

QUESTIONING “QUESTIONING” AS A SEXUAL IDENTITY AND LABEL:
AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

Julie M. Austen

June 25, 2014

Director of Dissertation: Susan L. McCammon, Ph. D.

Major Department: Psychology

Sexual or gender minorities often experience poorer health and mental outcomes than their heterosexually-identified or cisgender peers. Among those often included as sexual or gender minorities are those who identify as questioning; however, little is known about this population, due in part to a dearth of research. Among researchers and the LGBTQ+ community, Questioning has many definitions that further complicate the current understanding of the populations. This qualitative study explored the meaning and lived experience of emerging adults who self-identified as Questioning. The researcher used an interpretive phenomenological framework to inform the study design. Participants were ten emerging adults who resided in both rural and metropolitan areas of a southeastern state.

Two major themes that emerged from the study were the meaning of Questioning and the role of experience. Data revealed three sub-groups of participants who shared perspectives on the Meaning of Questioning: Those who used Questioning as their sexual identity, those who used the label of Questioning as an alternate sexual orientation label, and those who believed that questioning was part of a non-questioning sexual identity that was bisexual or asexual. The role of experience, a second major theme, involved attraction, sexual, and relational experience and served as a necessary component in understanding participants' sexual identity or use of

Questioning as a label. Subthemes that emerged from the data included participants' desire for experience, perspectives of the need for, or use of, information gained from experience, and difficulty attaining experience.

Contextual variables, such as implicit and explicit social messages, biphobia, geographical constraints, and religious values were important in understanding participants' stories and voices. This study enabled the researcher to affirm and expand upon commonly recognized meanings of questioning are both solidified and expanded. The implications of findings those who work with emerging adults who identify as Questioning are to explore actively what Questioning means to them and to provide opportunities to explore sexual identity.

QUESTIONING “QUESTIONING” AS A SEXUAL IDENTITY AND LABEL:
AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A Dissertation

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of Psychology

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Julie M. Austen

June 25th 2014

Questioning “Questioning” as a Sexual Identity and Label:
An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

By

Julie M. Austen

APPROVED BY:

CHAIR OF DISSERTATION:
Susan L. McCammon, Ph. D.

COMMITTEE MEMBER:
Christy M. Walcott, Ph. D.

COMMITTEE MEMBER:
Sharon Knight, Ph. D.

READER:
Marion Eppler, Ph. D.

READER:
Damon Rappleyea, Ph. D.

CHAIR OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY:
Susan L. McCammon, Ph.D.

DEAN OF THE
GRADUATE SCHOOL:
Paul J. Gemperline, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation and subsequent degree is a product of the gifts of many mentors who have believed in me. My deepest gratitude is to my first mentor, my mother, whose unwavering support guided me towards this journey. My teachers, Joanne Krett and Peggy Stubbs, instilled in me a strength of spirit, which I pay forward to others who I encounter. To my graduate school mentors, Drs. McCammon, Knight, and Walcott, I am thankful for the encouragement to choose a topic and a methodology that reflects both who I am individually and professionally. Drs. Knight and McCammon – I am particularly thankful for challenging me to think bigger and differently. The participants of this study shared with me ideas they have never shared with anyone else – I am so grateful for their trust and candor. Moreover, I am so thankful for my wife, Gina, who believes – and somehow makes me believe –, that I am a rock star.

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Participant Demographics	52
Table 2: Participant’s Relationships to Themes	59
Table 3: Participants’ Age and Self-Perceived Stability of Questioning as Sexual Identity	62
Table 4: Use of Labels	65
Figure 1: The Meaning of Questioning Concept Map	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 2: The Meaning of Experience Concept Map	74

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
List of Tables and Figures.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Research Purpose and Question.....	2
Rationale for Qualitative Methods.....	3
Characteristics of Qualitative Research.....	4
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.....	6
Statement of the Problem & Rationale for the Study.....	7
Purpose & Research Questions.....	8
Definition of Terms.....	8
Delimitations and Limitations.....	10
Delimitations for this Study.....	10
Limitations.....	10
Chapter II: Review of the Literature.....	11
Literature Review Method.....	11
Current Definitions of Questioning.....	12
Prevalence of Questioning and Questioning-Related Sexual Identity Behaviors.....	13
Reasons for Questioning.....	15
Questioning as Transitory Phase of Sexual Identity Development.....	16
Questioning as a Context-Related Construct.....	19
Questioning as Identity Iconoclasy.....	21
Questioning as “Post-Gay” Identity Marker.....	21
Questioning in Gender Identity.....	22
Issues Related to Adolescents Who Identify as Questioning.....	23
Chapter III: Methods.....	25
Researcher’s Perspectives.....	25
Researcher’s Initial Perspectives.....	25
Interpretive Framework.....	26

Assumptions.	28
Study Design	29
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.....	29
Sample and recruitment.	31
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.	32
Sampling Strategy.....	32
On Campus Advertising Flyers.	32
Psychology Course Requirement.....	33
Introductory Course Announcement.	33
Off-Campus Recruitment.	33
Snowball Sampling.	33
Gaining Participation.	34
Sample Size.	34
In-Depth Interviews with Ten Participants.....	35
Data Collection Strategies.	35
Interview Guide.	35
Questionnaires.....	36
In-Depth Interviews.	38
Strategies to Ensure Study Credibility.....	40
Triangulation.	41
Audit Trail.	42
Researcher’s Reflection and Reflexivity Journal.....	42
Analysis and Interpretation Memos.....	43
Methodological Congruence.....	44
Peer Review.	44
Informed Consent.....	45
Explaining Purposes.	45
Promise and Reciprocity.....	45
Risk Assessment.....	46
Anonymity and Confidentiality.....	46
Psychological Risks.	46

Data Access and Ownership.....	47
Guidance.....	47
Ethical Standards.....	47
Data Analysis.....	47
Transcription.....	48
Reduction.....	48
Representation of data.....	49
Chapter IV: Findings.....	50
Description of Participants and Setting.....	51
The Interviewing Experience.....	55
Responses to Questionnaires.....	56
Thematic Findings.....	56
The Meaning of Questioning.....	56
Questioning as Sexual Identity.....	59
Sexual Identity as a Developmental Process.....	60
Acceptance of Continuing Ambiguity.....	62
Questioning as a Label.....	64
Protecting Privacy and Credibility.....	66
Assessing Support.....	67
Expanding Experiential Opportunities.....	70
Questioning as Part of Bisexuality.....	71
The Meaning of Experience.....	73
Confirming and Disconfirming Evidence.....	75
Active and Passive Exploration.....	78
Inability to Gain Experiences.....	79
Making Meaning of Attraction.....	82
The Meaning of Contextual Factors.....	83
Messages.....	83
Religion.....	88
Culture.....	89
Geographical Location and Society.....	90

Exposure to LGBTQ+ People or Culture.....	91
Shared Experience of Questioning.....	91
Summary.....	92
Chapter V: Discussion.....	93
Questioning as an Instrumental Term and the Dynamics of Language.....	95
Questioning as a Sexual Identity and Identity Development.....	99
Sexual Minority Identity Development.....	100
Queer Identity Development models.....	104
Bisexual Identity Development.....	105
Other Identity Development.....	107
Questioning as Part of Bisexuality.....	109
Social Concerns of Identifying as Questioning.....	110
The Role of Experience.....	111
Returning to the Purpose: Implications for a Population at Risk.....	113
Limitations and Future Directions.....	114
Clinical Implications.....	116
Summary.....	118
References.....	93
Appendix A: UMCIRB # 2-002150.....	104
Appendix B: Interview Guide.....	105
Appendix C: Interview Schedule.....	107
Appendix D: Sample of Researcher’s Reflexive Journal Excerpt.....	108
Appendix E: Research Log.....	109
Appendix F: Analysis and Interpretation Memo Excerpt.....	109
Appendix G: Sample Codebook.....	111
Appendix I: Transcription Sample.....	117
Appendix J: Transcription Guide.....	119
Appendix K : Scores from The Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale.....	121

Chapter 1: Introduction

Commonly understood to be a part of sexual orientation or gender identity development, “Q, or Questioning, is a typical response choice offered when posing sexual orientation-related questions in demographic data collection; however, there is little information provided by people who identify as such. Thus, what people mean when they identify as Questioning is unknown. The current literature suggests a heterogeneous meaning to the construct, which further veils understanding. I will explore the common meanings of Questioning as described by the current literature are explored in this chapter. This introduction briefly reviews the current limits to the definition of Questioning, and introduces descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method for exploring the meaning of questioning to emerging adults who identify as such. This section provides a definition of terms and, lastly, it provides the theoretical framework used in the study.

“Q” or Questioning is an option provided with increasing frequency on demographic surveys for research, population studies, and intake forms in health care. It is also part of the ever-growing acronym of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ+; also, Intersexed and Allies; LGBTQIA) community as an effort both to be inclusive of the nuances among identities and non-restrictive of those with developing identities. Among both researchers and the LGBTQ+ community, “Q” frequently captures a heterogeneous population inclusive of both those questioning their sexual orientation and those who identify as “queer.” Whereas “queer” emphasizes shifting self-identity boundaries or ambivalence about choosing a sexual orientation category(s) (Escoffier, 1998), “Questioning” (a.k.a., “unsure” or “don’t know”; hereon referred to as Questioning) seems to have no agreed upon definition. The most typically found operational definitions in the literature suggest that Questioning is a

transitory phase en route to a sexual minority or heterosexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; Konik & Stewart, 2004; Morgan & Thompson, 2011; Morgan, Steiner, & Thompson, 2008; Troiden, 1989; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). Questioning has three common definitions, which complicates the understanding of exactly what people are questioning when they identify as such. Broadly, the definition encompasses a) those who are unsure of their sexual orientation/gender identity (e.g., Ott et al., 2011; Savin-Williams, 2001), b) those who are sure, but are not comfortable with disclosure (e.g., Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009), and c) those who wish to stand in opposition to, or to reject, the gender and/or heterosexual binary system (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009).

In quantitative research, Questioning is either combined with the whole LGB sample or is removed from the sample entirely, typically secondary to small numbers of people who identify as such. There has been a recent increase in research examining Questioning as a stand-alone variable, and the findings of some studies suggest that identifying as Questioning increases reported negative mental health outcomes and increased risk behavior among adolescents (e.g., Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Given the potential for negative mental health outcomes, it is essential that researchers and clinicians understand what Questioning means to those who identify as such, so that we may begin to understand correlates associated with these risks.

Research Purpose and Question

This descriptive phenomenological and interpretive phenomenological analysis explored the lived experience of emerging adults who identify as Questioning in terms of their sexual or gender identity, and the meaning that Questioning holds for them. This study also explored the constructs that influence the participants' selection of Questioning as the descriptor of their

identity, (e.g., familial support, religiosity, and romantic/sexual experience). Ultimately, findings from this study will contribute to the relatively limited literature base by providing insights on direct experience with this identity status. This study addresses the research question, “What is the lived experience of an identity of Questioning, and what is the meaning ascribed to Questioning by emerging adults who identify as such.”

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research, an explorative methodology, best addresses this research question for several reasons. First, to my knowledge, no other studies exist that explore the meaning of Questioning as an identity or identity label; rather researchers tend to explore Questioning identity as a process (i.e., of sexual identity development; e.g., Cass, 2012; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Reiner & Reiner, 2012; Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Troiden, 1989). Secondary to this, a complex, detailed understanding of the phenomenon is lacking. Understanding perspectives of those who identify as Questioning will provide a rich illustrative view of what the label means to them, which is a necessary foundation for clarifying ambiguous sexual and gender minority categories, and finding a place for the concept of Questioning within the dynamic landscape of sexual identity.

Marginalization is an important reason that a qualitative methodology is appropriate for sexual and gender minorities, particularly the Questioning population, because they are socially excluded and often overlooked in research. Indeed, the degree to which this marginalization exists was addressed by the 2010 Institute of Medicine’s recommendations to the National Institute of Health regarding the need for more funding and programming to specifically address the needs of the LGBTQ+ population (IOM, 2011). Although they specifically addressed the

needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, the needs of those who identify as Questioning were not addressed in the report at all.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

All qualitative research shares a common set of characteristics, including a discussion of my own interpretive lens, an emergent style of inquiry, the use of the researcher as the “key instrument,” and a thick description of the data using emergent themes to describe an experience. Descriptive phenomenology, which addresses the first research question, uses those characteristics to capture the shared lived experience of a particular phenomenon – in this study the phenomenon is identifying as Questioning. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), used in this study to answer the second and third research questions (“What is the meaning of Questioning to those who identify as such?” and “What important contextual factors are related to identifying as Questioning?”), also attempts to interpret the meaning of the data using the existing literature. Methodologists Patton (2009) and Creswell (2012) posit that qualitative research emerges from the researcher’s philosophical assumptions, which then influence their interpretive lens or phenomenology. This style of inquiry is emergent, meaning that as new information is learned, the style changes to improve the outcome of the study. Indeed this was true for this study as well; although a shared experience existed for the participants, there was much heterogeneity in the definition of Questioning. Thus, the study was adapted to combine the approaches in an attempt to interpret the meaning of the heterogeneous nature of Questioning identity, as well as the shared experiences between the participants. The setting of all qualitative studies is naturalistic, meaning that participants are studied in their own environment, rather than in a lab setting. In the case of this study, the participants chose a public location for the

interviews, typically a study room of a public or university library. One interview was conducted via a webcam and another was in an open-air market.

The researcher in qualitative inquiry is considered the “key instrument,” and I used my interviewing skills to collect data via observations and detailed interviews. Typically, researchers use a dynamic instrument designed by them to guide interviews, but do not typically use validated instruments and questionnaires. In this project, I used both interviews and questionnaires – a unique combination described further in the triangulation section – so that interpretive analyses could be aligned. This is another common feature of qualitative inquiry.

Data analysis in qualitative research is complex in that it is both inductive and deductive. In IPA approaches, a double inquiry approach is used, whereas the traditional phenomenological approaches use a singular approach. In the singular method, the researcher is asking, “how does one make sense of, or experience, a phenomenon”? The second analysis goes one-step beyond that and attempts to *make sense of how a person* makes sense of the phenomenon, which is done by using known information (i.e., the literature base and known psychological constructs) as the basis for exploring and interpreting at this second level. It is considered more psychologically oriented than a traditional phenomenological approach, and is considered by some to be more robust. A more detailed description of IPA is included in the methods section.

Data are analyzed in several stages, as described in the work of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2013, pp. 83-39). In the first stage of analysis, the transcriptions of the interviews are thoroughly reviewed for meaning, typically by highlighting and annotating descriptive information (e.g., time, place, location, experiences), linguistic information (i.e., phrases and words from which deeper meaning can be inferred, such as the phrase “trying to find myself”), and then conceptual knowledge (i.e., tying together previously understood frameworks and new

knowledge about the participant). In the beginning stages of analysis, the data are organized into patterns and themes that have emerged. To do this, I read transcripts and made multiple attempts to organize the data, often with the use of a coding scheme and memos, or with the help of computer programs. Toward the latter stages, I attempted to understand what the themes meant by comparing themes with known literature. The final product of qualitative inquiry is a rich description of the shared experiences of the participants, always using their direct quotes as exemplars of particular themes. This allows for the consumer of the research to gain insight into how I came to understand the themes. It also allows space to reinterpret those themes, similarly to the results section of a quantitative study. Lastly, all qualitative research demands that researchers “position themselves” within the research. Whereas quantitative methods often attempt to mute or reduce bias in their research, the inductive nature of qualitative analysis suggests that researchers’ interpretations will be, to some degree, housed within their bias. By describing ties to the study questions, and through understanding the researcher’s worldview, consumers become privy to those biases in a way that can inform their perception of the resulting outcomes. An analogous “positioning” could be in cases where disclosure of conflicting interests occur. Although all qualitative inquiry shares these concepts, there are differences among the approaches used, with some more fitting for particular questions. The most fitting type of qualitative research for this question is a phenomenological approach, or one that describes the lived experience as described by the informant.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a type of phenomenological analysis that explores the meaning of a shared experience of a particular group. The purpose is to garner rich, illustrative information regarding how people perceive experiences through their own worldview.

