a little argument that night over something, I don’t remember. But, I remember him getting in my face and calling me a faggot, calling me a queer, calling me a sissy, and all of those types of names...and I was just looking at him. I was so hurt by that but I didn’t allow myself to cry...I think that’s when I started to figure out not to show too much emotion. For him to do that...for someone who’s supposed to love and protect me to get in my face and blatantly call me out my name for who I was really taught me that no matter what happens in life, I’m gonna have to stick to my guns and be who I am.

Although Stephen’s experience in the fourth-grade was a tragic moment, he recognizes that it played a significant role in laying the necessary foundation for him to find self-acceptance.

Both Caleb and Stephen encountered adults whose treatment of them was physically and/or emotionally abusive and, although Stephen was able to use the experience to propel him in a positive direction, neither of the adults intended their behavior to be supportive. During the interviews, I asked the participants to share stories about significant people (bad or good) that were critical in shaping their experiences. Through the participants’ stories about experiences with adults during their bouts with social homelessness, I was able to group the adult response data into two categories—Oppositional Adult Responses and Supportive Adult Responses.

*Oppositional adult responses.* Although it was rare, there were times that participants sought help from adults as they grappled with the alienation and shame of social homelessness. While several of the participants believed their internal struggles were issues that they should handle on their own, most agreed that adults could have offered support to help them deal with the lack of acceptance from peers, particularly when it involved bullying. Throughout the interviews, participants shared stories about adults whose responses to their social homelessness were oppositional instead of supportive.

I decided to use the term “oppositional” rather than “unsupportive” to highlight the impact of the adult response. In general, we would interpret a supportive response as being helpful and an unsupportive response as not helpful. In second-grade, Tony was teased by a couple of African American boys for being biracial. He told his teacher that they were calling him “White boy” and that it was very hurtful to him. His teacher responded by moving his seat to the other side of the room and the boys were unable to tease him in class. The next day, they began calling Tony “White boy” on the playground during recess. In this vignette, the teacher’s response was unsupportive because it did not help Tony by stopping the behavior. The term “unsupportive” is problematic in the context of this study because it conveys a sense of neutrality that sheds little light on the role adult responses played during participants’ periods of social homelessness. Instead, I chose to use the term “oppositional” because it puts the adult in the role of an antagonist who made the participant’s situation more difficult.

Tyrell moved frequently during his elementary years. After finally establishing friendships with peers during his two-year stint in Virginia, Tyrell's family moved to Tennessee just before he began fifth-grade. After just a few weeks of school, Tyrell started to get picked on by his classmates. Tyrell had become accustomed to hearing all of the homophobic slurs over the years and learned the benefit of a "quick comeback." The teasing at his new school, however, was very different than what he expected:

Those kids were slick. They would never call me a faggot or homo. They would be real nice to me but refer to me as "she." "What does she have for lunch today?" or "See if she wants to play on our team," or "Somebody ask her what we have for homework." If I reacted, I was the one who got in trouble because the teacher didn't hear it... So, I decided that enough was enough and I would tell her [the teacher]. She looked at me like I was making a big deal and then she stood up and stopped everyone from working and said, "Class, please stop being mean to Tyrell by calling him a "she" or a "girl." Just because he acts a little feminine doesn't mean it's okay to tease him. Words can be hurtful, especially when you are a drama queen." I stood in disbelief before going back to my seat.

After the teacher's speech, the teasing got worse. Students who hadn't previously bothered him joined in the teasing and called him DQ—short for drama queen. "When they did refer to me as a 'he' they would stress the word or do air quotes. I would have been better off not saying anything." The teacher's speech in the story above was oppositional because it didn't make his situation better (supportive) or cause things to remain the same (unsupportive); rather, her response made Tyrell's situation significantly worse.

In several cases, oppositional adult responses made things worse by faulting the participant for being socially homeless. Doug shared his father's response to the bullying he endured in school:

I remember one day I did tell my dad. I don't really remember what he said but then after that, a series of events just happen. He was trying to get me to be more masculine. He said, "Don't do that [holds his hand with a limp wrist]," or comment about how I stand. He would say, "Fix your mannerisms" or "Don't say that." It was hurtful, you know, forcing me to be something I'm not...and I hated that.

Doug was looking to his father for support or to advocate on his behalf at school. His father's response, however, problematized Doug's mannerisms and speech patterns and made him feel that he somehow deserved to be bullied at school because he wasn't masculine enough. After dealing with the lack of acceptance by peers because of his sexuality, Doug's interactions with his father made him feel that he deserved to be alienated.

The above instances of oppositional responses were examples of an individual adult's response to the participant. In many cases, the oppositional response came from an institution via an individual adult. Elias remembered having relatives who questioned the sexuality of his friends and, as a result, quoted scriptures to warn him about associating with people who may be gay. Elias was stuck between trying to balance his family's opinion of him with his solidarity he found from his close circle of friends. He shared a story about one particular relative:

I had an aunt who was somewhat of a zealot [laughs], I guess you would say she was a Christian fanatic. She would always put the pressure on me and she would encourage my mother to put similar pressure on me...my aunt would say, "They've seen this group corraling and hanging out at night and riding around town, and you don't want to be caught in the car with them because people would say, 'That whole car was full of homosexuals.'"

During this period, Elias was ashamed of his sexual attraction because it was in direct conflict with his religious beliefs. His aunt's response was hurtful because it reinforced Elias' religious guilt and feelings of shame. Elias felt that because of his aunt's close connections in church, her response extended beyond her individual opinion and was representative of the church. Doug shared a similar experience: He remembered visiting a church and looking for unconditional acceptance. During the sermon, the preacher said, "God created Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve," and Doug was crushed. He never returned to the church and wanted "nothing to do with anyone who was in the service regardless of what they believed." Both Elias and Doug encountered adult responses in which an individual oppositional response was extended to represent a larger group.