The analyses of these data are both inductive, in that themes emerge from the data, but also deductive, in that the themes are often connected to currently existing psychological theory.

These themes were reconstructed to create a new whole – the shared meaning of Questioning to young adults who identify as such.

Statement of the Problem & Rationale for the Study

Although Questioning is a term used in surveys and within the LGBTQ+ population, to date there is little information available on what Questioning means to those who identify as such. Though studies exist that refer to Questioning, or review concepts that may be pertinent to Questioning individuals, a review of the literature suggested that few, if any, study the construct of Questioning. Through the same literature review, it was evident that many studies do not disambiguate Questioning from other LGBTQ+ demographics, typically an LGB sample. In a sample of studies that have disambiguated Questioning demographically, there has been consistency in the findings that those who identify as Questioning tend to fare worse than their lesbian, gay or heterosexual counterparts. For example, a 2011 study found that middle and high-school students who identified as Questioning were second-highest to report both suicidal thoughts and suicidal attempts, second to those identifying bisexual (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). If, as some researchers suggest (e.g., Cass, 2012; Troiden, 1989), Questioning is a phase of a linear identity development, then these data suggest inherent stigma in Questioning sexual orientation and that it is much more distressing than Questioning other non-stigmatized aspects of one's identities (e.g., religion, academic, social). In addition, those who are exploring an additional marginalized identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, religion, gender identity) may be experiencing a delay in reaching developmental sexual identity milestones. This delayed development of multiple identities has been associated with an increase in risky behaviors and a

decrease in overall mental health (e.g., Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999). Thus, the importance of understanding the meaning of Questioning to a diverse population may provide a rationale for interventions that address healthy exploration of identity. With the understanding of phenomenological approaches and the current deficits in the research in mind, the purpose of this research can now be more fully explained.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of the shared, lived experience of emerging adults who identify as Questioning. This study will explore the beliefs and attitudes of the population, as well as the structural concept of Questioning from an interpretive framework.

The central questions of this study are:

- What is the shared lived experience of people who identify as Questioning?
- What is the meaning of Questioning to emerging adults who identify as such?

Subquestions include the following:

- How will participants know when they are not Questioning?
- How stable is Questioning as an identity?
- How has context or environment influenced a Questioning identity?
- How has this identity fluctuated throughout one's life thus far?
- How has identifying as Questioning been beneficial or unfavorable?

Definition of Terms

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2008) defines sexual orientation as being comprised of three components – a cognitive sense of one's identity, and both sexual/romantic behavior and attraction toward another person. The APA stressed that sexual orientation is more than an *intrapersonal* category; they suggest that it is also an *interpersonal* category in that the

definition is inclusive of others – groups or types of people with whom one will feel most satisfied interacting. Sexual identity (SI) typically refers to the cognitive process of moving *from* a heterosexual identity status *toward* a non-heterosexual identity status (Cass, 2012), thus making sexual identity the term that is most commonly used in sexual minority identity development.

Sexual identity typically includes the identity categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (or straight). It now also includes terms used more frequently such as pansexual and demisexual, which reflect sexualities that either cross gender boundaries in favor of other personal qualities (pansexual) or encompass all genders (demisexual). Demisexuality rejects the notion of a binary gender system.

Asexuality is becoming a widely recognized identity status marked by a lack of sexual desire or attraction for self, others or both. Although this identity category differs from sexual dysfunctions, it likely overlaps with hypoactive sexual arousal disorder, as reported by Bogaert (2006). This research suggests that asexuality is distinguished from dysfunction in that most people with sexual dysfunctions have marked distress regarding the dysfunction. A second distinction is that most people who identify as asexual find their lack of either sexual or romantic desire to remain constant both over time and across partners

Gender identity, a separate construct from SI (although it may be a large part of people's SI), refers to people's sense of maleness or femaleness (APA, 2008). Gender expression refers to how people choose to express their gender identity and may not be congruent with their gender identity. Sex (hereafter referred to as assigned sex) refers to the biological genitalia that people are born with (i.e., male, female, intersexed; APA, 2008). When someone's gender identity or gender expression does not align with one's assigned sex, then this person may identify as

transgender or gender diverse. Transgender is an umbrella category that envelops such terms as gender nonconforming, gender variant, bi-gender, agender and genderqueer (Lev, 2004). The assumption of sexual and gender identity, and gender expression are complicated by institutionalized stigma and discrimination (e.g., De Oliveira, Lopes, Costa, & Nogueira, 2012; Hereck, 1991; HRC Growing up LGBT in America, 2012; Kendra & Mohr, 2008; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Discriminating laws persist, thus making it difficult for sexual or gender minorities to enjoy the same rights as other citizens, or to live their life authentically and without fear of discrimination and retaliation.

Delimitations and Limitations

The following delimitation (or requirements for participation) and limitations have been defined for both this study in particular and qualitative studies in general.

Delimitations for this Study

- Emerging adults aged 17 to 25 years old.
- Individuals who self-identify as Questioning (or don't know/undecided) regarding their sexual identity or gender on a demographic questionnaire
- Individuals willing to share their personal experiences and perspectives with me.

Limitations. Study findings are not generalizable to the Questioning population as a whole. The intent of qualitative research is not to be generalizable, but rather to gain in-depth insight into Questioning, thus necessitating purposive sampling for individuals with direct experience.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The need to understand the meaning of Questioning as it relates to emerging adults fuels this study. Captured as a sexual orientation in many studies on sexual minority youth and sexual identity development, Questioning is found in as little as 1.3% of samples to as much as 53% (Kann et al., 2011 and Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2003, respectively). This range is better explained by exploring why people select Questioning on a demographic form – for example contextual and political variables, as well as Questioning *per se* as part of a typical sexual identity development. Despite this, those who identify as Questioning seem to have higher reports of suicidal ideation than their heterosexual or sexual minority peers (e.g., Birkett et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Samantha, 2001).

The following section explores the current literature regarding sexual identity development, coming out, and confounding concepts for Questioning (including bisexuality). Prevalence and issues reported by those who identify as questioning, also contribute to further reason to develop this line of inquiry.

Literature Review Method

I conducted a two-phase literature review on Questioning and sexual identity development using relevant psychological and sociological databases (e.g., Issues & Controversies, PsycARTICLES, Psychiatry Online, PsycINFO and Web of Science) both to identify gaps in the current literature, and to create interview questions that would address those gaps. Information from the first phase of the literature review is included in this chapter. Analysis of the data prompted a secondary literature review as new and unexpected information emerged. This information is included in the analysis section, where it was used to anchor themes.

Current Definitions of Questioning

The “Q” in LGBTQ+ has several common explicit and implicit definitions seemingly mediated by life stage, including a transition phase en route to sexual identity development, a rejection of societal expectations of identity labels and, a way to keep sexual minority orientation hidden for fear of discrimination or rejection. Regarding sexual orientation identity, Garnets & Kimmel (2003) suggest that there “is often a lag time between the discovery and owning of one’s identity” (p. 9) and this understanding and acceptance of sexual identity is presumed to occur during adolescence (e.g., Cass, 2012). This would explain why “Q” typically stands for Questioning in adolescent populations and “Queer” in adults, (although anecdotally the age gap appears to be closing). For example, the most direct definition of Questioning is found in the book *GLBTQ: A Survival Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth*:

Q is for Questioning. People who are Questioning are uncertain of their sexual orientations or gender identities, or they may just prefer not to label themselves with any particular orientation. ...Deciding that you're Questioning can remove the pressure of having to choose a label like gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight right away (Huegel, 2011, p. 9).

A fact sheet created by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SEICUS) mirrors this definition, stating that “Questioning refers to a person who is *unsure* of his/her sexual orientation” (2011). Therefore, Questioning, sometimes referred to as unsure, means uncertainty with orientation or gender identity or a lack of clarity about how, when, or whether to come out, which is defined as an acknowledgement of sexual orientation or gender identity, typically used by non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming people (i.e., sexual or gender minorities).

The use of the term Questioning can serve to avoid labeling oneself as one forms a better understanding of sexual or gender identity, or to abstain from participation in the gender and hetero-homosexual binary systems altogether. The Q Center, a LGBTQ+ community center, exemplifies this in its policy. The policy states that in the Q Center they “let people define it [Q] as they see fit: Questioning, queer, quick, quirky” (The Q Center, 2012). Despite the wide use of these definitions within the LGBTQ+ community, there is no mention made as to the etiology of these common definitions of Questioning. It is unclear if any of the definitions come from the perspective of people who identify as Questioning, and if so, to what degree heterogeneity of meaning exists within the group.

Prevalence of Questioning and Questioning-Related Sexual Identity Behaviors

Typical of sexual identity or orientation research, issues with operational definitions persist. Much variation on demographic reporting metrics persist, some of which may not have a specific category for Questioning. Some capture sexual behavior (current, past or both) and some measure attraction or fantasy (again, current, past and both). When Questioning is captured, it is often not included in analysis (as found during a literature review on Questioning and sexual orientation). I posit that, similar to other methodological issues related to smallness of sample or atypicality (i.e., the researchers may not find that the group is what they are intending to study), Questioning is likely included in a larger sexual minority sample, rather than be separated for study. For some studies, Questioning was simply not the focus in that researchers were investigating differences between typical LGB and heterosexual samples.

A report of the 2001-2009 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, which sampled 156 high school (9-12th grade) students, listed the number of students who selected “unsure” on a question of sexual orientation in the seven-state survey ranged from 1.3% to 4.7% depending on

state (Kann et al., 2011). Regarding sexual behavior, among those who reported being unsure of their sexual orientation, the majority of respondents reported having sexual contact with both sexes (range 6.1% to 15.9%), although same-sex contact was reported by 0.7% to 6.6% of respondents, and opposite sex sexual contact was reported by 0.6% to 2.1%. Among middle school children, a “sexually Questioning” variable (ascertained by collapsing participants who “were sometimes, a lot, or always confused about whether they were LGB”) totaled 4.6% of the sample (Birkett et al., 2009, p. 992). A 1992 report by Remfedi, Resnick, Blum and Harris (2012) found approximately 10% of their sample identified as unsure (i.e., of their sexual identity or orientation; a question added onto the typically used Kinsey scale). They found that the “unsure” sample tended to decline with age; approximately 26% of 12-year-olds identified as unsure compared to 5% of 18-year-olds, suggesting that Questioning was transitory. In study by Remfedi et al. (2012), those who identified as unsure were significantly more likely to be male, nonwhite, and from lower socioeconomic strata. They were less likely to report non-heterosexual experiences and more likely to report bisexual sexual fantasies and attractions. Contrary to other samples with data reported for Questioning or unsure, in a Canadian sample of 138 sexual minority high school students (i.e., identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual), 53% identified as Questioning, compared to 38% who identified as bisexual and 9% who identified as gay or lesbian (Williams et al., 2003).

A more recent study that also involved a Canadian sample of high school students found that 3.6% were unsure of their sexual orientation (less than half of those who identified as LGB; Zhou et al., 2010). This research was unique in that it reported sexual behavior, attraction and fantasy and ideal sexual behavior for the unsure category. The disambiguated unsure category and the following results were of interest. Unsure adolescents were significantly:

- More likely to be under 16 years of age than LGB peers
- Less likely than LGB and Heterosexual individuals with Same-Sex Attraction to have never had a sexual experience.
- Less likely than LGB and Heterosexual individuals with Same-Sex Attraction to not experience any sexual attraction (18.6% versus 5.6% and 0.9%, respectively)
- More likely to experience suicidal ideation (37.3%) than Heterosexual individuals with Opposite Sex Attraction (14.5%) or Same-Sex Attraction (26.1%), but not more than individuals who were LGB (elevated, but not significantly different for Questioning youth; 44.8%).
- More likely to experience suicidal attempts (20%) than Heterosexual individuals with Opposite Sex Attraction (8.2%) or Same-Sex Attraction (13.0%), but not more than individuals who were LGB (29.3%).

This study suggested the existence of differences between sexual experiences and attractions of those who identified as Unsure when compared to sexual minority peers. It also suggested a difference in ethnic make-up and age, which may have indicated competing identity formation, particularly in the area of developmental and ethnic/racial identities. Overall, Questioning-identified young people experience great variation when exploring sexual experiences, fantasies, and attractions. There is, however, some consistency in at least two studies that indicated that unsure or Questioning seemed to be endorsed more frequently by non-white males. Thus, capturing an ethnically diverse sample was important for this study.

Reasons for Questioning

A review of the literature indicated three reasons for identifying as Questioning: A transitory phase of sexual orientation, a context-related and dependent construct, and a form of

identity iconoclasy or post-gay phenomena. Although all of these reasons refer to the development of a sexual minority identity, there is some research to suggest that Questioning is also a part of heterosexual sexual identity development (e.g., Konik & Stewart, 2004; Morgan & Thompson, 2011; Morgan, Steiner, & Thompson, 2008; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). Lastly, Questioning may refer to the intersection of gender and sexual identity (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008) and, as such, there may be gender identity-related reasons for identifying as Questioning that are analogous to sexual minority reasons.

Questioning as transitory phase of sexual identity development. The majority of sexual identity development research has focused on the development of non-heterosexual identities, citing heterosexual development as normative and unremarkable (Morgan, 2013). Thus, the body of literature regarding the topic is relatively new, beginning with the most cited work by Cass in 1979. Since Cass's homosexual identity development model, which focused primarily on out, gay men in metropolitan areas, the continuing focus has been expanding the literature to be inclusive of women and adolescents, as well as a wider range of sexual identities. Currently, researchers are beginning to explore both heterosexual identity development models, as well as models inclusive of lesser-known identity labels, such as asexual.

Many models of sexual identity (SI) development are stage theories based in some part on Erickson's (1968) identity ego psychoanalytic theory and Marcia's (1980) identity development model. Erickson posited that adolescence was the prime period for identity development, the developmental goal of which is finding one's place in social relationships (called identity versus role confusion). During this phase, engagement in both exploration (e.g., trying out various roles, executing life plans) and commitment (e.g., the degree of investment an individual has for an exploratory pursuit) are necessary to prevent failure in to attaining a stable

identity. This could result in role confusion and affect development during later phases (including those related to intimacy). Thus, someone in the intimacy versus isolation stage without a coherent identity will have trouble with intimacy and instead will lean more toward isolation.

Expanding on Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion, Marcia (1980) identified four identity statuses; two based on high levels of commitment, and two based on low levels. The high-level commitment statuses are *identity achievement* and *identity foreclosure*. Identity achievement is attained through exploration, whereas a foreclosed identity occurs with little to no exploration. The low commitment category is made of the statuses *moratorium* and *identity diffusion*. Those in moratorium are in an active state of exploration with a high degree of concern and direction. Conversely, those in identity diffusion lack both exploration and commitment, and are swayed by external people or variables. These categories of identity development are often the basis for sexual identity formation models.

As mentioned, multiple models of sexual identity formation exist, most of which are stage-based (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). In each stage, successful identity formation and integration occurs following completion of the requirements for each phase. Stages typically start with sexual identity (SI) moratorium ("Questioning, searching—alternatives, possibilities, various hypotheses," Manaster, 1989, p. 163) about identity, and end with acceptance or assimilation of a different, or non-heterosexual, identity. These models usually share four stages, the first of which is often *initial awareness* of same-sex attraction, desires or fantasies, followed by some type of *intimate relationship or community-based exploration* which leads to an *initial acceptance of non-heterosexual identity* (or tolerance thereof), and ends with a *successful integration of non-heterosexual SI* into overall identity. Some models include *declaration* (i.e., coming out) and pride, which is often inclusive of a

public announcement of status and positive stance toward self-affirmation, dignity and rights for all LGBT people. Questioning in these models is a transitory aspect in the first several stages; however, is also seen indirectly as movement between the stages as exploration occurs.

Within these models, the first two, or even three, stages are places where Questioning may be occurring. For example in the first stage of initial awareness, people may be wondering if they are gay, bisexual or if their attraction is fleeting. In the second stage, questions surrounding what to do about the same-sex attraction may abound, including Questioning becoming part of a new (and potentially stigmatized) social group, and how to navigate experimentation with (and potential integration of) stereotypically gay norms and behaviors. Potentially, Questioning could exist in the third stage of identity tolerance or acceptance, at which time people may be Questioning to whom, if anyone, to disclose their status. Any or all of these questions could result in non-linear movement throughout the stages, as suggested by McCarn and Fassinger (1996).