As I analyzed the data, I found that a couple of the participants experienced an oppositional adult response through a proxy. Both Doug and Tony shared the coming out stories of their older gay siblings and discussed the affect it had on them. Doug's older sister came out when he was 15-years-old and his father made many hurtful comments. Tony's older brother came out to his parents while Tony was in elementary and discovering his same-sex attraction. He applied their negative reactions to his own situation and believed that his parents would have an oppositional response if he shared his feelings with them.

*Supportive adult responses.* As previously mentioned, supportive adult responses are those that helped the participant deal with the feelings associated with social homelessness. As I analyzed the data, I found that there were often similarities in the ways in which participants discussed positive interactions with significant adults.

Consider these two examples from Tyrell and Doug. Tyrell recalled how his mother supported him: “My mother loved me unconditionally and always supported me. She came to my school events regardless of what it was and always helped me with my homework.” Doug’s recollection of his mother’s support was very similar: “My mother has always unconditionally loved me regardless of who I was or what I was doing. I always felt very close to her.” In isolation, these are very similar stories of generic adult support that may or may not be in response to the participants’ social homelessness. Within the larger context of the full interview, however, the meaning behind these stories are very different. Although Tyrell wrestled with his sexual identity and felt like an outsider at school because he was gay, he was always open with his mother about his sexuality:

In middle school, I was being teased really bad about being gay so I created a fictitious girlfriend on Facebook and started posting comments from her to me on my timeline [laughs]. It helped that I moved around a lot because I pretended that she was still in Tennessee. I know my mom saw the posts but she never said anything directly to me until I was going into high school.

Tyrell came out to his mother during that conversation and shared that he wasn’t hiding his sexuality from her, they just hadn’t had a chance to talk about it. Doug’s story above about his mother’s support was shared to contrast the response he received from his father who coached him to change his mannerisms. When he was around his mother, Doug said, “I felt like I could be myself.” Based on its proximity to the story about his father and the positive outcome associated with his mother’s response, I interpreted Doug’s comments about his mother as a supportive adult response.

During his interview, Jonah Curry discussed two teachers who responded supportively to the pain Jonah endured because he was socially homeless. These stories highlight the two types of supportive adult responses found in the data—solicited support and unsolicited support. In a discussion about the level of support Jonah received from his father in elementary school, he recalled inviting his dad to a school presentation shortly after the death of his mother. Jonah knew that his classmates’ parents would attend and he wanted his father to attend as well. “On the day of the presentation, everyone’s parents show up and my father is no where to be found.” After encouraging him to call his father as a reminder, Jonah and his teacher realized that “he was at work and had no intentions of coming.” As soon as he hung up the phone, Jonah burst into tears in front of the entire class. Looking back on the pain he felt at that moment, Jonah said that it “epitomizes the entire k-8 experience ‘cause my father kept us busy with things so he could be busy with his things.” Twenty minutes after sharing the story about his absent father, Jonah talked about adult support during his elementary years and shared what happened after he dried his tears: “After my dad didn’t show up that day, I called my second-grade teacher from the year before and she stood in my dad’s place and sat through the presentation.” Prior to the presentation, Jonah had already felt isolated from his peers because he was the only Black student in his class and his father’s absence exacerbated his isolation. By responding to Jonah’s request to stand in for his father, Jonah’s former teacher displayed a *solicited* supportive adult response.

As previously mentioned, Jonah struggles with fitting in and gaining acceptance from peers continued through his middle school years. He shared a story about his

seventh-grade math teacher, who was the only African American teacher at his White Catholic school. Although he had not come out to himself or to others at this point, he believed that the teacher knew he was wrestling with his sexuality and dealing with the internalized shame: “She saw that I was withdrawn and shy at that point in my life and she kinda took me under her wing as you would expect as a Black teacher at a Catholic school.” Jonah remembered eating alone in the cafeteria and not having many friends:

And she walked over and she sat and she ate with me during lunch and I remember her telling me, “No matter what anyone else says, f\*ck those faggots, you are a beautiful person.” [Laughs]. But looking back now, for several reasons, I think about it all the time. Looking back at it, I think she realized that I was gay...I definitely think she realized that; and that was one of those things that helped me get through those next couple of years.

Once again, Jonah’s teacher provides him with a supportive response to the alienation and isolation he felt in school. In this vignette, Jonah did not reach out to any of his teachers for help; rather, she noticed that he was withdrawn and acted on her own volition. This teacher’s response was categorized as an unsolicited supportive adult response.

Initially, I placed the responses from Jonah’s two teachers into the same category—supportive adult response. Both responses came from an adult, both responses addressed feelings related to the participant’s social homelessness and both yielded positive outcomes for the participant. As I continued to analyze the data on supportive adult responses further, I found differences among level of impact the responses had on the participants. Participants felt that while solicited responses were helpful, several of the participants believed it was the adults’ duty to respond supportively on their behalf.

Tony “snitched” on his classmates to one of his teachers after being bullied on a middle school field trip: “Yeah, I was glad that she [the teacher] got them to stop picking on me but I mean, come on, after I reported it, did she really have a choice?” After reflecting on the solicited supportive response from his teacher, Tony, although appreciative, felt that she had no choice but to respond positively. When they recounted stories of adult support that were unsolicited, participants were often found the support to be more meaningful. Sean talked about being asked to sing the *Star-Spangled Banner* at a school function by his sixth-grade teacher: “She knew I felt like an outsider at that school and she didn’t wait for me to make connections with people, she gave me the support and confidence I needed to feel like I was a part of the school... That lady will never know how much that meant to me.” Sean’s experience shows how when they are unsolicited, supportive adult responses were two-pronged. Beyond the positive impact described in solicited responses, participants felt that unsolicited responses showed the participants that they mattered in the eyes of the adults.