The assumption of non-linear movement between the stages, including skipping and revisiting stages, and foreclosure (which halts further exploration) in any of the stages is an indirect type of Questioning. In this way, the question could be whether one is comfortable in any given stage at any given time. The circularity and continuous nature of these models has prompted some researchers to explore the non-linear movement aspects of the stage models (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008), as well as the influence of contextual variables (e.g., Kanuah, 1997) on SI development, both of which may affect people's reason for Questioning.

Diamond's (2008) twenty-five year longitudinal study of this non-linear movement in women demonstrated a new aspect of SI – fluidity. Sexual fluidity is a construct separate from sexual identity and suggests that some people (mostly women) are more apt to move between

identity labels (i.e., lesbian, unlabeled, bisexual, straight), as well as through sexual behaviors (i.e., same-sex or cross-sex attraction, romantic/sexual experiences). In this study, it was shown that as women aged, they became more comfortable with selecting a non-binding identity label (i.e., unlabeled), suggesting that they grew comfortable with their level of fluidity. For some, this may be a part of Questioning: How fluid is one, and what does this fluidity mean for one's SI status?

Despite differences in the multiple models, Dubé & Savin-Williams (1999, p. 123) compiled and reported general developmental milestones for sexual minority youth: “Awareness of sexual attractions (8–11 years), same-sex sexual behaviors (12–15 years), identification as gay or lesbian (15–18 years), disclosure to others (17–19 years), and the development of same-sex romantic relationships (18–20 years).”

In light of societal attention to alternatives to presupposed heteronormativity in identity development, heterosexual identity development research was conducted. Work by Morgan and colleagues (2013) found that women who identify as exclusively heterosexual tend to report earlier and more frequent active exploration of SI. This suggests that Questioning could be a part of heterosexual identity development, given that more choices for sexual behavior, attraction, and fantasy are seemingly becoming more normative and available. Lastly, Questioning could also be a part of asexual identity development, about which little to no research currently exists.

Questioning as a Context-Related Construct. Contextual variables, such as ethnicity, community, experience and social support also provide a perspective for a Questioning identity. Although people may feel secure in knowing – or in not knowing – their identity status, they may feel more comfortable identifying with a more ambiguous status in order to preserve privacy, safety, social support or other aspects of their identity.

One example occurs because of discovering some degree of sexual fluidity. Confusion may occur when one selects an identity label, such as lesbian, and then finds herself to be more fluid, suggesting a bisexual label. Her movement between the labels may inhibit her from disclosing this status for fear of losing social support, secondary to a continuing stigmatization of bisexual women within the lesbian community (known as biphobia; see Rust, 1995). Thus, she may continue to use the lesbian label or move to a Questioning or unlabeled identity to preserve her status within the lesbian community.

Other contextual influences may also inhibit coming out or acceptance of self, including ethnicity (particularly in people of Color; Kanuah, 1997) and family and sociopolitical climate (Kahn, 1991). McCarn and Fassinger (1991) have argued that stage models of identity have failed to recognize these contextual influences, in particular, the “two parallel processes that occur in gay identity development, a self-identification process regarding sexual orientation and a group-membership identification process involving the awareness of oppression” (p. 160)

Family and sociopolitical climate have particular significance not only in coming out, but also in obtaining the experience necessary to be comfortable with one’s identity. Cass (2012), for example, has suggested that the “translation of homosexual self-image into homosexual identity” is a result of “interaction with others” (p. 144). Indeed, sexual minority adolescents are often deprived of typical experiences, such as dating, as well as intimate or sexual expression by their families (D’augelli, 2002). In a study of sexual minority youth, involvement in a same-sex relationship was positively associated with changes in self-esteem in males, and negatively correlated with changes in internalized homophobia in females (Bauermeister et al., 2010). Thus, according to Cass, people who lack these experiences will not move fluidly through the stages of SI development, which may cause prolonged confusion, or Questioning. This is suggestive of a

combination of contextual, intra- and interpersonal variables that influence both identity formation and acceptance, and consequently may be an area of Questioning. Kendra and Mohr (2008) argue that many of the stage-theory identity models fail to account for such environmental variables, as well as opportunities that may not be afforded to sexual minority youth, such as dating, which may affect how one perceives their identity. Also context-dependent, but not related to either disclosure or experience, Questioning can pertain to stable identity in which constant flux is recognized and accepted (as in Diamond's fluidity model) or, it could be selected in an air of non-conformity for either sexual or gender identity norms.

Questioning as Identity Iconoclasy. Identity iconoclasy is a term used to describe people within a sociopolitical movement who, by choice, do not identify publicly, or sometimes personally, with any sexual or gender identity. This is a civil rights strategy which is used to affect or deconstruct the hegemonic binary system of gender (i.e. Male-female) or tri-chotomous system of sexual orientation (i.e., homo-, bi-, or heterosexual; Currah, 1996). Through my personal experience, I have found that although many people who utilize this strategy will call themselves "queer" or "unlabeled," those selections are not often on demographic forms, whereas Questioning is. Thus, although people may not be Questioning aspects of their identity, they are questioning the overarching system in which the gender or sexual identity constructs are situated.

Questioning as "Post-Gay" Identity Marker. As heteronormativity continues to break down within media and society, freedom of sexual identity exploration is created. "Post-gay" is a queer theory term, which suggests that we are moving beyond the traditional triadic continuum of heterosexual-bisexual-gay/lesbian, to a more nuanced view of sexual identity that no longer requires self-disclosure or pride (Ghaziani, 2011). It remains unclear whether teens are "post-

gay," or beyond identity labels. For example, Russel, Clark and Clary (2009) research suggests that, although teens are more likely to provide alternative identity statuses than they were in the past, the identity status of Questioning (along with traditional labels) remain consistent, suggesting that we are not yet post-gay. Recent research suggests the existence of "in-between" categories, such as "Mostly Heterosexual" and "Mostly Gay/Lesbian." Although these categories are useful for research and for capturing varying expressions of sexuality, it seems that these categories do not capture the nuances and richness of an individual's identity (Vranglova & Savin-Williams, 2012), which may necessitate the use of Questioning as an identity label.

Questioning in Gender Identity. Perhaps more stigmatized than sexual orientation or SI is gender identity, more specifically, gender non-conformity, gender variance, gender atypicality or transgender identity. To date, issues with intrapsychic distortion between assigned anatomical sex and their perception of their gender identity (i.e., sense of maleness or femaleness) remains a pathology known currently as Gender Dysphoria Disorder (GDD; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Until very recently, this was called Gender Identity Disorder and presumed to be "treatable" (presupposing pathology). Today, although the stigma of pathology and persistent diagnosis of GDD remain, the focus of the "treatment" is no longer to promote congruence between assigned sex and assumed gender, but to ameliorate distress caused by the environmental variables that make coming out as transgender, gender atypical, gender variant, genderqueer, or agender difficult (WPATH, 2011). Despite this seemingly positive shift toward acceptance of these gender identities, many psychologists remain frustrated that there remains a notion of pathology (e.g., dickey, Burnes, & Singh, 2012). Thus, one may continue to identify as Questioning as protection from stigma given the current sociopolitical climate. However, it is

also likely that people may be Questioning their gender identity or gender expression in ways analogous to the aforementioned SI Questioning reasons.

Issues Related to Adolescents Who Identify as Questioning.

Homophobic bullying and violence towards youth who identify as sexual or gender minorities abound. Homophobic bullying and violence also abound for those who are *perceived* to be sexual or gender minority youth, whether or not the identity is either true or intentionally asserted (Varjas, Dew, Marshall, Singh, & Meyers, 2011). Researchers have found higher reports of truancy, alcohol/marijuana use, and depression/suicidal ideations, in those who identify as Questioning when compared to both heterosexual and LGB students (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009), even though there were no significant differences reported on the aforementioned variables between LGB (collapsed) and heterosexual groups.

Although studies by Birkett and colleagues demonstrate evidence for increased risk in Questioning youth, they remain ignored. The largest public health meta-analysis to date (Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010), did not include information about adolescents or emerging adults who identified as Questioning, instead reporting on the needs of the lesbian, gay and bisexually identified students. Further, the national plan to decrease health disparities did not include Questioning as an identified population, assumedly because there is not enough information to demonstrate the potential risk. Thus, there is little information that further explores the potential risk associated with a Questioning identity, and no evidence for future exploration. There is also little understanding of what Questioning means within the literature, and there is no literature that has asked people who identify as Questioning what it means to them. With this information in mind, this study will act as a base upon which to build an understanding of this population

from an exploratory perspective in the hopes that their perspectives will also be recognized and addressed.

Chapter III: Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the shared lived experience of, meaning associated with, and context related to Questioning sexual or gender identity as perceived by emerging adults who self-identified as Questioning. I used a qualitative approach via descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to collect and analyze data for this study. Following a literature review, I used strategies I developed to gain participation, collect and analyze data, write findings, and to validate the themes that emerged from the data. As is necessary in all qualitative research, I explored my existing perspectives and theoretical assumptions by using a process of reflection and reflexivity prior to and during the entire study process. Described in the segment below is a description of methods I used in this qualitative inquiry, including my engagement in a process of reflexivity. In this chapter I will describe the study design, sampling method, data collection strategies, methods of ensuring study credibility and data analysis techniques that I employed in conducting this study.

Researcher's Perspectives

Qualitative research assumptions and processes influenced my philosophical assumptions that, in turn, influenced the design and conduct of this study. The qualitative theoretical orientation that informed the research process also influenced the interpretive lens I used in collecting and analyzing data and presenting findings. As such, it was crucial for me to examine my perspectives before and during the study in an effort to identify and address possible personal biases, assumptions, values, and beliefs may have potentially influenced study participants and the research environment.

Researcher's initial perspectives. Before beginning this study, I wrote down what I assumed to be true about my potential participants. Doing so helped me to reflect on my

assumptions and beliefs, and to be aware of how they affected data collection and analysis.

Listed below are my initial perspectives.

- I assumed that questioning was not a discrete phase of identity development, but rather, a process that may occur at several life stages. As Kahn (1991) stated in response to their research findings, “if identity development is motivated by the desire to establish congruence between self-perception and environment, then continual shifts in self-perception or interactional behavior would be required to achieve congruence” (p. 53). Thus, Questioning would be conceived of as a continuous process based on an individual’s environment and new understandings about aspects of self.
- I believed that Questioning could be part of identity development for people regardless of sexual orientation.
- I assumed that, contrary to the original research literature related to development, an individual’s “successful completion” or resolution of questioning did not lead to a stronger sexual identity, particularly in those who tended to be more sexually fluid.
- I made no assumptions about characteristics of people who might identify as Questioning.

Interpretive framework. An interpretive framework served as the lens through which I framed my assumptions. Couched within ideologies that had developed through my life, including formal and informal educational and other experiences, are assumptions that have affected how I have assimilated, accommodated, and interpreted the data. Thus, I continually engaged verbally and nonverbally in a process of introspective analysis of my own world beliefs, so that I became aware of how these beliefs affected my interpretation of data.

I view both life and research through a pragmatic framework. Guided by a “what works” philosophy, I focused on the outcomes of the research and did not commit to one particular philosophical view or vision of reality. I used the processes of bracketing and reflexivity to distance myself from absolute or dichotomous terms, such as the gay-bisexual-straight trichotomy. Thus, “truth” for me is defined by what worked at the time. This ideology fueled the research mechanics, and expected research gains informed the methodology. As I learned new information, I made several pragmatic changes in the study. For example, through the interviews, it became clear that the meaning of questioning was heterogeneous. I realized that a traditional phenomenological framework could be augmented and supported by gaining insight into the meaning of Questioning. Therefore, by adding the elements of IPA, I was able to add to the “shared lived experience” of the phenomenon by gaining an understanding how people made sense of it.

A second pragmatic change that I made was in the questions posed during the interviews. I modified the questions to reflect a changing understanding of the meaning of a Questioning identity. As it became clear that some participants associated Questioning with in vivo development, SI questions were minimized to pursue questions that focused on exploration of individual’s *current* developmental process, including current attraction, sexual, and relational experiences and the meanings such experiences held for them.

I used Queer theory (Plummer, 2011), a theory which is pragmatic in nature, as the guiding theoretical framework for the development and analysis of this project. The primary focus of Queer Theory is on the de-centering of identity by challenging sexual orientation and gender binaries. Queer theorists contend that most categorical concepts are actually continuous or fluid concepts. The current study focuses on the possibility of questioning as a dynamic state

and that that multiple spheres of influence affected the subjective relevance of Questioning; thus, Queer theory is a natural backdrop for understanding a construct that has not been person-centered in the definition to date. These pragmatic and queer theoretical frameworks are embedded within my own assumptions, described below.

Assumptions. Like all researchers, I brought my personal values and theoretical assumptions into the collection and analysis of data. As such, I engaged in continuing reflection and reflexivity regarding my assumptions about all aspects of the study. The process of reflection and reflexivity served as a pre-condition for my engagement in “bracketing” during the course of the study. LeVasseur (2003) defined bracketing as the “interval, where momentarily we are dispossessed of our assumptions” (p. 418). In this study, I was able to engage in bracketing at the conclusion of coding, analysis and discussion-writing sessions by taking a moment to be mindful about the study and the psychological principles that were influencing my thinking about the data. During these moments of reflection/reflexivity, I spent briefly writing about my emerging self-awareness of my biases, assumptions, beliefs, and values, which is consistent with the act of reflexivity. My writings allowed me to be open to other possibilities and explanations that may have helped inform my initial and novel understandings.

Reflexivity is the crux of axiological beliefs, the first of four philosophical beliefs articulated by Creswell (2013), that I discuss in this section. From an axiological perspective, it was imperative for me to maintain a journal and research log in order to aid in my recognition of my personal, value-laden assumptions and biases, values and beliefs associated with the study. I strived to bracket these assumptions during interviews, data analysis, and the process of writing findings.

A second way I attempted to reduce biases was by minimizing the distance between the participants and myself. I made the epistemological assumption that, as a psychologist-in-training, I had developed competencies in establishing rapport and in recognizing researcher-study participant differences in values and experiences, power differentials, and privileges. I attempted to maintain an appropriate level of emotional connection with participants without allowing my emotions or responses to influence participants' views and vice versa.

Study Design

Consistent with the qualitative research paradigm, the design for this study was emergent by being responsive to emergent data in that it was flexible, holistic, and contextual. This study began as a typical hermeneutic phenomenological approach; however, initial findings of heterogeneity made it clear that an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) would be helpful in finding meaning in the participants shared experience. Described in this segment of the chapter is the design of phenomenological interpretive analysis, including the recruitment and selection of participants, data collection methods, strategies to address study credibility, and the data analysis process.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Phenomenological approaches share several philosophical notions, as described by Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994), which guide the process of meaning-making. First, phenomenology is an attempt to attain the Greek concept of “wisdom,” though deep understanding of a phenomenon. This is unlike “scientism,” which attempts to explain the world through empirical means (Moustakas, 1994). The second philosophical notion, as described by Husserl, the father of phenomenology, is *epoché*. Epoché is the suspension of judgments about what is real until more evidence emerges to support participants' vision of reality (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché, as asserted by current methodologists,

is achieved by engaging in reflexivity and bracketing. These tools, which I used to contribute to a credible research design, are described in detail in the *Issues of Trustworthiness* section.

The concept of transcendental-phenomenological reduction is connected to epoché. Once judgment can be suspended, then one can apply a novel textual description of phenomena that is inclusive of “essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds colors and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Following transcendental-phenomenological reduction is the last philosophical pillar, imaginative variant. This is essentially the “how” of a phenomenon; it is asking, “how does this phenomenon occur?” Thus, the understanding of the phenomenon is brought forth by suspending judgment of the phenomenon to view it in novel, holistic ways that will describe both what it is and how it came to be.

IPA builds from these assumptions, and makes a third assumption that robustness can be attained by the connection and derivation of themes from current literature. Simply stated, IPA assumes that one need not recreate the wheel, but instead reinterpret the use of it. IPA is a relatively new way of approaching phenomenology, which has gained traction particularly in health psychology where limited objective measures of constructs – such as pain – are not yet available (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This introspective and personal approach lends itself to the study of other constructs such as stigma, and particularly for constructs that have not been studied from personal accounts to date such as Questioning.

The text of Smith et al. (2013) describes IPA as evolving from the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Husserl’s approach to phenomenology urged researchers to focus research on understanding a person’s experience within their environment (i.e., context and experience). Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre moved toward a focus that is more interpretive, allowing researchers to view the

phenomenon as it exists within the world rather than in isolation. IPA is based, in large part, on Hermeneutics, which is a theory of meta-interpretation. Hermeneutical interpretation focuses on the relationship between the whole and the part.

The Hermeneutical Circle – an important analytical concept within the phenomenological framework – brings forth the idea that analysts must think about a stated word in the context of the sentence. Then, think about the sentence in context of the complete text, the text in the context of the interview, and the interview within the complete life of the participant. It is non-linear and iterative in nature, simply suggesting that related to each of these notions is the larger context of life. In IPA, this pragmatic notion influences data analysis by moving between linguistic, descriptive and conceptual approaches. The approach is particularly important in studying a Questioning population, in that the meaning of Questioning is both dynamic and heterogeneous, quite possibly so nuanced that the meaning is different for all who identify as such. Thus, using the literature to make sense of these meanings is warranted.

Sample and recruitment. This study, approved by the Institutional Review Board at East Carolina University (Appendix A), involved developmentally emerging adults aged 17 to 25 years. Though researchers have consistently found that the average age of awareness of same sex attraction continues to be around ten years of age, disclosure tends not to occur until the early 20's (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). For many emerging adults, college may have been the first place that individuals encountered an existing LGBTQ+ community. This observation is particularly salient with my personal understanding about the rural, socially conservative communities that surrounded one of the two university towns where the research took place (rural LGBT populations are not well understood).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. Inclusion criteria specified that participants were: a) between 17 and 26 years of age; b) able to speak and read English; c) self-identified as *currently* questioning or “unsure”, although participants could concurrently identify with other sexual or gender identities; and d) voluntarily engaged in the study. Of the individuals who contacted me with interest in study participation, one person was excluded because the individual did not identify as questioning.

Sampling Strategy. I used purposive sampling to select study participants who had direct and current experience with questioning their sexual or gender identity. According to Smith (2013) a sample size of six is considered a sufficient for an IPA, and a sample of ten is considered large enough to make within group comparisons and is considered robust for IPA. Ten individuals engaged in the study for the purpose of providing in-depth insight into questioning. I selected participants on the basis of those from whom I stood to learn the most (Creswell, 2012) and ultimately was able to involve a diversity of people in the study who all had self-identified as Questioning.

To obtain a diverse purposive sample, I recruited participants in several ways – flyer advertisement, departmental research requirement, introductory psychology course invitations and snowball sampling. All flyers and personally delivered invitations directed students to a website (www.explorationQ.com) where potential participants were able to obtain additional information about the study, me as the researcher, and how to contact me if interested.

Study participant recruitment efforts included:

On Campus Advertising flyers. I posted advertising flyers on university campuses in locations where people who were Questioning would be most likely to view them, including the campus LGBTQ+ Resource Office, freshman residence areas, and the student counseling center.

Psychology course requirement. I increased awareness of the study by using the campus psychology department's research requirement for students enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course. This requirement states that students may participate in research for course credit. I used the Psychology Department's online system to pre-screen potential participants using a brief demographic questionnaire that included an item about sexual or gender identification. Those who indicated they were Questioning were invited to participate in the study. All students who attended the initial meeting with me that occurred prior to giving consent to participate in the study were awarded with the research credits so that they would not feel obligated to participate in the study.

Introductory course announcement. I extended invitations for study participation by making personal announcements in a several sections of lower-level undergraduate psychology courses that I chose because of the high likelihood that younger participants would be enrolled in those courses.

Off-Campus Recruitment. I placed advertising flyers off-campus in locations such as coffee shops, bulletin boards on streets, public libraries and eateries with bulletin boards in two locations, one that was a rural and one that was a larger university town. This ultimately resulted in the recruitment of some slightly older and more racially/ethnically diverse participants in the study.

Snowball sampling. I provided to all study participants a brief flyer to give to acquaintances who they believed might meet the study criteria. This strategy was useful in recruiting two additional participants. Browne (2005) suggested that snowball sampling, or chain sampling, may be particularly useful in hermeneutics given that asking people to identify another

person within their network who may be appropriate for inclusion in a particular study can help to add depth to the data by capturing the nature of social transactions and networks.

Gaining participation. Potential participants contacted me through the study website. I also contacted some participants by email secondary to their indication of interest in study involvement as a consequence of their participation as an option for meeting the psychology department's research requirement for undergraduate students. The latter were referred to the study website to gain information about the study prior to scheduling the initial interview.

Prior to the onset of the individual in-depth interview, I obtained verbal consent for study participation. I offered participants an information sheet containing contact information for support or counseling resources (specific to each location), which some participants chose to keep. I provided all participants a token of appreciation – a \$5 gift card to a place of their choosing. Some individuals who participated in the study as part of the psychology course requirement also received course credit for participation in the study. In order to eliminate the possibility that some participants might have felt coerced to discuss potentially uncomfortable issues, potential participants did not need to participate in the study further than listening to the initial consent information in order to obtain a gift card or course credit. Everyone invited to participate in the study engaged in the data collection associated with the study; no one declined to participate.

Sample Size. I based sample size on the concept of data saturation, generally thought to be the point of diminishing return for data collection. This is to say that stories or themes seem to become redundant after a point (Patton, 2012). This sense of redundancy suggests that a shared meaning has been captured. After seven participants, I noticed three very distinct stories that coincided with previously collected data. I consulted with my research mentors to discuss the

possibility of saturation, and our discussions confirmed that saturation was imminent. I attained saturation after collecting data from additional three more participants. In other words, after observing the occurrence of saturation after the seventh participant, data from three additional participant interviews confirmed saturation.

In-depth interviews with ten participants. Three participants identified as male, and one identified as both female and questioning their gender identity. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 years (modal age was 21 years) and had been enrolled at universities in the southeastern United States. One participant was a graduate student, one was a recent college graduate (within the month of the initial interview); everyone else was a matriculated college student. One participant was married, three were in long-term committed relationships, and six were not in committed relationships. Eight participants were sexually active; one remains celibate by choice, the other by circumstance. Of the ten participants, four identified as Caucasian, three identified as multi-racial, two identified as Asian (Filipino and Hmong) and one identified as Afro-Caribbean.

Data collection strategies. I conducted this descriptive phenomenological and interpretive phenomenological study using in-depth, open-ended interviews as the primary data collection strategy, and quantitative questionnaires as a secondary data collection method. I used the questionnaires as a means of triangulating the data (Patton, 2002). With participants' permission, I audio-recorded the interviews and took handwritten notes during the interview. Discussed in this section is my use of the interview guide and questionnaires as well as the format for the dual-phase interviews.

Interview Guide. I facilitated each interview using an interview guide (Appendix B) in a way that was flexible and unrestricted in terms of the wording and order of the questions posed

to participants. In addition, consistent with the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 1999), I addressed but did not limit the content of the interview to the particular questions listed on the guide. For example, as it became clear that a lack of romantic or dating experience seemed salient in understanding the phenomena of Questioning, I began to ask questions that might garner more information about experience. A second example is that as it became clear to me that biphobia was an important factor in people's perception of themselves, I asked questions aimed at understanding the participants' stance or beliefs about bisexuality. In this way, the participants' responses influenced the study design (Patton, 2002), thus making them a more active part of the research process.

Questionnaires. In order to gain insight into participant's latent and explicit perceptions about sexual identity, the participants completed (as relevant to their identity) up to three survey instruments immediately following the first interview. These surveys were: The Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS; Kendra & Mohr, 2008), The Gender Identity/Gender Dysphoria Questionnaire for Adolescents and Adults (GIDYQ-AA; Singh et al., 2010); and The Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), each of which is described below.

I used the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) to measure various constructs that constituted sexual identity, taking into account environmental factors including stigmatization management. Kendra & Mohr's scale (2008) was an adaptation of Mohr and Fassinger's Lesbian and Gay Identity Scale, which was slightly reworded to account for the experience of bisexual individuals. The scale also accounted for environmental factors (i.e., social, political, economic, and cultural) and subsequent intra- and interpersonal facets of identity that other identity models have often failed to address such as internal homonegativity and need for disclosure, respectively. Thus, this scale was valuable in understanding study

participants' *constitution* of identity as well as developmental variables related to identity. The 33-item questionnaire measured seven constructs: Identity Dissatisfaction; Identity Uncertainty; Stigma Sensitivity; Identity Centrality (i.e., how important SI is in a respondent's life); Difficulties in the identity process; Motivation to conceal identity; and Identity superiority. When tested with a sample of Portuguese participants, the factor structure of this scale was found to generally follow Kendra and Mohr's model (de Oliveira, et al., 2012).

In order to gain insight into participants' perspectives about outness or the degree to which they were open to disclosing their sexual orientation to others, participants completed the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). This scale measured the degree to which individuals were out, to whom she or he was out, and overall levels of outness. For example, an individual may have been out or willing to disclose personal sexual orientation only to certain individuals (e.g., mother, best friend), or in certain spheres (e.g., at work or at place of worship). This scale provided insight into participants' level of comfort with the identity of Questioning.

I employed the Gender Identity/Gender Dysphoria Questionnaire for adolescents and adults (GIDYQ-AA) for one participant who was questioning gender identity. The GIDYQ-AA measured heterosexual and non-heterosexual respondents' subjective distress regarding their gender identity (termed *gender dysphoria*; APA, 2008). Singh et al. (2010) found that the scale possessed excellent discriminate variability for gender dysphoria in gender identity patients versus controls; sensitivity was 90.4% for the gender identity patients and specificity was 99.7% for the controls.

I used these scales for their descriptive value, rather than as a diagnostic tool. For all of these measures I provided instructions to "skip questions that do not seem to make sense to you." After the initial session, I reviewed and scored the instruments, and used the information gained

to inform questions for the second sessions. If individual question scores were extremely high or low, subscale scores were inconsistent with previous discussion, or any answers offered potential new insights then I probed about their meaning in the second interview.

In-Depth Interviews. I conducted two interviews about one to three weeks apart with each of eight participants; two participants had only one interview for reasons described below. During initial contact with the participants, I offered them a choice of public locations that enabled confidential conversations for conducting the interviews. Many chose private study rooms on their campus or private meeting rooms in public libraries. One participant preferred the al fresco area of a grocery store, while another participant preferred to use a webcam service (i.e., Skype). After verbally providing informed consent, I asked the participants to complete a demographic form, and then began the interview. Afterward, the participants were asked to complete either two or three questionnaires (depending on Questioning gender identity). This initial session was generally completed in less than one and one half hours. I initiated audio recording of the interview with participant's permission after obtaining informed consent. The Interview Schedule can be seen in Appendix C.

Phase One of the study included obtaining informed consent, an initial interview, and the completion of the questionnaires. During the first phase of the interview, I used a script to address the purpose and process of the study, then built rapport, and obtained verbal informed consent. After obtaining consent, the participants completed questionnaires. All participants completed the Outness Inventory and the LGBIS. One participant who was questioning gender identity completed the GIDYQ-AA. The type of questionnaires that the participants completed was determined by their responses to demographic questions (i.e., choosing the "Questioning" response option for the sexual orientation question, or choosing the "Questioning" response

option for the gender identity question), resulted in the administration of the LGBIS or GIDYQ-AA, respectively. After participants completed the questionnaires, I requested permission to audio-record the interview. I used an interview guide to elicit data-rich information from the participant. After the interview, I scheduled the Phase Two interviews, which typically occurred within a two week time-frame.

The Phase Two interview session included a follow-up interview that included a discussion of participants' responses to the scales. Eight of ten participants completed both phases. One participant was not reachable after the first interview as was anticipated because he did not have continuous access to communication devices. A second participant was lost to follow-up despite my repeated efforts to contact the individual.

Participation in the follow-up interview took about thirty minutes. During this interview, the discussion focused on follow-up questions from the first interview, and provided an opportunity to gain insight into the participant's responses to the questionnaires. I generated follow-up questions after listening to the audio recording of the first interview and viewing the questionnaire responses. I directed these queries toward clarifying or gaining additional depth of information related to the person's questionnaire responses or to information they had provided during the previous interview. My follow-up questions primarily focused on gaining further insight into participants' scores on the questionnaire subscales. For example, if a participant's subscale score on the Outness Inventory indicated comfort in disclosure of sexual orientation to family, but not to friends, I invited the participant to provide additional contextual information (e.g., "I see that you feel more comfortable being out to your family than you are to your friends. Why do you think that might be?").

Another way that I used the subscale scores was to elucidate discrepant information. For example, one participant disclosed a lack of concern about what other people thought about their sexual orientation, yet that person's score on the need for privacy subscale was elevated. Pointing out this discrepancy elicited a discussion about the difference between a need for acceptance and a need for privacy. The survey-based questions helped me to glean developmental, conceptual or sexual identity constitution information that was not captured during the interviews.

At the close of the second interview, I asked participants about their willingness to participate in a member check of findings within the next year. Although time did not yet permit a member check for this study, one will be within one year of the completing of this dissertation to assure that I accurately represented each individual's perspectives and experiences in the report of findings.

Post-interview, I debriefed with interviewees. One participant seemed concerned by the meaning of our discussions and was interested in learning about local resources for support and counseling. I provided a written handout summarizing these resources. No other participants voiced an interest in such resources.

Strategies to ensure study credibility. The study design included strategies that reflected a rigorous approach (Creswell, 2002), including the continuing development of my knowledge and skill in the area of qualitative research; purposive sampling; triangulation of data; methodological congruence and maintenance of an audit trail.

Researcher's capabilities to conduct the study. I have demonstrated knowledge of the tenets of qualitative inquiry through successful completion of a graduate level qualitative research methods course. I have continued to seek knowledge through independent study of qualitative research, including texts authored by Patton (2002), Smith, et al., (2010), van Manen

(1994), Moustakas (1994), and Creswell (2012) and published qualitative journal articles. By understanding the philosophy of qualitative inquiry and methods, I increased my capabilities in serving as a “research instrument,” as suggested by Patton (2002).

Additionally, I am a psychologist-in-training and have had multiple courses in therapeutic techniques, which often addressed methods for eliciting information from individuals. The skills parallel those needed to obtain information-rich data from study participants through a qualitative research process. Throughout the research process, I monitored myself and reflected on the necessity of maintaining my role as a researcher and not as a therapist. Through discussions with my committee members, I was able to maintain a clear focus in the research role.

Triangulation. Triangulation, as described by Patton (2002; 2009) is a strategy used by qualitative researchers to search for evidence of consistency in the data from various viewpoints. In this study, triangulation included collecting data from multiple participants and using more than one data collection strategy with each participant (i.e., in-depth open-ended interviews, Likert-scale questionnaires, and participant’s narrative discussion of their responses to questionnaire items). Although typically used to gather quantitative data, I used questionnaires to facilitate discussion with the participants and to garner a deeper understanding of gender identity, sexual orientation and outness, as previously described. I asked the participants to complete the items the participants felt made sense to them. I used any scorable subscale scores, blank items, or extreme high/low scores as points of discussion in the next interview. I also searched their answers for discrepancies between the questionnaire and the previous interview. I would discuss this with the participant in an effort to understand better their perspective in the interviews, and to look for nuances among the themes during analysis.

A second method of triangulation that is specific to IPA is theoretical triangulation (Smith et al., 2009). I used extant literature to extrapolate and explain findings in the context of theories and themes relating to questioning. For example, as I learned more about the importance of Questioning as an instrumental term, I went back to the literature to learn more about the dynamics of language used in the LGBTQ+ community. This helped to provide a backdrop for the theme and to anchor it to previously explored topics. In this way, methodological congruence makes the theme stronger, and directly adds to the literature.