**Summary.** Embedded in the stories and experiences of multi-marginalized identity negotiation shared by participants were portraits of adults that responded to their feelings of alienation, shame, and lack of acceptance. The adult responses captured above were separated into two distinct categories: oppositional or supportive. These responses often had both short- and long-term affects that shaped how participants viewed themselves internally and how they viewed themselves within the larger social context of schools.

## **Potential Outcomes of Supportive Adult Responses**

**Affirmation.** As previously mentioned, a high majority of the participants experienced social homelessness in school as a result of their bifurcated racial and sexual identities. Although there were differences in the ways in which the 13 participants responded to their social homelessness, they all experienced feeling like an outsider, grappling with the incongruity of being African American and SGL, and battling with periods of social isolation. In the previous section, I discussed two types of adult responses to social homelessness—oppositional and supportive—and described supportive adult responses as being helpful for participants. Because I was interested in generating substantive theory that would assist school leaders in creating socially just schools, I was interested in knowing what, if any, impact supportive adult responses had in reshaping the lived experiences of participants. Although participants recognized the immediate positive benefits of supportive adult responses, I wanted to know more about the long-term affects. In several cases, the participant, though not specific, shared the long-term benefits, as they discussed the adult response. Referring to his impromptu lunch with his middle school teacher, Jonah said, “[And] that was one of those things that helped me get through those next couple of years.” In addition to the initial support he received, Jonah recognized the long-term impact of her intervention. Although Jonah made it clear that his teacher’s contribution lasted beyond his immediate need for support, he wasn’t initially clear about how his interpretation of her actions changed his trajectory until he shared about another teacher in high school:

I remember staying after for tutoring in PreCal and my Calculus teacher was one of the math tutors at the school, and I remember she had to leave for something and she said to one of the other teachers, “Oh this is Jonah, he’s one of my best students, he’s funny, you’ll love him.” And I looked at her and said, “Ms. Abraham, no one says funny anymore, I’m gay” [laughs].

Jonah didn’t highlight the above exchange with his teacher as an example of support; rather, he shared the story and connected it to the middle school lunch story to show the benefit of his teachers’ non-judgmental support. Jonah connected the above stories because they exemplified how affirming his teachers were. After recognizing that Jonah saw adult support as affirmation, I returned to the data and found an emerging pattern of affirmation among six of the 13 participants who experienced social homelessness.

Tony shared a story about an older cousin who was visiting from New York with her boyfriend who was a photographer when he was in the third- or fourth-grade. On the second day of their visit, Bobby the photographer, decided to take pictures of Tony and his family:

We were in the backyard and Bobby was snapping pictures of me and my cousin Grace. She was much older but she was a kid at heart and we were being really silly striking all of these cool poses...A couple weeks later, Grace came back to visit and brought the pictures for me to see. I was shocked and embarrassed. I looked like a girl in the pictures with my hands on my hips and lips poked out. As we were looking at them, I said something like, “Oh my God, I look like a...” and Grace interrupted me. She knew I was going to say “homo” but she wouldn’t let me say it. Instead, she said, “You look like you have more style than any ten-year-old I ever met and I love it.” When I tried so say it again, she cut me off and said, “Listen to me. You’re perfect.” We weren’t talking about the pictures anymore [pause]. Life changing...that moment was life changing because I suddenly had her stamp of approval.

Tony described Grace's affirmation as life changing because he continued to refer back to it during significant periods of social homelessness. "It didn't change things at that time but knowing in the back of my mind that Grace thought I was perfect helped me to find some inner strength."

Stephen's experience with adult support was similar to Tony's. During his senior of high school, Stephen auditioned for entrance into a performing arts high school. Shortly after auditioning, he found himself surrounded by other aspiring performers and living on a predominately White campus with students who offered him a reprieve from the pain of his previous schools:

I was able to talk about my boyfriends and talk about my family 'cause we were all going through some of the same kind of things. They pretty much came from the same situation that I came from; so we all were just kind of there for each other. And that gave me a sense of community, of a group.

Although these students were unconcerned with Stephen's sexuality, he experienced feelings of isolation, which were related to his African American identity. Stephen talked about the support that he received from his drama teacher who believed in him and helped him to find his self-worth: "He gave me the courage to look at myself and think, 'Maybe I'm okay.'"

Throughout his interview, Doug shared stories of the pain he felt as a result of others' reactions to his racial and sexual identity and his refusal to engage in becoming invisible as a response to being socially homeless. When I asked about how he endured the bullying, Doug responded by saying, "I always stayed true to myself." When I asked if he tried to become more masculine after coaching sessions with his father, Doug

responded by saying, “I always stayed true to myself.” Doug told me that his two closest companions in high school were the librarian, who monitored him while he shelved books during his free period, and the custodian, who was also his cousin. When I asked if it was difficult to feel so disconnected from peers, Doug responded by saying, “Yes, but I always stayed true to myself.” Finally, I asked Doug how he was able to stay true to himself in the middle of so much adversity and he proved the power of affirmation: “I never thought anything was wrong with me and it was because of my mother. She made me feel like there was nothing wrong with me so I didn’t need to change. Everyone else did.” The support Doug received from his mother did more than offer temporary relief from the hurt he felt from his father’s masculinity lessons. Like with Jonah and Tony, the support built within him a foundation of self-worth that would provide him with the confidence he needed to endure.