Audit Trail. I addressed trustworthiness and credibility in study design (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002) by maintaining an electronic audit trail by using software (NVivo 10), which is designed specifically for qualitative research. I scanned and uploaded all completed surveys, handwritten notes and other data, and voice recordings into the software program for ease of retention of data and searching. The audit trail for this study was comprised of all documents related to the study. The components of the audit trail (Patton, 2002) that I consistently maintained during the study included: a) reflection and reflexivity journal (Appendix D), b) research log (Appendix E), c) analysis and interpretation memos (Appendix F), and d) codebook (Appendix G).

Researcher's Reflection and Reflexivity Journal. Reflexivity and reflection, important methods to develop study rigor, differ from one another in that reflection is becoming aware of the processes of research and reflexivity is the awareness of the self within the process (Nutt Williams & Hill, 2012). I maintained a paper reflection journal, which outlined the process of research including important perspectives on data saturation, possible themes, subject recruitment, and issues that arose during the study. For example, when I was unable to reach a participant for a second interview; I needed to think about why this might have occurred and how

I could be mindful in balancing a potential desire for privacy with my desire to complete the interviews. I combined this journal with my research log, a spreadsheet in which I maintained a dated, timed log of events that occurred throughout the study including all participant contacts, actions, and decision points (Appendix F).

My reflexivity journal began with post-it notes of thoughts that came to me during the course of my day, which I scanned into NVivo. I also set aside time after each interview, transcription and analysis session to take digital voice recordings of my thoughts and perceptions (transcribed; Appendix E). As I listened to these notes, I noticed that it became easier to maintain self-awareness of my biases, assumptions, values, and beliefs. This allowed me to distance myself (bracket) my perspectives in order to be more fully present to study participants' views and experiences during the interviews, but mostly during analysis. My use of reflective and reflexive journal entries added an additional layer of transparency to the qualitative inquiry process and allowed me to see areas that required flexibility, for example in participant recruitment and data saturation. Another rationale for engaging in journaling was to elucidate "experiences, values and positions of privilege," and to provide accurate understanding about my rationale for particular research decisions (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001, p. 325).

Analysis and Interpretation Memos. I engaged in an ongoing process of memoing in which I documented how I made sense of the data beginning from the point of initiating data collection to the conclusion of the study. Some of these notes were included in my research log or reflection journal. Mostly, I kept analysis and interpretation memos in the margins of the e-transcripts of data and by creating concept maps. I noted my perceptions about and connections in the data as well as emerging patterns, some of which I later identified as themes (samples in Appendix G). The analysis and interpretations memos lent themselves to Phase One coding

during analysis and I began keeping them as part of my codebooks, which I maintained in NVivo. I developed several codebooks in an effort to consistently and accurately code or label segments of narrative data. According to Creswell (2012), codes can represent expected, unexpected and/or “conceptually interesting” information found in the data (p. 186). I developed initial codes during the first pass of analysis that reflected contextual, descriptive and linguistic similarities among the participants. Through continued exploration of my reflection and reflexivity journals, close reading of the transcripts and writing of the thick descriptions, the codebooks – and themes within them – became more refined. I kept each version separately in the event that I wanted to revert to a previous structure, or to remember why I collapsed or expanded certain subthemes. In later analysis, I anchored the refined codes to the literature through a second literature review.

Methodological Congruence. The existence of methodological congruence suggests that I understood the “metatheory” with which I studied the phenomenon (Burns, 1989, p. 48) which, in this case was Questioning. Possessing methodological congruence meant that I thought in the way that the methodology required and that all components of the design were consistent. I have studied qualitative methodology as outlined by IPA and Husserlian theorists, which informed the IPA perspective. I offered a more detailed description of the Phenomenological Research Approach in a previous section.

Peer Review. By inviting members of the dissertation committee to critically engage in the analysis of themes and coding, I was able to manage subjectivity (Patton, 2002). Through confirmation, questioning, or challenging my codes and themes, a richer exploration of themes and testing of interpretations occurred.

Informed Consent

Following a scripted sharing of the study purpose, procedures, expectations, and anticipated use of the data, all participants verbally consented to participate in the study. Consistent with a continuing informed consent process, I provided participants many opportunities to address their questions or concerns about the study during the course of the interviews. All participants had the option of retaining a document that outlined all study information, including how to contact me in the event that they wished to discontinue their involvement in the study at any time during the study, including after the interview (i.e., during the process of member checking). Three participants chose to keep the document outlining this information. The following information was provided to the participants in the study information document.

Explaining purposes. The following study purpose was explained to each participant: “This study is being done to understand sexual orientation and gender identity development. We would like to know how Questioning fits into the puzzle from the perspective of young adults who identify as Questioning, like you. Right now, there is limited understanding of what people mean when they identify as Questioning and this interview, combined with interviews from other people, will help to build a knowledge base that might help researchers and clinicians when working or conducting research with people who identify as Questioning.”

Promise and Reciprocity. Discussing their identity in an open, safe, non-judgmental environment that I strived to foster during the interviews may have had some positive psychological consequences for participants. Those who chose to view the research findings as part of member checking may have recognized some similarities in their stories with the stories of others, which may have normalized their experience. Their participation in the study was

important because of limited understanding of the Questioning population. Eight people elected to be part of a future member checking process and will be contacted to provide feedback about the findings. Although I assumed no benefits to study participation, participants may have experienced unintended benefits because of the opportunity they had to share their perspectives with me and reflect on their experiences. As a consequence of study participation, for example, two participants reported a greater understanding of their identity which they shared with me during the second interview.

Risk Assessment

Anonymity and Confidentiality. The foremost risk associated with participation in this study was inadvertent disclosure of an individual's identity and sexual orientation or gender identity status. For that reason, I took special precautions to ensure participants' anonymity and maintained their confidentiality in all study documents. I offered all participants the option of choosing a pseudonym or using one that was created by a random name generator. One person chose to use the randomly generated pseudonym, while the other study participants selected names for themselves or used their real names. I used whichever name the participants' chose for themselves in the transcriptions of their data and in all related physical/electronic data. Since two participants chose not to use pseudonyms, I presented findings in a way that was reflective of their choice.

Psychological Risks. Only one participant wanted to learn more about their campus counseling service after feeling some psychological discomfort about ambiguity during the interviews associated with this study. This participant reported wanting the opportunity to discuss sexual identity further. Without exception, participants responded to all questions posed to them;

none reported feeling reticent or uncomfortable in addressing questions or sharing their own perspectives or experiences.

Data Access and Ownership. Only members of the research team had access to data collected in this study. Primary ownership of the raw data belonged to the participants. I informed each participant about the possibility of retracting consent at any time prior to study publication. They could also claim ownership of their interview recordings if they wished, although no one inquired about this. Participants were informed that ownership of the transcribed data, field notes, analyzed data, and written reports based on the data, and all other study-related products belonged to the me and the research team.

Guidance. I had ongoing discussions about Questioning with colleagues and other members of the LGBTQ+ community who added further insight into the emergent results of the interviews. I regularly consulted Drs. McCammon, Walcott, and Knight throughout the project to discuss ethical issues, limitations of objectivity, qualitative inquiry guidance, and to discuss future directions of the project.

Ethical Standards. I abided by the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association and the policies of the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board for both collecting and analyzing data and reporting findings. As a psychologist-in-training, I am bound by the ethics of the American Psychological Association and by the law.

Data Analysis

Data collection, analysis, and reporting were interconnected steps and occurred simultaneously in this qualitative research study (e.g., Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). I initiated data analysis and originated analysis and interpretation memos at the onset of data collection. Shared among all forms of qualitative inquiry are several core analytical

elements: transcription, reduction, and representation (Creswell, 2012). I coded the transcribed data by, “reducing them [data] into meaningful segments and assigning names for these segments” (Creswell, 2013 p. 180), and creating an initial and refined codebook in order to consistently apply codes across all transcripts. During the process of coding and codebook development, I re-categorized or re-defined some codes, sometimes necessitating a re-coding of some segments of data. I then combined final codes into broader categories and identified central themes. I then created graphic representations of these themes via charts, tables and graphs.

Transcription. One of the most important ways that I connected with my participants’ stories was through transcription and close reading of the transcripts. In order to fully immerse myself in the data and prepare the data for further analysis, I transcribed verbatim or proofread the transcriptions of all interviews. A trained undergraduate assistant in the Department of Psychology, who formally agreed to confidentiality regarding the data, transcribed three participants’ interview data for research-related academic credit. I proofread the assistant’s verbatim transcripts by comparing the transcript to the original digital recording. I digitally recorded analysis and interpretation memos during the process of transcription and analysis and imported the recorded memos into the OneNote database. The guide I used to transcribe my data is located in Appendix I; a sample of a transcription is presented in Appendix J.

Reduction. I used the analytical techniques described in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) text, which served as a guide for novice IPA researchers. In describing lived experience, I reduced the data to phenomenological themes, which van Manen (1990) described as an aid to understanding the “particular” through the lens of the “universal.” He defined themes as “the experience of focus, of meaning, of point” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79); or the answer to the

question “what is the point” of the data. The themes I identified were the “fasteners, foci or thread” in building a phenomenological description (van Manen, 1990, p. 91).

I used the IPA approach to reduce the data to thematic categories or concepts in order to make meaning of participants’ experience. The following steps became the analysis process. After reading and initially coding the data for content and contextual information, I developed codes. After clearly defining and categorizing these codes, I used the codes to analyze the data a second time. Using NVivo software, I searched for connections across codes and cases, thus resulting in themes. The themes were developed and reconstructed to create a new “whole” that described the meaning of Questioning to the participants in this study, and were continuously refined up through the final draft of the analysis chapter.

Representation of data. Visual representation of the findings in the form of graphs, tables and charts are presented in Chapters IV and V. A concept map illustrated coding schemes and final thematic categories. Through transcription, reduction and representation I developed the final product of this research as a document that described and interpreted the meaning of the experience of Questioning. Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutical phenomenological methodology implicated writing as an integral piece of analysis, and as such, I have made every attempt to mirror that philosophy in the final document in an effort to give voice to the participants who shared their experience with me and that provided evidence for the outcome associated with the analysis process.

Chapter IV: Findings

Using the dual methodologies of Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), I employed in- depth, open-ended qualitative interviews and an additional literature review to explore the research questions: What are the shared lived experiences of people who identify as Questioning and what is the meaning of Questioning to them. After interviewing the participants and transcribing their data verbatim (see Appendix I for a transcription sample), I then coded the transcriptions for contextual, linguistic and descriptive information. After comparing the codes for similarities, I developed themes which were then used to code the data a second time. As new themes emerged, I recoded the data to be consistent with the new themes, and then used the coding software NVivo) to compare themes across participants and to descriptive and contextual factors (see Appendix G, Sample Codebook). Following several stages of refinement, including creating several iterations of the concept maps presented below, the themes presented in this chapter are the most salient descriptions of participant voices. Taken together, these themes provided insights about the research question – How do emerging adults make sense of the meaning of Questioning in relation to their sexual identity?

Three key findings that emerged from the data. The meaning of questioning as a sexual identity label was not heterogeneous; participants used the word, Questioning, to define or label their sexual identity, with participants applying the term to themselves in one or both ways. Second, although some people viewed themselves in a developmental stage, others viewed Questioning as an authentic, stable and persistent sexual identity. Third, some participants described Questioning as one of many labels they were using to manage other people's perceptions of their sexual identity or to gain access to experiences. Fourth, sexual and intimate

relationship experience, attraction and difficulty attaining these experiences played varied roles in how participants made meaning of questioning. Discussed in this chapter are the results of this study, analyzed by coding emergent themes of shared meaning and experience. I will include the voices of the participants as evidence for the analysis and interpretation of data. To begin, participants' characteristics and interview settings follow.

Description of Participants and Setting

I conducted audio-recorded, in-depth, open-ended interviews with ten purposively sampled study participants who self-identified as Questioning in terms of personal sexual identity. Table 1 provides demographic information about the participants, all of whom were between the ages of 18 and 25 years. Eight of the ten participants were undergraduate university students who were enrolled in one of two universities in the Southeastern U.S., both of which were situated in a university town. Two participants were non-student residents of the university town that was located in a larger metropolitan area. The other university town was located in a rural area.

Interviews took place in public spaces of participants' choosing, with most of the interviews occurring in the private meeting rooms of public or university libraries. One participant engaged in an interview via Skype and another chose to be interviewed in a private space located in the outdoor seating area of an open-air market.

In reporting findings associated with this study, pseudonyms were used for all but two participants, both of whom requested that their real names be used. Although all participants had the option of self-selecting a pseudonym, eight participants did so; two chose their own, and for the others I selected a pseudonym from a random name generator.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	Ki	Marlana	Kristen	Joyner	Alex	Cridias	Lee	Zak	Maria	Candace
Assigned Sex										
<i>Female</i>	X	X	X	X			X		X	
<i>Male</i>					X	X		X		X
Identified Gender										
<i>Woman</i>	X	X	X	X					X	X
<i>Man</i>					X	X		X		
<i>Questioning</i>							X			
Age										
18	X	X	X							
20-22				X	X	X	X	X	X	
25										X
Sexual Orientation										
<i>Questioning</i>										X
<i>Questioning-Lesbian</i>				X						
<i>Questioning-Don't Know</i>	X	X	X							
<i>Questioning-Gay-Bisexual</i>						X				
<i>Questioning-Bisexual</i>								X	X	
<i>Questioning-Asexual</i>							X			
Race/Ethnicity										
<i>Caucasian</i>			X	X	X	X			X	
<i>African-American</i>	X									X
<i>Multiracial</i>								X		
<i>Asian</i>		X					X			
Hometown										
<i>Rural</i>		X		X						
<i>City/Town</i>	X		X		X	X		X		X
<i>Metro</i>							X		X	
Recruitment										
<i>University</i>	X	X	X	X	X					
<i>Community</i>						X	X	X	X	X

Six participants were women. Ki, Kristen, and Marlana were 18-year-old freshman women enrolled in a university situated in the rural Southeastern part of the United States. These three women identified their sexual identity as Questioning. Twenty-five-year-old Candace, a non-student university town resident, identified Questioning as her sexual identity. Two women, Joyner and Maria, aged twenty-one and twenty-two respectively, identified their sexual identity as primarily Questioning and secondarily as “*gay for now*,” or bisexual respectively.

Of the four men who participated in the study, Alex, a twenty-year-old, identified as primarily Questioning and as gay as a secondary label. None of the participants over twenty-one years old actually expressed an identity as Questioning, although they used the label as if they did. Cridias, a twenty-year-old senior college, student identified solely as Questioning. Twenty-two-year-old Zak, a non-student resident of the university town in the metropolitan area, identified himself as and used the label of Questioning regarding his sexual identity. Lee, a twenty-two-year-old, identified as Questioning with a secondary label of asexual. Despite having an assigned sex as male, Lee primarily identified as a woman, leading to additional concerns for this participant about gender identity

Of the ten participants, six identified as Caucasian, two identified as biracial, one identified as African American, and one as Asian. Marlana identified as a biracial Asian and Caucasian. Zak also identified as a biracial Native American Indian and Caucasian. Candace identified as African American and Lee identified as racially Asian and ethnically as Hmong.

Most participants were reared in rural areas of the US; however, Kristen, Ki, and Alex moved from metropolitan to rural areas of the country during their adolescent years. At different points in their lives, the participants resided in areas of the U.S. that they viewed as socially

conservative and other areas that they regarded as liberal. They often referred to the differences between the two types of areas during the interviews.

Half of the participants described coming from religious families, as reflected by familial participation in religious services and family values. Alex, Zak, Candace, Cridias, and Joyner were raised in various Christian faiths and believed that their formal religious experiences within their faith communities had some impact on their sexual identity development, at least at some points during the course of their lives. In contrast, Lee grew up in a religious family, but believed that ethnic traditions played a larger role in her life than did religious ideals.

At the time of the study, three participants, Marlana, Maria, and Candace, were in long-term mutually monogamous relationships (defined by the participants as between three and six months duration). Four of the participants had experienced at least one same-sex romantic relationship; six of the participants reported engaging in other-sex romantic relationships, and two participants reported both same and other-sex romantic relationships. Candace had recently married her male partner. Lee, on the other hand, had never dated or been in a romantic relationship. Regarding sexual experience as defined by each participant, five study participants had experienced at least one same-sex sexual experience; six participants had experienced at least one heterosexual sexual experience, and three of the participants had experienced both same-sex and heterosexual sexual experiences. One participant reported no sexual experiences.

It should be noted that at the time of this writing, the landscape of LGBTQ+ in the United States rights has changed dramatically during the prior decade. Thirty-two states had legislated marriage equality, several landmark Supreme Court cases created the federal recognition of some benefits of marriage equality, and several federal laws had been passed that created some non-discrimination protections for sexual and gender minorities and provisions for equal access to

health care (The Williams Institute, 2014) for some LGBTQ+ people. In addition, The Williams Institute report on state-based polls listed twelve states approving same-sex marriage in 2012, and another five states being within 5% of that majority. Thus, the moment in time the in which the study took place was a particularly important contextual factor. In some ways, it seems that the participants in this study were waiting for the sociopolitical landscape to catch up, at which point, they could be free to be whatever they chose. At no time in American history has the possibility of public acceptance of LGB people ever been so close to occurring.

The Interviewing Experience

I conducted two interviews with each of eight participants, with a range of one to three weeks between interview sessions ($m = 2.8$ weeks). Two individuals were not able to schedule a second interview since they did not have regular access to the internet or a telephone and I was not able to maintain contact with them.

I observed that all of the participants were fully engaged in the interviews. They were thoughtful, interested in talking with me about their experiences, and willing to engage in reflecting aloud about those experiences. I detected no reticence by participants to explore any aspect of sexual identity that was raised during the interviews.

Three of the participants, Joyner, Kristen, and Cridias, shared that their participation in the first interview provoked introspection during the time span between interviews. Joyner described thinking more concretely about coming out as Lesbian during the time between the interviews, which provided a rich in vivo exploration of her movement between sexual identities and choosing the sexual identity label with which she was most comfortable. Cridias relayed that, during the time between the interviews, he realized that his biggest fear was that of being gay. Kristen felt that the discussions during the first interview provided her with more insight

into herself and how she wanted to pursue her sexual identity development. She described feeling “*less confused*” about being Questioning (i.e., she sensed that Questioning might be “*normal*”) during the second interview, although she said she still believed that she was in the process of discovering her sexual identity.

Responses to Questionnaires

Secondary to the modified instructions to answer questions that made sense to the participants, many of the subscales of the questionnaires were non-scorable. Only one person, Joyner, had a scorable Outness Inventory (scale used to describe her level of outness to people such as mother, pastor). She described her overall level of outness to be very low (three on a seven-point scale). Lee was the only person to complete The Gender Identity/Gender Dysphoria Questionnaire for Adolescents and Adults; however, it was non-scorable due to incomplete items. Several people had scorable Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Identity scales and are presented in Appendix K.

Thematic Findings

Two overarching themes emerged from the data: The Meaning of Questioning and The Meaning of Experience. These interrelated themes were also related to contextual factors associated with sexual identity. Contextual factors were influential in both questioning sexual identity and experience with attraction, relationships, and sexuality, including contributing to nuances in participants’ meaning that they associated with Questioning as an identity label.

The Meaning of Questioning. The theme, Meaning of Questioning sexual identity, included three elements (Figure 1): a) Questioning as sexual identity, b) Questioning as a personal label, and c) Questioning as bisexuality. Participants nuanced these elements further as in, for example, Questioning as a Sexual Identity. The participants understood or experienced

this element in two ways: a) Questioning as a developmental process in sexual identity, and b) Questioning as acceptance of ambiguity. I have presented each participant's relationship to the theme in Table 2.

In this study, sexual identity referred to how participants made sense of their sexual orientation, including arousal, attraction, preferred behaviors, desired behaviors, level of outness (i.e., disclosure to others), and community. For some participants, sexual identity was one of several salient superordinate identities and may have been a source of pride for the individual. For other participants, it was one of many parts of themselves, but was not an identity that they considered to be more important than others. Some participants may have understood their sexual identity in one way (i.e., lesbian) but preferred to use a different label for themselves (e.g., Questioning).

Sexual identity as a label referred to what participants called themselves when interacting with others about their sexual identity; it was how they named their sexual identity. Questioning as a label was usually one option that participants took from a common taxonomy of sexual orientation labels (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, etc.). They chose the label of Questioning and sometimes identified other secondary labels. They often used the term Questioning in nuanced ways as illustrated by one participant who identified as lesbian to friends, but chose to identify as straight (or not identify at all) to members of a faith community. This individual used questioning to test the waters, so to speak, when she was not sure what the best approach would be.

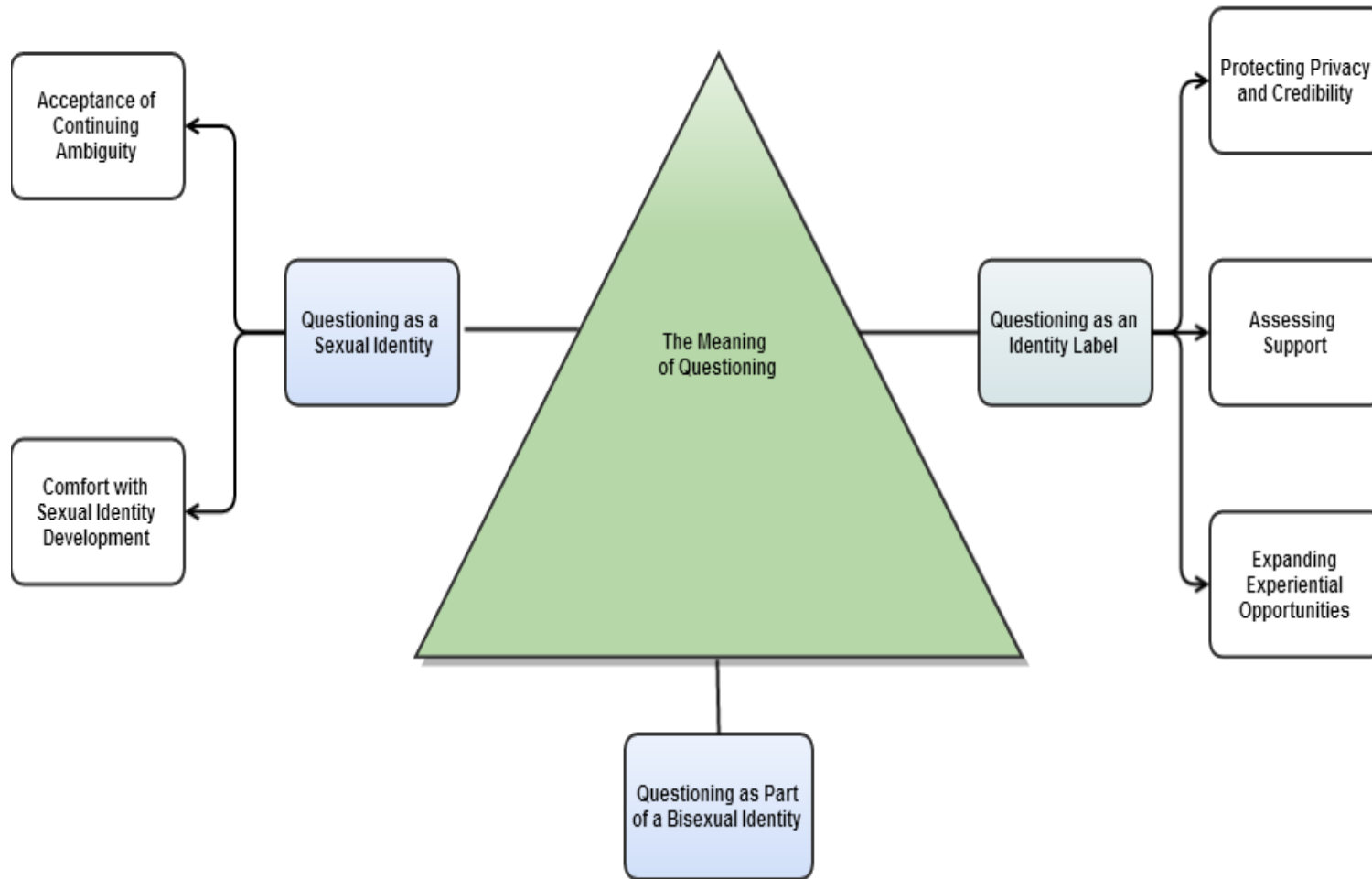


Figure 1: The Meaning of Questioning Concept Map

Participants' chosen identity label was not necessarily reflective of past experiences or expressed desires. Thus, a participant could have chosen an identity label of Questioning even though he had a relationship with a woman. In addition, some participants who self-identified as Questioning reported that others labeled them as gay based on their appearance or behavior. Although participants could not control how others labeled them, they were able to control how they labeled themselves and how they understood their sexual identity and their use of the term, Questioning helped them do that.

Table 2: Participant's Relationships to Themes

	Ki	Marlana	Kristen	Joyner	Alex	Cridias	Lee	Zak	Maria	Candace
<i>Identity</i>	X	X	X			X	X			X
<i>Label</i>	X			X	X			X	X	
<i>Part of other ID</i>					X			X	X	

Questioning as Sexual Identity. Represented in this element of the Meaning of Questioning was participants' use of the term, Questioning, to describe how they currently understood their sexual identity. Participants spoke about two facets of Questioning as Sexual Identity: a) sexual identity as a developmental process and b) Questioning as acceptance of ambiguity. For many participants, Questioning involved a sexual identity that was developing. Participants differentiated between the two facets of sexual identity as developmental process or acceptance of ambiguity in terms of a perceived endpoint, one possibility of which was envisioned as a long-term mutually monogamous relationship. Other participants recognized no clear endpoint for Questioning as Sexual Identity. Instead, they believed in the prospect of continuing to explore themselves, their relationships, and their sexuality throughout their lives.

In other words, some participants believed that a sexual identity of Questioning offered them life-long freedom to engage in the process of self-discovery.

Sexual identity as a developmental process.

“Roll with it.” (Cridias)

Participants talked about sexual identity as a developmental process that unfolded in its own time and, for some, involved relational or sexual experiences and experimentation that ultimately would culminate in the revelation of a personal sexual identity. For Cridias, the words, *“roll with it,”* described what Questioning meant to him. The phrase also captured the sentiments of participants who viewed Questioning as a process that ultimately would take them to a point of having a definitive sexual identity such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; no participants envisioned heterosexuality as their possible definitive sexual identity (see Table 3).

Participants recognized that questioning could be a typical or natural part of their sexual identity development trajectory. Marlana explained that she was, in fact, still developing her sexual identity. She said, *“Yeah, but there’s no pressure to get that. It’ll come when it comes. You don’t have to be consistently striving for it; it’s just whatever you fall on.”* Her words, *“get to that,”* in her preceding statement meant that she eventually would come to different insights about her sexual identity and perhaps a different identity label, but would do so as a consequence of a naturally evolving process.

Kristen’s sentiments seemed to capture those of participants who were searching for their sexual identity but who valued and accepted the exploration that accompanied Questioning as a part of the process. She explained, *“I mean I feel comfortable saying, ‘I don’t really know.’ I’ve been trying to get out there and like play in the field, I guess. But yeah...I don’t really know, so I’m ok with figuring it out.”*

Some participants described the meaning of Questioning as Sexual Identity as a phase during a developmental process that was transitional. They believed that they would not remain in a Questioning status, but instead viewed the ultimate discovery of a suitable sexual identity label, usually one that was non-heterosexual, as the goal of the process.

The meaning of experience was particularly salient to participants who defined themselves as actively engaged in Questioning through experimentation. They sought to understand their own sexual identity by using multiple sources of evidence, including their own thoughts and fantasies, as well as their sexual behaviors and intimate relationships. In this way, they remained open to all possibilities in order to understand their sexual identity. Cridias found that his personal circumstances and perspective of being “*confused*” supported Questioning as his sexual identity in part because he was not yet in a long-term relationship. He said, “*It’s like one of those things, so I guess it’s good that I’m confused because I haven’t settled down with people yet.*” From Cridias’ perspective, being in a long-term relationship would signify the end of being able to explore his sexual identity. Involvement in a long-term intimate relationship signified one way that participants demarcated the conclusion of Questioning *per se* as part of the developmental process of sexual identity.

Questioning as a process or phase in the development of sexual identity was salient to all participants in this study, but the process itself was unique to each individual. Participants came into the process from unique circumstances that required them to search and make sense of experiences differently. For example, Kristen’s only experience with an intimate relationship had been a long-term heterosexual relationship that had ended badly. The experience complicated her understanding of her sexual identity because she was unsure if she is still grieving the loss of the relationship or if she was just not attracted to men, whereas Maria enjoyed experiences with

men, but found herself becoming less interested in time. They both made sense of their experiences with men differently. The role of relationships and sexual experience in Questioning will be discussed later as a major theme that emerged in this study.

Table 3: Participants' Age and Self-Perceived Stability of Questioning as Sexual Identity

	Ki	Marlana	Kristen	Joyner	Alex	Cridias	Lee	Zak	Maria	Candace
<i>Age</i>	18	18	18	20	20	21	21	21	22	25
<i>Process of Discovery Stable Identity</i>	X	X	X			X	X			
								X	X	X

Acceptance of continuing ambiguity.

“Let it ride.” (Candace)

For some participants, the meaning of Questioning was a more permanent sexual identity since a self-identity of Questioning enabled them to explore intimacy, sexuality, and intimate relationships more actively and freely. Candace, for example, described a disinclination to foreclose on any possibilities or accept labels that limited her experiences and her sexual identity. She said, *“You want understand yourself, but at the same time, you don’t want put yourself into a category, especially a category where you can’t get out of it. You don’t want to be trapped into it.”* For Candace, questioning meant freedom from traditional labels.

Some participants discovered that their personalities naturally led them to be persistently curious and exploratory regarding relationships and experiences. Lee viewed Questioning as part of her sexual identity journey. In the following comments, she described herself as someone who engaged in the journey in her own way.

Some people pretend they don't care. Some people already settled down... I mean that in general they settled down with what they have found... Congratulations, very good. Some people say, 'We're not sure because everybody says so or because most people say so,' and they would say, 'Yes then, I think so.' That is not what I want to do. I do have to be different. I just come up with my own answer. Even if the answer finally will be the same as the question.

Candace, who was in an other-sex marriage, viewed the ambiguity associated with sexual identity as a part of Questioning and a “*curious part*” of herself. In essence, she believed that ambiguity regarding sexual identity would continue for her unless she was able to have different experiences that might inform her sense of identity

It [being Questioning] doesn't bug me, but like I uh, it's like a curious part of me. Will I be ever be able to know for sure? I'm curious, but I never tried it, ya know? You never know until you try!

Lee found that Questioning related not only to sexual identity, but also provided a broader lens through which she viewed the world. She described the extension of ambiguity to what for her were other important relationships and life issues:

We don't know why we're here other than your mother and father decided to bring you here. Maybe we have ambitions, maybe we have a goal, maybe we're meant to meet somebody, maybe we're not. And we're meant to find out who we are or what we are, what can we do and what should we do. So then, my sexuality is not the question. Other things that I'm questioning would include my

abilities, my relationship with father, with my family, with my friends, umm a lot of other things around the world.

Some participants viewed a Questioning sexual identity as a positive attribute since remaining Questioning meant being open to new opportunities and experiences. Zak responded to a question about his perception of sexual identity as Questioning in the following way:

When I was able to branch out and become more open with other people and myself, it gave me huge boost of confidence to do other things and gave me the ability to just be myself.

Candace shared that she was conflicted about enjoying the ambiguity of Questioning, which she likened to, “*life on the fence,*” and implied that she ought to feel less content with the label. She said, “*I like life to be on the fence. It’s kind of horrible to say that, but I kinda like of being on the fence.*”

Participants who accepted the ambiguity of Questioning tended to value the fluidity and ambiguity associated with their sexual identity. They were disinterested in a sexual identity label that would suggest an identity that was more definitive (i.e., bisexual, gay, lesbian) and found value in the freedom of exploration. Other participants perceived Questioning as a Label to be beneficial to them, as described in the following section.