The above experiences of participants captured the significance of supportive adult responses and highlighted the importance of affirmation for multi-marginalized students as they negotiate their identities. Generally speaking, affirmation is the acknowledgement or endorsement of a person, place, event, etc. as a truth. Because of its positive connotations, the affirming of an individual is typically viewed as an acknowledgement of one’s “good” qualities. Therefore, the idea of affirming someone as a liar is nonsensical because of the general belief that lying is not a quality to be praised. Stephen noted the connections between affirmation and goodness as he reflected about one of his teachers: “His affirmation forced me to see my own worth...maybe I’m not so bad after all [laughs].” Stephen’s use of the term affirmation in the above quote is loaded

with meaning. He recognized that having his teachers affirm him as an African American gay male meant that they recognized the “good” in him. Therefore, Stephen was able to reframe his self-view and see both his racial and sexual identities as “positive qualities” that are inextricably tied to his overall goodness.

There were several participants who did not share stories about a positive adult relationship during school. Despite not having first-hand experiences of support—solicited or unsolicited—several participants were still able to speak to the significance adult supportive responses. Dayquan expressed that the difficulty he had being simultaneously African American *and* gay in high school has followed him into his adulthood, and he is still in search of affirmation from people who represent positions of authority.

During his interview, Trey discussed what he needed from the adults connected with his k-12 experiences that were missing: “Affirmation. I needed someone to tell me I was okay.” Although he did not have a personal affirmation story to compare his experiences to while he was in school, Trey believed the absence of affirmation made navigating his identity more difficult. “For me, at that time, [affirmation] would have been a place, a space, something, or someone that I could go to and have a conversation with about the emotion I was going through.” Trey shared that he looked to many of the adults in his life for this type of affirmation and did not limit his search to school. Because his family was heavily involved at his church, he also looked to members of the congregation for unsolicited support: “There was not anyone at church or at school that affirmed me; that gave me that space, whether right or wrong, to just be able to vocalize

that this is what I'm feeling." Although it was missing from his k-12 experiences, Christian also acknowledged the importance of affirmation. He recalls being aware that, while it was missing from his experiences, students representing dominant identity groups were affirmed: "I needed all of those things that everyone else got, but I needed them crafted for me... I feel that it was crafted to fit the box that I was supposed to fit in." For Christian, generic affirmation did little to satisfy his need for approval; rather, it highlighted the parts of his identity that failed to fit within the "box" and intensified his feelings of social homelessness.

Although participants' captured this notion of affirmation through stories that centered on the increase of their self-worth, there was also an understanding of the power of adult affirmation. Stephen honed in on this power as he described the benefits of this type of support: "Their affirmation gave me the balls to change. Change myself for the better and change things around me." For Stephen, accepting the support and interpreting it as affirmation was an act of resistance. Acknowledging his self-worth in the face of the societal norms that previously led him to believe otherwise meant rejecting his status as socially homeless and creating a new home. "In finding my social home, I found my most authentic self." Stephen described this new home as a place or a time when the performance ended, and he could just be.

**Summary.** Throughout the interviews, several participants recounted the immediate benefits of supportive adult responses during periods of social homelessness. Through an analysis of the varied stories about how supportive adults responded to feelings of alienation, isolation and rejection from peers, I discovered similarities in the

ways participants described outcomes. Using terms like approval, acknowledgement, respect, support, and endorsement, participants cited affirmation as the outcome of adult support. Contrary to the more fleeting nature of the temporary relief of social homelessness pain resulting from adult support, affirmation had a longer lasting affect that helped participants change the ways they viewed themselves.

### **Conclusion**

To generate substantive theory on multi-marginalized identity negotiation in school settings, I interviewed 14 African American SGL males. These stories were analyzed and organized using the grounded theory coding paradigm represented visually in Figure 1. Using the five themes of the grounded theory coding paradigm, I presented the results as a process in which a) the central phenomenon of social homelessness was identified and discussed, b) the three causal conditions of social homelessness—alienation, shame and lack of acceptance—were explored, and c) the four strategies used to deal with social homelessness—over-achieving, seeking peer validation, becoming invisible, and privileging one identity over another—were explored. By using the grounded theory coding paradigm, I was able to capture the interconnectedness of the participants' stories and illustrate the potential benefits of adult intervention. Further, using the grounded theory coding paradigm to analyze the data and organize my results, I discovered a progression of feelings and emotions that shaped the ways in which the participants interpreted their experiences and negotiated their identities when they were students. This progression is a significant component of the substantive theory that emerged from the data, which I will discuss in Chapter VI. In addition to proposing a

grounded theory of social homelessness that can be used heuristically by principals as they shape socially just school climates in Chapter VI, I will also discuss recommendations for school leaders and implications for future research based on the findings presented in this study.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover the stories of African American SGL males and generate substantive theory around multi-marginalized identity negotiation. Further, my hope was that the stories shared by African American SGL males and the theory that emerged from the data would provide school leaders with a unique lens or heuristic theory that will be useful in understanding the lived experiences of multi-marginalized identities as they construct socially just schools. Two over arching research questions guided this study.

1. How do African American students who identify as SGL males negotiate their multi-marginalized identities in educational spaces?
2. What impact—if any—does their identity negotiation have on the relationships they build with other students, particularly students who belong to only one of their marginalized identity groups?