Questioning as a Label

For some participants, questioning was an identity label, rather than an authentic sexual identity (as summarized in Table 4). Many of the participants who found value in the label believed that they had a clear sexual identity that was bisexual, gay, or lesbian. However, they found Questioning to be one of many labels that they could use to afford themselves protection

from the judgments of others or enable access to experiences they desired. Thus, although they were exploring sexual identity, the meaning of Questioning also involved their use of the label to navigate social situations. For example, some participants used the term, Questioning, to manage how other people perceived them, while other participants used it as a delaying tactic until they were ready to discuss their sexual identity more openly with others. Still others were uncertain about their authentic sexual identity.

Table 4: Use of Labels

	Ki	Marlana	Kristen	Joyner	Alex	Cridias	Lee	Zak	Maria	Candace
<i>Primary</i>	Q	Q	Q	L	B	Q	Q	B	B	Q
<i>Secondary</i>	-	-	-	Q	Q	-	A	Q	Q	-

L = Lesbian, B = Bisexual, Q = Questioning, A = Asexual

Participants for whom use of the label was relevant used Questioning and other labels in situations that required managing the perceptions of other people. In other words, they used two or more labels flexibly to help them manage other people's perceptions about their sexual identity. Doing so helped them maintain supportive relationships, engage in new relational or sexual experiences, or protect their privacy.

Those who used Questioning as a label included participants who acknowledged their authentic sexual identity status to themselves but were not ready to disclose it to others, those who had a grounded sexual identity but found it cumbersome or too personal to disclose or explain to others, and those who identified as bisexual, but found the label of bisexuality too stigmatizing. Participants for whom Questioning was a label seemed cognizant and accepting of having a non-heterosexual identity but believed that asserting their identity might not serve them well.

Protecting Privacy and Credibility. Some participants contended that the common labels for sexual identity (i.e., bisexual, gay, lesbian) did not accurately describe them so they used the label, Questioning, as a means of protecting their privacy or credibility. Some perceived their sexual identity to be rich and complex; however, they viewed efforts to explain their sexual identity to others as cumbersome and some feared being misunderstood. Alex, who fluctuated between using the labels Questioning, bisexual, and gay, shared the following insight:

I feel like I look at look at a person and care for a person because of like their soul. So to me if someone has a good soul and like we're kind of compatible and we can get along and we care for each other, why does it matter if it's a man or a woman? Umm that's how I come to feel and that's how I kind of describe how I feel about love because I feel like I could love anybody. Umm but I feel that that's kind of hard for a lot of people [to] understand umm so umm that's why it's easier for me to just tell people that I'm gay sometimes. Cause like if you're like, 'Oh, I'm attracted to you,' that just kind of confuses people or people aren't really accepting of that cause they don't understand.

Alex also believed that explaining his sexual identity challenged his credibility about intrapersonal knowledge. This is to say that other people believed that he did not know himself or his sexual identity, or that he did not know that he was “*in the closet.*” He contended that he carried a heteronormative status in that people did not consistently think he “*looks gay*” and feared that people would think that he did not understand himself if he openly discussed his identity.

Um because I guess sometimes I am pretty masculine, so it's harder for people to tell. Umm so I don't really say anything, so I guess people just kind of figure it out. Umm but that's also why people get confused, because like if they didn't ask me or they didn't know yet and then they see me with women and stuff they just get kind of confused, but it's just easier for me to if people do ask, just be like 'yeah, I'm gay' than to sit down and explain to them, 'oh, well I actually like I can be attracted to both,' because a lot people just like don't understand or wouldn't take that creditably or something.

Assessing Support. For some participants, using Questioning as a label afforded them time. Some participants wanted time to assess their current support situation; others wanted time for society to accept bisexuality as an identity. Both homophobia and biphobia were highly salient to using Questioning as a label. Some participants believed that they had a good understanding of a non-heterosexual identity, but they were not ready to disclose their identity to friends or family. Joyner, for example, believed that identifying as Questioning gave her time to figure how she would be supported when she was ready to disclose her sexual identity, and also gave her space to continue exploring her authentic self. She explained, *“Saying that I'm Questioning, even to myself, lets me have time. . . Like I can be in both worlds and have both things. I just can't have everything yet.”*

Maria shared Joyner's perspective, but believed that the world was different for those who identified as bisexual. She explained that she did not need people to understand her, so she chose Questioning as an identity label to deflect the need to self-identify as bisexual. She struggled with feeling that progress had been made for sexual identity equality, but that it was not yet the same for people who identified as bisexual. This made it difficult for her to be open

about her sexual identity and made labeling herself as Questioning a safer option. Maria explained,

Well it's not really important that people understand. It's just... I don't come out like that. If someone were to directly ask me 'are you bisexual?' I'd say 'yeah.' I'm not going to like ... put that on Facebook for instance. My parents don't know... my family... my cousins... No one knows. I just know that some people won't accept it [being bisexual]. I know that the world's progressing... I don't know... In some ways it's progressing but it's still not fair at all.

Ki, who said she was comfortable with exploring her developing identity, did not believe that she would lose support from others if she disclosed her identity, but rather that she would be taking away from her parents their long-awaited desire for her to have a traditional marriage. She found that she would rather have the flexibility associated with using the label of Questioning so that her father did not feel like he had lost the chance to walk her down the aisle:

If I were to tell my parents honestly thinking like straight [realistically], if I was to say, 'I'm gay,' they would be like 'okay.' You know it would be hard for me to tell them because I feel like they would feel like I'm taking away their opportunity of him [her father] to walk me down the aisle. So the easier part would be to say that I'm bi or Questioning.

Alex described himself as someone interested in exploring relationships with both men and women. Some participants preferred Questioning as a label specifically because they did not like the label of bisexual. They believed that the label, bisexual, failed to adequately capture their sexual identity. These individuals would not choose the label, Questioning, if a word were

offered that described them more accurately such as pansexual or demisexual. Marlana, for example, viewed bisexuality as an equal split of attraction, desire, and intimacy for both men and women. She explained that she did not meet all of those criteria, thus making her something other than bisexual.

For me, it wasn't really, like there wasn't actually something that I really knew how to identify as because I don't identify as bisexual. For me, I lean more towards guys, obviously because I've been in an intimate relationship with my boyfriend for three years. But I have like emotional feelings towards girls before but it's on an emotional level, but not on a sexual level. Like I feel like I could have a girlfriend and like kiss her but I'd probably not have sex with her, and so I don't think that that defines as full-on bisexual. Just kind of like a step below that, you know what I mean?

Marlana also perceived that bisexuality had an inherently negative connotation as she described the difference between people who identified as bisexual versus those who identified as pansexual. She explained that bisexual people were overwhelmed by stigma, thus her preference for the term pansexuality.

I feel like people who are bisexual spend so much time thinking about the fact that they are bisexual, but pansexuals don't do that. Like the people who are pansexual don't obsess over it... They just like who they like, and that's how it is. Whereas bisexual people [are] always like thinking about the fact that they are bisexual and that they like men and women, and they can do that if they want to.

They are more like aggressive about it I guess. Nobody knows what pansexual is, though.

Expanding experiential opportunities. Some participants found that other people's perceptions of them prevented them from attaining relational or sexual experiences. Both Alex and Cridias explained that women tended to perceive them as gay, which made it difficult for them to have other-sex romantic experiences. Alex stated, "*Instead, they meet me as, 'oh this guy is gay,' like we'll just be best friends!*" Cridias, who was struggling with understanding what made people perceive him as gay, hypothesized that a similar appraisal had limited his experiences with women. He described being what he called "*friend-zoned,*" a situation that occurred when one person in a platonic couple wanted a romantic relationship and the other did not. Thus, the latter person only viewed the former in a platonic way. Cridias perceived that the number of times he had been unable to move a platonic relationship to a romantic one was indicative of women's appraisal of him as gay.

So people say, 'You just got friend-zoned,' so you know, I've been 'friend-zoned' like four times since I've been in college. Yeah, because it if comes off that way, then I don't know. I was like, 'Maybe that's why I can't get a girlfriend' [Laughter].

Thus, favoring a Questioning label helped both Alex and Cridias moderate the perceptions of others and potentially helped them both gain access to the intimate experiences they desired.

Maria and Ki's perspective about Questioning combined both a protective factor as well as an experiential factor. They found that disclosing their bisexuality to a partner put potential long-term relationships at risk because their partners saw their bisexual identity as either a risk or a sexual opportunity, both of which made them concerned about dating these men and disclosing their sexual identity to them. Maria discussed disclosing her bisexual identity to an ex-boyfriend

who thought that her bisexuality would make her more likely to seek sexual experiences with a woman while they were dating. She said,

So this was when I had my first serious boyfriend and he never really said anything. I told him and he said, 'Well, whatever you do, if you want to do something with a girl, I have to be there.' And he didn't like the idea but I thought it was kind of weird that he said that.

Questioning as part of bisexuality. For some participants, Questioning was a persistent part of bisexuality as their sexual identity. Some participants combined Questioning with bisexuality as their identity or used Questioning as a synonym for bisexuality when necessary. These participants, for example, ascribed the label of Questioning to themselves as a means of managing the perceptions of other people who might otherwise have labeled them bisexual. Their concern was the label, bisexual, and the social stigma they perceived to be strongly associated with being bisexual. Questioning enabled them to protect themselves from the stigma and using Questioning as a label for themselves also afforded them opportunities for sexual experiences that they may not have had otherwise. For some participants who were bisexual, Questioning served as a less stigmatizing identity and label.

Some participants viewed themselves as primarily bisexual and secondarily Questioning. The meaning of Questioning for them was similar to those who viewed it as an identity in that they recognized that Questioning was inherently a part of bisexuality. Maria explained,

If you're bisexual I think you're always questioning. So I mean it's kind of a hard thing to deal with sometimes (long pause).

Others who used the label Questioning interchangeably with bisexuality reported that the stigma associated with bisexuality made it difficult to identify with bisexuality even though they believed that bisexuality might be a good descriptor for them. Maria described feeling embarrassed about defining herself as bisexual. She said, *“If I look at people who are bisexual, I think, more power to you! I don't have any negative feelings towards them, but when I think of myself in that way, I feel embarrassed about it a little bit.”*

Candace was concerned about her credibility if she self-identified as bisexual. She said, *“Yeah I'm married. I can't really come out as bisexual, ya know... They start questioning my marriage's legitimacy.”* Candace's concern was shared by participants who identified as bisexual. Biphobia and misperceptions about sexual identity by others prevented them from claiming the label of bisexual.

Ki, who viewed herself as actively engaged in the process of identity development, described why she preferred the label of Questioning to a bisexual label:

If I was to tell a guy, 'oh yeah, I'm bi,' he'd be like, 'oh really?' You know? He would probably get more attached, but that would be a turn off for me. I'd think, you're just using me now, you know? I feel like I'm being used. If I tell a girl, you know, maybe if I tell a girl I'm bi maybe I feel more protected around her kind of you know, but she'd be like, 'You're gonna leave me for a guy.' That's why I feel like it [identifying as Questioning] can benefit me. So if I was like, I'm wondering, I'm questioning, if I tell somebody that, they be like 'okay.'

The Meaning of Experience

“Questioning ...it’s just a new experience” (Ki)

The role of experience (including emotions, thoughts, relationships, and behaviors) was an important theme that emerged related to Questioning, and is represented in Figure 2. Personal experience with intimacy could be unexpected and varied; the ways in which experiences were meaningful to participants was widely varying. Some participants found themselves searching for experiences that confirmed or served as evidence of their authentic sexual identity. Other participants viewed experience as part of their process of sexual identity development. Still other participants found themselves blocked from experiences, and subsequently blocked from understanding themselves. Some participants engaged in a succession of relational or sexual experiences, but were unable to find meaning in them. The relationship between experience and Questioning was salient and important to all participants; however, the role that experience played for each participant was variable. For all of the participants, experience was a necessary part of understanding their identity. Patterns such as active and passive exploration were expected and emergent. It would make sense that a person would come by experiences by choice and by chance during any type of identity development. However, participants also highlighted unexpected roles and types of experiences associated with Questioning, such as their desire for experience, perspectives about the need for, or use of, the information they gained from experience, and difficulties they faced attaining experiences. How participants made meaning of experiences was the central motif woven through this theme.

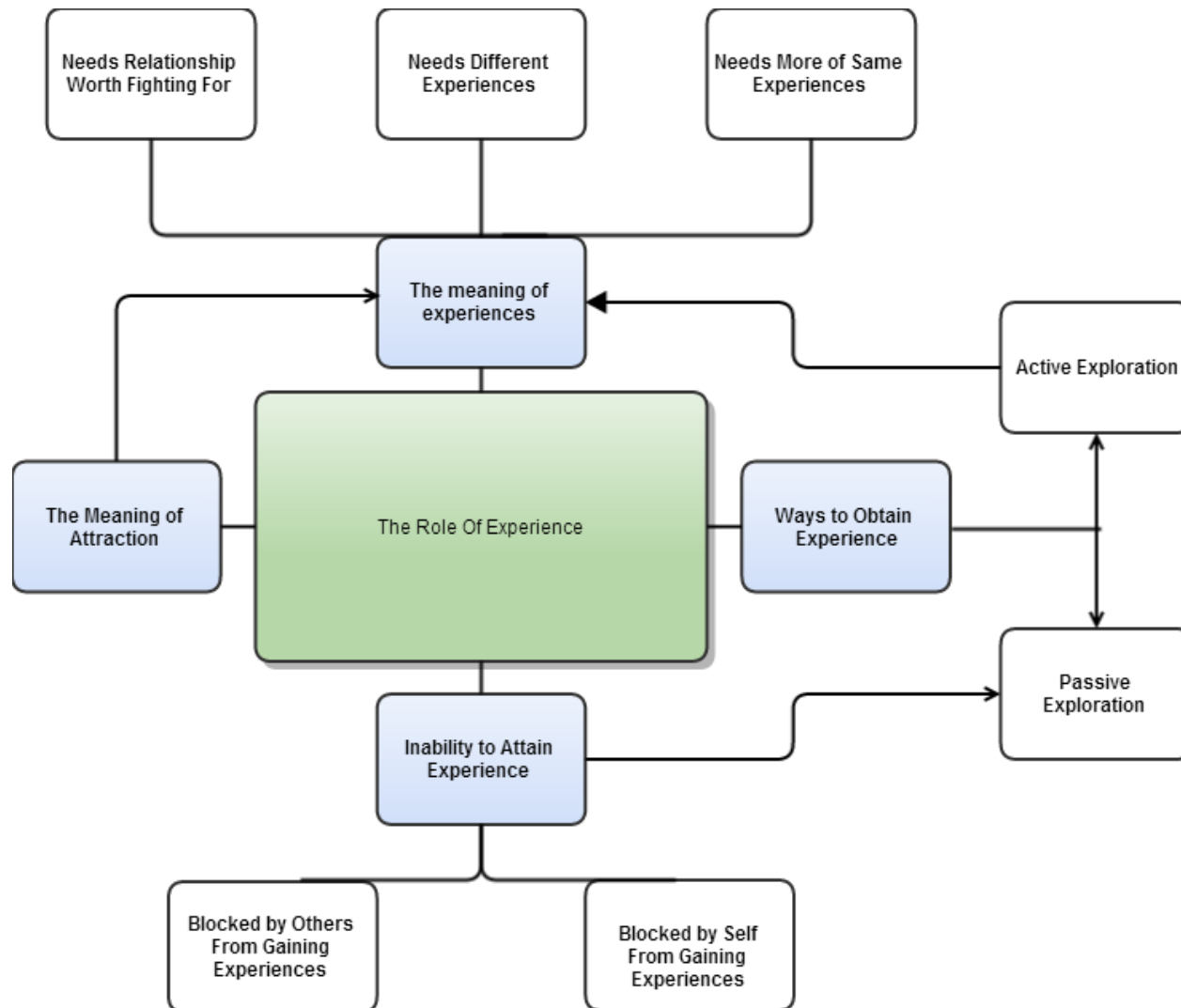


Figure 2: The Meaning of Experience Concept Map

Confirming and Disconfirming Evidence. Some participants viewed the role of experience as confirming or disconfirming evidence of their sexual identity. They applied meaning to the emotional cues such as, comfort, discomfort, embarrassment and excitement that arose from the experiences that they then used as evidence of identity. Alex, who was comfortable with his identity, discovered that his sexual experiences confirmed his own notions of his sexual identity. He said, *“But the more I’ve been with men, I feel like I’m attracted to men and I would want to be with a man and I feel more comfortable with men.”* To Alex, a growing level of comfort with men lent support to his perception that he should continue to seek experiences with men. Joyner, who identified as both gay and questioning, had dated different types of men. For her, experience was also confirmatory but in a different way. She took cues from discomfort or as she said, experiences of not, *“feeling right.”* She described her frustration with heterosexual experiences and what this meant for her sexual identity:

I mean, I've tried and tried with guys. I've dated all kinds of guys. I've dated feminine guys that let me be me and it's just not right. When it comes time to.... it just doesn't feel right.