My goal for exploring these two research questions was to provide school leaders with a lens to help them assess and shape their schools climate. Data was collected via 14 semi-structured interviews with men who identified as African American and SGL. The data were analyzed and categorized using a grounded theory coding model resulting in a substantive theory of social homelessness. This theory cites three causal conditions to social homelessness: alienation, shame, and lack of acceptance from peers. It also

highlights four ways students respond to being socially homeless: over-achieving, seeking peer validation, becoming invisible and privileging identities. This theoretical model—represented visually in Figure 2—denotes the process through which socially homeless students negotiate their multi-marginalized identities in school settings.

Figure 2. Theoretical Model of Social Homelessness



### Theory of Social Homelessness

In the selective coding phase of a grounded theory study, the investigator refines the theory that has been developed and presents propositions, or hypotheses about the story line of the theory (Creswell, 2007). From this investigation of how African

American SGL males negotiate their multi-marginalized identities, a theory of social homelessness emerged. This theory of social homelessness captures a progression of feelings and emotions that shape the ways in which African American SGL students interpret their experiences and negotiate their identities in school settings. Each of the qualities identified as part of this progression (alienation, shame, lack of acceptance from peers, over-achieving, seeking peer validation, becoming invisible, and privileging identities) are integral in the process of negotiating their identities and finding respite from social homelessness.

The theoretical model of social homelessness shown in Figure 2 represents the reciprocal and reflective nature of the data, demonstrates the interconnectedness of each characteristic, and highlights the power of adult responses to alter outcomes. As the reader can see, the central phenomenon, or central category of students from multi-marginalized identity groups, social homelessness is identified first. After social homelessness, causal conditions, or categories of conditions that determine the presence of social homelessness, and strategies used to respond to the feelings associated with social homelessness are indicated next. Although there are many ways that students can respond, and multi-marginalized students should not be limited in the ways that they respond to their identity negotiations, this theoretical model helps to capture the ways in which student reactions yield positive and/or negative outcomes within the school environment. The causal conditions (alienation, shame and lack of acceptance from peers) lend themselves to the intervening conditions of adult responses. Finally, the consequences, or outcomes of adult responses, specifically supportive adult responses,

are represented at the bottom of the diagram. Because this study was intended to heuristically support the work of principals, the most important aspect of the theory of social homelessness is the notion that adult intervention has the potential to change outcomes for socially homeless students. While there is value in supporting students who reach out for help, this study emphasizes the impact of unsolicited support and affirmation of socially homeless students.

**Propositions.** This theory of social homelessness is designed to be a practical tool for principals to better understand their multi-marginalized students in their schools. As with any other tool or theory designed to facilitate the work of school leaders, principals should be careful to avoid pitfalls in their use of this theoretical model that could inadvertently promote further marginalization for socially homeless students. Here, two propositions about the current theory are presented with a brief description of each.

1. *This process is not sequential or serial.* Students experiencing social homelessness are not expected to move through this process like developmental stages nor are they expected to confront one emotion/feeling at a time. This process, like identity, is fluid and each person's experiences are unique.
2. *The pattern of negative experiences and feelings associated with social homelessness can be interrupted via adult intervention.* How adults respond to socially homeless students—oppositional or supportive—can worsen or improve their present experiences. Further, adult responses can provide

socially homeless students with the necessary skills to re-conceptualize how they view themselves, potentially offering lasting improvements.

**Hypothesis.** Although this study focused on African American SGL males, I believe the theory generated in this dissertation can be useful in understanding other students who would identify as socially homeless because of their multi-marginalized identities; particularly those with bifurcated marginalized identities. That said, there is considerable diversity in how marginalized identity groups experience oppression in schools. In this study, there were a wide variety of schools attended by the participants representing various geographic locations, sizes, racial compositions and socioeconomic statuses. Despite the particulars of the school, the White heteronormative hierarchies that exist in the larger society were consistently reproduced in each of the participants' schools. In spite of these hegemonic consistencies, there were variations among the adult responses that improved or intensified students' social homelessness. Thus, more research on how adults use their positional power to provide socially homeless students with unsolicited support, regardless of societal norms, is necessary. Finally, this theory of social homelessness is designed to be a heuristic tool for school leaders (and other adult personnel) to assist multi-marginalized students during their identity negotiations by a) recognizing and identifying patterns of behavior that have the potential to be physically or emotionally damaging to already oppressed students; b) interrupting patterns of behavior that reify and/or support the hierarchies that undergird the oppression in schools; c) debunking the master-narrative of schools that privilege White heteronormative experiences and providing opportunities for the counternarratives of

multi-marginalized students to become more centralized. This theory should not be overgeneralized and used to dismiss the unique experiences of marginalized and multi-marginalized students and should be applied with prudence.

### **Recommendations for School Leaders**

Given the foregoing introductory statements, the findings presented through this research, and the grounded theory that has emerged from this study, which highlights the potential for adults to positively impact the outcomes for socially homeless students, the following specific recommendations are made:

**Recommendation #1.** *School leaders should develop new methods for assessing the climate of their school that decentralize the experiences of dominant identity groups and privilege the realities of socially homeless students.*

Although there are many instruments designed to measure a school's climate, only a few have proven to be scientifically sound (Wang, Berry & Swearer, 2013). These instruments gather information from students, staff members, and parents in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the school climate. Because of the relationship between school climate and bullying—students are more likely to participate in bullying when the school climate is unhealthy (Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011)—accurately assessing the climate is the first step in changing outcomes for socially homeless students. While current measures of school climate attempt to solicit feedback from all stakeholders, they fail to accurately represent the unique experiences of socially homeless students who are at greater risk of being bullied and are experiencing stress beyond that

of their non-victimized peers (Hughes, et al. 2009). Although bullies victimized most of the participants in this study, they still described the climates of their schools as positive.

During the theoretical sampling stage of analysis, I asked seven of the participants to share more information about their school's climate: *Give me three to five words that describe the climate of your high school. These words should describe how well people got along as well as how emotionally and safe people felt.* A compilation of participants' descriptions of their schools' culture is featured in Table 4. Despite their encounters with bullying, the participants interviewed minimized the impact of bullying describing the school climate as positive. The incongruency between participants' lived experiences and their recollection of the school climate supports findings in Robert Valles' (2007) qualitative study of how high school students coped with bullying. In his study, Valles noted that the students he interviewed had positive feelings about the school's culture although they had previously been bullied. These findings, in conjunction with the current study, indicate the need for a deeper and more nuanced investigation of school climate that creates space for students—especially multi-marginalized students—to share stories that capture how they experience their school.

Table 4. School Climate

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Status of Sexuality</b>	<b>School Climate Descriptors</b>
Trey Jackson	Not Out	Close, Family, Driven, Supportive, and Inclusive
Stephen Dawson	Out	Judgmental, Hostile, Loving, Safe, and Carefree
Ashton Stewart	Not Out	Freedom, Pride, Competitive, Supportive, and Traditional
Tyrell Stewart	Out	Secure, Traditional, Homophobic, Judging, and Fake
DeMarcus Privy	Not Out	Private, Safe, Group-Oriented, Sports-Focused, and Popular
Tony Lorenz	Out	Restrictive, Critical, Static, Rigorous, and Exciting
Elias Cage	Not Out	Secure, Respectful, Encouraging, Driven, and Conservative
Levi Smart	Not Out	Comfortable, Tight-Knit, Compliant

In the current study, I investigated how multi-marginalized students negotiated their identities in k-12 settings. I was interested in hearing their stories but also interested in how these stories unfolded within the school context. To understand the *realities of socially homeless students* as I suggested above, I asked questions intended to uncover how participants *felt* in their school environment. As previously noted, participants shared specific stories about times when they were not accepted by peers and were bullied, but they also shared feelings of unacceptance that were not related to acts of bullying, but were reinforced by the climate of the school. This phenomenon of ongoing feelings of discomfort and unacceptance during periods of non-bullying aligns with findings in Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, and Reid’s (1996) study of gay-related stress in African American and Hispanic youth. In their quantitative study of 136 Black and

Hispanic SGL youth in New York City, Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, and Reid found that the fear of being bullied was the most stressful issue for participants.

We suggest that it is the uncertainty of the response from others, whether accepting or rejecting of the person's sexual identity, that makes gay-related life events stressful. This uncertainty characterizes both the anticipation of the life events and their actual occurrence. Therefore, the uncertainty extends over time, often involves multiple individuals as targets (e.g., mother, sibling, friend), and generates a chronic state of stressfulness (Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, & Reid, 1996, p. 153).

As in the current study, Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, and Reid found that the fear of bullying by peers is driven by the social climate in which they interact with others.

To develop new methods for assessing school climate of their school that decentralize the experiences of dominant identity groups and privilege the realities of socially homeless students, school leaders must problematize the master-narrative within schools. This master-narrative overlooks the unique experiences of multi-marginalized students and highlights dominant opinions of a school's climate as a universal truth (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The theoretical model of social homelessness and the experiences shared in this study provide school leaders with an alternative to the master-narrative that serves as a lens through which we can assess the success of our schools' climate. Based on this theoretical model of social homelessness, students may respond to the feelings associated with social homelessness by engaging in high academic work and/or taking on student leadership roles. Within the master-narrative of schools, successful students—those who excel academically or hold school offices—view the climate of their school as positive

and are receiving the adult support they need to excel. Because of the positive attributes of academic achievement and student leadership, it is very easy for principals to overlook the negative feelings of alienation, shame and lack of acceptance that may be a catalyst to these behaviors. Specifically, if students are engaging in high academic work in order to fill the void they are experiencing by being socially homeless, it is likely that they will require additional support for their emotional well-being. Similarly, this theoretical model and the experiences shared in this study show that multi-marginalized students may respond to their social homelessness with a quest for popularity. Within the master-narrative of schools, popular students are viewed as having it all together and are therefore at risk of not getting the emotional support needed to address their feelings of inferiority. In the current study, the more oppressed, marginalized and ostracized participants felt, the more important it was to feel validated via “normalizing offices.” Normalizing offices describes those traditional positions in school that play significant roles in the master-narrative of school (i.e. homecoming king, SGA president, jock, etc.). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) note that research and theoretical models that seek to explain the inequities in education and the gaps in academic achievement often support majoritarian viewpoints through the constant amplification of deficits. The theoretical model presented in this study nuances the ways in which multi-marginalized students respond to their social homelessness, highlights the potentiality of positive responses to social homelessness and promotes the use of counter-narratives to expose deficit-informed research that silences and distorts the epistemologies of multi-marginalized students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

**Recommendation #2.** *School leaders should develop a process to ensure socially homeless students are provided with unsolicited adult support (affirmation) in response to the alienation, shame, and lack of acceptance they experience within the school environment.*

As previously stated, the risk of emotional distress is greater for marginalized students in comparison to students who represent dominant identity groups. For socially homeless students, the potential stress is compounded by the unique challenges associated with negotiating marginalized identities, especially when those identities are bifurcated. While the internal feelings of alienation, shame and lack of acceptance experienced by socially homeless students can lead to responses that would be viewed as positive within the master-narrative of schools, the potential of a decline in the social and emotional well-being of socially homeless students remains. The theoretical model presented in this study provides school leaders with an opportunity to intervene in the lives of socially homeless students by providing them with affirmation via unsolicited acts of adult support. In order to explore what affirmation looks like for socially homeless students, school leaders should investigate the ways that they and their schools regularly affirm students from dominant identity groups. In other words, how are White heterosexual students currently being affirmed in our schools? Further, they must explore the role the master-narrative about school experiences plays in the affirmation in support of White heterosexual students.

Students representing dominant identity groups are affirmed in two ways in school environments—through traditional curriculum choices and the master-narrative of

schools. The experiences of White heterosexual students are reflected back at them through the content and literature they study in their classrooms. This reflective nature found in traditional instructional materials affirms students from dominant identity groups while further othering socially homeless students whose lived experiences are rarely infused into lessons. In her article on the need to prepare teachers to represent their students' cultures during classroom lessons, Geneva Gay (2002) claims when cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of students are infused into instructional practices, students are more successful in school. According to Gay, "the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters" (2002, p. 106). Gay's belief that students of color are affirmed through curriculum can be extended to include multi-marginalized students.

In addition to finding affirmation from their daily lessons, students from dominant identity groups are also affirmed through the master-narrative of schools that positions their lived experiences as "normal" and centralizes their realities of school. For these students, the explanatory stories society tells as to why things are the way they are offer a roadmap to help navigate the social murkiness of schools. It's the school myths like "With hard work and determination, all students can achieve" that we all grow up hearing and believe even when we are fully aware of the systemic oppression that creates barriers to academic success for marginalized students. It spins a story about why some students experience academic, social and economic advantages and why others are disadvantaged. It sells us on the idea of schools being a meritocracy while playing down the impact of

oppressive hierarchies. Within this master-narrative are explicit negative stories about certain groups of people such as “Those people don’t care about education” (Fill in the blank about who “those people” are).

While the master-narrative of school is affirming for some students, it paints a picture of schools that reifies socially homeless students’ feelings of alienation, shame and lack of acceptance. In the current study, participants assumed their schools and the adults in them were racist and heterosexist until they were given some indication that the opposite was true. Stephen Dawson assumed that his elementary school was racist and that he was targeted by teachers and not given the support he needed because he was African American. When he later encountered the helpfulness of the staff at his performing arts high school, he did not have the schema to handle the positivity from the adults. Similarly, Jonah’s encounter with the gay-friendly teachers in high school was shocking and stands out for him as a significant story because it was unexpected. Although none of his previous teachers made outright homophobic comments, their ambiguity on the issue of homosexuality caused Jonah to interpret their silence as the promotion of the heterosexist status quo.

Since the master-narrative of school provides students from dominant identity groups with unsolicited affirmation, school leaders must also create a space for the counter-narratives of socially homeless students to be heard and acknowledged. Just as Milner’s (2008) believes that a “counternarrative allows the researcher and participants to study and name a reality inconsistent with what might be considered the norm or pervasive otherwise” (p. 375), I believe counter-narratives allow school leaders and

students to challenge the majoritarian stories and provide the school community with a more inclusive alternative. Thus, the counter-narratives of socially homeless students would centralize the experiences of multi-marginalized students to reveal how their reality counters what has previously been conceptualized as the “normative standard” while simultaneously providing students with the necessary affirmation to counter internalized feelings of shame and self-loathing.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Because this grounded theory study of 14 African American SGL males generated a substantive theory of social homelessness, it would be great to continue exploring the relevance of the theory with individuals that represent different multi-marginalized identities. Also, because this study was intentionally limited to k-12 school settings, it would be interesting to investigate the relevance of this theory in other settings. Several participants from the current study indicated that the identity struggles they experienced in school have continued into adulthood. Since adult intervention was such a salient point in the current study, I am curious about whether or not solicited *or* unsolicited support from others is beneficial for adults who identify as socially homeless.

While this study focused on the identity negotiations of multi-marginalized students, it was framed within the social milieu of schools in which bullying is rampant. I believe further research on social homelessness and bullying is necessary. More specifically, I believe school leaders would benefit from a qualitative study of bullying that uses the theoretical model of social homelessness as an investigative lens to uncover

a more nuanced understanding of school bullying. Through this study, the researcher could explore the following questions:

- How is bullying socially homeless students different than bullying students who have a sense of solidarity within their identity groups?
- Do students who have an internalized a sense of inferiority and are experiencing self-loathing have the confidence and affirmation needed to report bullying?
- Are current anti-bullying programs successful for socially homeless students without a significant change to the schools climate that decentralizes dominant norms and provide space for counter-narratives?

Answers to the above questions have the potential to equip school leaders to create safe school environments that provide all students with the social and emotional support needed to realize their individual definitions of success.

### **Limitations of this Study**

Since this qualitative study sought to uncover the identity negotiation stories of African American SGL men within school settings, generalizing or transferring the findings to other settings is restricted. It would be difficult at this point to conclude that the variables associated with the theory generated from this research could be applied to all socially homeless people in all contexts. Even so, it was immediately interesting to note that the experiences, the commonalities, and thus the findings with regard to social homelessness were so similarly shared between participants across all ages (18-45). Participants were chosen across significant distances geographically, represented rural, urban, and suburban backgrounds, came from families across a wide socioeconomic

spectrum and attended both public and private schools. More importantly, because all participants shared many of the same types of identity negotiation experiences within their school settings, in addition to not knowing one another, this offered pertinent evidence for and thus gave credence to the development of the grounded theory advanced through this research. The findings of this work, then, provide the impetus for additional research that could allow for appropriate generalizing.

### **Final Thoughts**

I have been called. I believe I have been called to be a change agent in education and my goal is to make our schools more socially just. I have learned to take my call very seriously because I recognize that the educational success I've experienced as a multi-marginalized individual is an anomaly, and I recognize that many multi-marginalized students are overwhelmed by the internal struggles they experience as they negotiate their identities. It is the recognition of this call that causes me to constantly analyze the climate of my school and investigate how my school's practices and beliefs support my most fragile students. It is the recognition of this call that inspires me to challenge the traditional practices of schools that ignore the irrefutable emotional damage to students who fall outside of the identity boxes supported by the master-narrative of schools. And, it was the recognition of this call that led me to this dissertation that I believe has the potential to help other school leaders better understand their students and interrupt the status quo. The system I wish to interrupt revolves around issues of oppression and is focused on the negotiation of power dynamics in schools. Because freedom is not a gift that can be granted by an oppressor, oppressed students must

become agents of their own liberation. Therefore, our obligation as school leaders is to provide students with the skills to become active participants/leaders in their own freedom. I recognize that my call may be unique and my passions for justice may not be shared by all of my colleagues. Therefore, while my hope is that this dissertation would serve as a call to action for those school leaders with similar calls, I am more hopeful that principals will pragmatically apply the components of this theoretical model as part of their day-to-day work.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMNS, AGE AND SEXUALITY

<b>Participant's Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Type of School</b>
Tyrell Chambers	18	Gay	Public
Tony Lorenz	20	Bisexual	Public/Private
Ashton Stewart	22	Gay	Public
Jonah Curry	25	Gay	Public/Private
Caleb Andrews	25	SGL	Public
DeMarcus Privy	27	Gay	Public
Dayquan Martin	27	SGL	Public
Doug Crane	27	Gay	Public
Elias Cage	28	Gay	Public
Stephen Dawson	30	Gay	Public
Christian Stapleton	36	Gay	Public
Levi Smart	38	Gay	Public
Sean Keaton	40	SGL	Private
Trey Jackson	45	SGL	Public

## APPENDIX B

### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Uncovering Identity Negotiation of Multi-Marginalized Students: Debunking Racists and Heterosexist Hegemonies and Developing Socially Just Schools

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Rydell Harrison (principal investigator) and Carl Lashley (faculty advisor)

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **What is the study about?**

This is a research project that will examine the k-12 educational experiences of African American males that identify as same-gender-loving. Through this study, I hope to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who locate themselves within more than one marginalized identity group. Your participation is voluntary.

#### **Why are you asking me?**

You were invited to participate in this study because you are over 18 years of age and identify with all of the following identities: Male, African-American, and same-gender-loving (SGL).

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

You will be asked to participate in an interview, which will take approximately 60

minutes. During the individual interview, I will ask you about your K-12 educational experiences and about how your race and sexuality impacted your experiences. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview, verify its accuracy and recommend changes if necessary.

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

The audio from your interview will be digitally recorded. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below. All digital recordings will be kept in an encrypted-digital file and will be destroyed after the study is complete.

**What are the risks to me?**

Some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable/emotional and you may choose not to respond to any question you do not wish to answer. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. All names and places will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Rydell Harrison (principal investigator) via phone at 336-549-2491 or via email at rydell.harrison@gmail.com You may also contact Carl Lashley (faculty advisor) via email at carl.lashley@gmail.com.

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

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

This study could uncover the k-12 stories of African American males who are SGL and provide school leaders with a useful theory that will assist them in engaging in critical discourse on breaking down structures and systems that sort and separate people.

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

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

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

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

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

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless the law requires disclosure. Audio recordings of the interview will be secured in an encrypted-digital file and will be destroyed after the study is complete. Pseudonyms will be used for names and places to maintain confidentiality. A master list will be created linking the

participant's name to their pseudonym and it will be stored separately from the data in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's home office.

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

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

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

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

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

This study qualifies for a waiver of signed consent. By completing the interviews, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By completing the interviews and focus groups, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate.

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER

*Research participants wanted!!!*

**Uncovering the K-12 Stories of  
SGL, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender  
African-American Men**



Are you interested in participating in a UNCG dissertation research project that will examine the K-12 educational experiences of African American males that identify as SGL, gay, bisexual or transgender?

Participation includes a 60-minute interview.

If you are interested, over 18 years of age and you identify as SGL, gay, bisexual or transgender, please email Rydell Harrison at [rydell.harrison@gmail.com](mailto:rydell.harrison@gmail.com) for more details!

## APPENDIX D

### INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **I. Establish rapport with the participant**

- Tell me about yourself. How old are you and what do you do for a living?
- Why did you agree to participate in this study?

#### **II. Capture a portrait of the participant's k-12 educational experiences**

- I want you to go back to a time in your personal life that you may not think much about very often. Let's talk about your K-12 educational experiences. What was school like for you?
- Suppose I was walking the halls with you at school, what would I see and what would be going on?

#### **III. Uncover the participant's multi-marginalized experiences**

- Tell me some significant stories that capture your K-12 experiences.
- What significant people, places, or events (good or bad) were critical in shaping your experiences?
- In what ways, if any, did your identity as an African American same-gender-loving male play a role in these stories?

#### **IV. Investigate the participant's experiences of solidarity, comfort and familiarity of home within their marginalized identity group as well as their whether or not they experienced the isolation and alienation of social homelessness within schools**

- Tell me about how you related to, connected with, or engaged with others and when you felt most at home.
- Did you ever feel disconnected from others based on your identity as an African American same-gender-loving male? What was that like?
- Have you ever felt that it was necessary to focus more on one identity over another in order to fit in with others? What was that like?
- How did you connect with other African American students?
- How did you connect with other same-gender-loving students?
- Did you experience conflicts because of your identities? How did you manage them?