Joyner took emotional cues from her experiences with men that led her to believe she should seek relationships with women. She recounted those efforts by saying, *“Even hitting on guys- I can do that. That's easy. I can hit on girls, too, if I have a wingman. But I'm more hurt when girls turn me down. I'm more embarrassed.”* Joyner noticed that she felt differently when women rejected her advances and perceived that such information seemed to confirm a gay sexual identity.

Both Joyner and Alex found that having more of the same kinds of experiences contributed to confirmation of their sexual identity. Some participants, however, sought different

types of experiences to help them understand their identity. Zak, who had previously had sexual experiences with both men and women, believed that a long-term same-sex romantic relationship would help him understand more about himself. Although he knew that he wanted such a relationship, he described being thwarted in pursuing this desire because he believed that other men preferred a more open relationship. He described his perceptions as follows:

I've wanted to [be in a romantic relationship with a man] but umm I think that's another kind of another cultural thing that, it's still like it's still a little hush hush and it feels awkward pursuing a relationship with another man just because of it... You don't know how much they want to be open and how much... umm A lot of umm career men that I've met who [were interested in Zak]... usually don't want a committed relationship. They want some kind of openness umm... I just don't want that.

Maria, who was in a heterosexual relationship at the time of the study, hypothesized that if she had the opportunity to actively explore her identity, she would be interested in a relationship that had an emotional component to it. She described her difficulties in pursuing these types of relationships by saying, *“Ok. So I'd want to be with someone in the exact same position. We would like the sexual part and we would both question the emotional part. So it would be healthy and nobody was getting hurt.”* By the phrase, *“questioning the emotional part,”* Maria meant that she wanted someone who was in a similar stage of exploration. Exploring the emotional side of relationships with someone who is already comfortable with the sexual aspects was important to Maria because she had felt used by women who were exploring their own sexual identity, only to find that they were not interested in women. She described this below.

I haven't been in a relationship with a girl at all. I mean like dating relationship. Not really. With that first girl... but it was so awkward. Then there was the time when I didn't want it, but later when I wanted it and the girl was like, 'Whoa. I don't want this.'

Kristen, who had only been in a same-sex long-term relationship, said that she was looking for different experiences. She stated that her heterosexual experiences had not helped her to learn more about herself. She discussed her experience with kissing a man at a club, but felt unclear about whether she was disinterested in this particular man or men in general:

Yeah, like I tried at the club one night because my friends were really annoying with it... They were like bugging me like, 'Oh my god you need to get out there!' And so like I kinda kissed this guy but then I was like, that was weird, and I wasn't sure if I just wasn't into it or if he was a really bad kisser.

Ki, too, found that her relational and sexual experiences had been important, but inconclusive. She had experienced intimacy with both men and women, but did not feel that such experiences defined her. She described her sexual experimentation with women as follows:

"Yeah I had a couple experiments with like, with girls and stuff like that. I was just like, 'Okay!' Ya know [laughter]? It wasn't anything too outrageous or anything that [made her think] like yeah, I'm gay, I'm there." Although it is unclear if Ki was interested in something more sexual than the experience described above, it was clear that, for her, experimentation was not a confirmation of a particular sexual identity.

Some participants hypothesized that special romantic relationships would be the ultimate experience to prompt them to be forthcoming with their sexual identity. They believed that having a relationship "*worth fighting for*" would ease the process of coming out to their family.

This intersection of experience and support suggested that participants wanted to lean on strong feelings associated with a relationship in order to risk the potential loss of support from their families. Joyner described this in the following comment.

I guess I just gotta find that person. Everybody I talk to is in the same boat and maybe they might be more out with their friends, but not their family. With everybody it's always the family. I feel like I need the right person as proof. I mean not as proof that I'm gay. I mean so I can take a woman home to my mom and say, 'Look. I'm happy. She makes me happy.' I need that person that I'm going to fight for.

Ki, who identified as questioning, echoed this sentiment. Ki believed that having the experience of strong feelings for a partner would be the best method for her because her sister came out to her parents in the same way.

But once I accept it, I'll still be like, I don't know if I could tell my parents. Imma accept it to myself and I'll keep it to myself and I don't think it will affect me unless I got into a relationship with a female and if it was something serious at one point...then Imma be like, okay Imma have to tell my parents.

Active and Passive Exploration. Some participants described the necessity of certain types or levels of engagement in attraction, relational, and sexual experiences, although their experiences did not seem to affect their level of comfort with ambiguity. Some participants found that they needed to be actively exploring their sexual identity in order to understand themselves. Below, Ki described that questioning meant experimentation to her.

I think Questioning is more experimenting. You just want to experiment with everything and that's when you go and figure it out, like, 'Oh I'm gay', or 'I'm bi,' or 'I'm straight'. And that's how you figure it out - once you experiment.

Some participants were more passively engaged in the process of gaining experience. Marlana described passive engagement in her process of sexual identity development. Kristen, who described herself as shy and uncomfortable with the typical “college experience” of drinking alcohol and going to parties, believed that her opportunities for exploration were limited and would not become easily available. She said, “*I'm just like waiting for the situation to arise, but it's just not.*” Cridias also waited for experiences to come to him. For Cridias, direct exploration was not something for which he felt ready. He flirted with the line between passive and active exploration by using alcohol to buffer the experience. He recounted a time when he had a same-sex intimate encounter:

I was really surprised. But the thing is, I don't remember kissing him because I was too far gone and people told me about it... It's just like the only experiences that I've had with [a male] have been [when he was] drunk.

For Cridias, using alcohol may have obscured the cognitive dissonance he experienced between the exploring his sexual identity and remaining consistent with his religious beliefs and upbringing. This was a particularly salient issue for Cridias, who struggled with the religious ideology of “free will” and his personal notion that he did not control his sexuality.

Inability to gain experiences. Some participants believed that they needed experience with attraction, relationships, and sexual intimacy in order to understand their sexual identity, but felt hindered in obtaining such experiences. Some participants believed that the barriers they encountered were societal beliefs like biphobia. Some believed that their barrier was self-

imposed, such as commitment to a relationship or to celibacy. For some, geographical factors, like being in a town with few LGBTQ+ people, and other contextual factors created difficulties in gaining experiences. Participants clearly articulated both the origin and meaning of these barriers to experience and the emotions that such barriers engendered.

Zak described his frustration gaining relational and sexuality experiences secondary to societal stigma. Maria shared this sentiment in relation to biphobia. Similar to Zak and Maria, other participants have also felt hindered in their ability to have the experiences they desired. Other reasons participants cited for being hindered from having desired relational or sexual experiences included having access to a limited same-sex dating pool, personal religious values, current engagement in a heterosexual relationship, and various cultural factors. Thus, being able to use the label Questioning flexibly helped to circumvent barriers to experiences. Despite this, some obstructions to experience were not ameliorated by flexible usage of the term. Maria, who lived in a town with less than forty thousand people, felt frustrated that there were few women who, like her, were bisexual and available to date.

But the problem is that I haven't meet females that are worth getting into a relationship with. I've met straight girls where I'm like, 'Wow, I kinda like her' or whatever but like females who are interested in other females... ugh. I've found some and ... I don't like them. I mean it's just like anyone who's in a relationship where there's all these people that you don't like and then the one person that you do. With females it's hard cause it's a much smaller pool [Laughing].

Maria, Zak, and particularly Candace, perceived that although they were happy in their long-term heterosexual relationships (and for Candace, her heterosexual marriage), the ambiguity would remain because their relationship forced some degree of identity foreclosure. Maria

agreed that she could not explore alternative aspects of her sexual identity because she was in a committed relationship.

Candace described being comfortable with a Questioning sexual identity but explained that exploring her sexual identity through various sexual experiences was not possible in the context of her current marital relationship. As she said, *“At this time, I think its [other sexual experiences] no longer an option. I don’t know. Maybe we’ll become swingers when we are in our fifties, and maybe it will come up again, but at this time, no.”*

Cultural barriers to exploration, including religion, posed issues for both Cridias and Lee. For Cridias, his faith required celibacy, which limited his ability to participate in any type of sexual experience, although he was interested in having them. Lee believed that her father’s strict dating rules, which were typical of the Hmong culture in which she was raised, had created a delay in her psychosexual development and thus her ability to engage in romantic or sexual experiences. She relayed, *“It was very simple and straightforward. No dating. It like not a warning or anything, it’s a command: ‘No dating!’”* She described a moment when she realized that her peers had been having relationships for over a decade but she had not recognized it. She commented, *“It’s not about questioning the relationship that they have, it’s questioning my sense ability. I cannot sense that.”* Lee’s lack of *“sense ability”* precluded her from being able to recognize both other people’s relationships and other people’s attempts to engage her in relationships. In this way, she believed that she was developmentally behind her same-age peers. She described her experience as follows.

When I think about those times [when men were trying to engage her in a relationship] I thought...my mind wasn’t... I have to put it in a way...umm my metaphor would be umm it was like, you know how you have the computer you

have to connect the motherboard and the software...I guess mine wasn't connected yet [Laughter].

Making Meaning of Attraction. Participants consistently referred to efforts to find meaning in perceived attraction and relational and sexual behavior. Many participants tried to understand the meaning of same-sex attraction for themselves. Ki spent some time modeling during her teen years. She described her process of teasing apart the way that she looked at women. She found that looking critically at women, admiring them, and being attracted to them (or desiring them) were conflated. As she described,

And that's actually when I started modeling. So that's when I started feeling comfortable with myself. That's when I started hmm...I started looking at girls when they walk and thinking, 'Oh, I have a pretty walk.' I kind of feel like you know... in modeling, I was forced to watch her, I had to critique her, so. I'm like, 'but am I criticizing her?' Or am I like, 'Oh, she's pretty. I'm really attracted to her?'

Cridias added the element of sexual desire in his comments below. He explained that it was confusing to him when considering the difference between admiration, attraction and desire or perhaps arousal:

There is the Questioning for you, it's not just about asking, 'Is this person physically attractive' or 'Do I like this person because they look good and I could admire their body' or 'Can I admire or be jealous' ...but it's also asking, 'Does this feel good because I'm attracted to the sex [the person]? Or does it feel good because I just want to have sex?'

For one individual, a lack of immediate physical attraction was puzzling, in that she did not understand why, if she was bisexual, that she would not immediately be attracted to men in the same way that she perceived her peers to be. Maria explained typical conversations between herself and her friends:

I have friends who are totally straight and they just check out guys and like if there is a guy who takes his shirt off and they'll like talk about him and I think, 'Why are you talking about him?' Yeah he looks fine or whatever. So that...it makes me different because I don't check out guys.

The ways that attraction, relational, and sexual experience colored their perception of Questioning were linked. Each participant was searching for, interpreting and weighing experiences or their lack of experiences in different ways

The Meaning of Contextual Factors

Contextual factors were important in understanding how participants made meaning of their use of the term, Questioning. Messages from parents and others, past and present geographical location, religion, and exposure to individuals who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender exemplified significant contextual factors in Questioning.

Messages. Many of the participants found meaning in the messages about tolerance of sexuality and sexual identity heard both implicitly and explicitly from trusted adults. Many of these messages came from trusted adults such as parents or religious leaders in their faith communities, while other messages were implicitly perceived societal norms, rules, and traditions. Although societal stereotypes, culture, and tradition communicated relational and sexual messages, this section of the chapter focuses on messages from important people in the participant's lives, as well as other societal messages. Participants reported that the messages

they received about sexuality and sexual orientation during the course of their lives could be positive, negative, or mixed.

Ki's parents accepted her sister's identification as lesbian. Ki believed that because her parents accepted her sister's sexual identity, they would also accept her sexual identity if and when she shared it with them. She believed that her parent's careers in medicine precluded them from being judgmental. When asked if she was concerned about sharing her own sexual identity information with her parents, Ki responded,

Umm, no. My parents don't have anything like that [negative feelings about sexual identity], if I ever told them, they wouldn't judge me. They would be like, "Okay, just take precautions," you know. "As always." they always want to say. They can't do anything else. They from the medical field, they be like "Okay we can't do anything about it. She's growing up!"

Marlana believed that her mother's previous unconditional support of her indicated that her mother would continue to be supportive her, regardless of her sexual identity. She said,

And my family has always been super accepting of whatever I wanted to do. In high school I did theatre but I was associate editor of the newspaper. Like I just did whatever I felt like doing and like my family was just always supportive and didn't push me one way or another and if I didn't want to do something anymore like when I was little. When I was like eight or nine I took karate and I didn't like it so my mom let me quit, like she never forced me into anything.

Some participants received negative implicit messages from significant others in their lives. Cridias described being a child and receiving negative messages about being gay from his classmates and his mother's response to their messages.

So I just drew all kinds of stuff, I drew like rainbows, colors, trees, flowers all kinds of stuff and everybody was like, "You're gay, why are you drawing rainbows." I was like, "What do you mean? I don't understand." In my little bubble you know? And so I asked my mom what does that mean and she's like, 'Oh, you go tell them that you're not,' but she didn't tell me what 'it' was.

Cridias' mother's instruction to, "tell them that you're not," and her secrecy in defining "it" suggested to the participant that it was shameful to be "it." Other participants received messages of intolerance that were much stronger. Alex described his experience telling his family that he was gay and subsequently being sent to therapy. Being asked to see a therapist suggested to Alex that there was something wrong with him but he refused to tell the therapist that he was anything other than gay. Alex described his parents' reaction to his disclosure of being gay as follows:

When I had originally come out as gay, I told my parents I was gay and umm at first they were definitely very very angry and upset and hurt and they said I was confused and I didn't know what I was talking about. And they made me go to a therapist and stuff. And umm like my dad told me there was a demon in me and that I was like listening to the world and that like that's not what God would want and yadda yadda yadda.

With time, Alex's parents came to understand and accept him and, at the time of the study, he enjoyed a close relationship with his family. Zak received no explicit messages

regarding sexual identity, but he explained that his parents were generally abusive and that he would not discuss his sexual identity or anything else with them.

Participants perceived mixed messages about sexual identity as highly confusing, particularly when they explored whether parental support would continue after disclosing their sexual identity. They described mixed messages both tolerant and intolerant. Joyner described how her mother's description of disgust regarding a co-worker's same-sex relationship contrasted with a persistent message of unconditional support. Joyner found these conflicting messages to be perplexing. As she described,

Well, um. I don't know. My mom, she works now. She has a lesbian female that works with her as well. She's like, "Oh I gotta hear her talk on the phone. I hear her texting and she's probably sitting there Hey baby!' ... That's some sick crap!" She's very ... and I'm just like ðh man." "And Mother's always saying, 'There is nothing you can ever do to hurt me. I might be disappointed but I'll never disown you.' I'm at that point right now.

Joyner's statement, "I'm at that point right now," illustrated her confusion about which message weighs more or might signify continued support. In thinking about coming out to her mother, the weight of those messages was very significant. Maria's experience with mixed messages was similar to Joyner's experience but Maria observed that her Mother's acceptance of same-sex relationships for other people would not hold true for her. Maria provided an example of her Mother's response to a question about being gay.

In my house they never talked about... or said racist things or talked badly about gay people. I remember when my brother asked, What's it mean to be gay? She

said, "it's when you're a boy and you like a boy." She just made it like... she never put a negative connotation on it or anything.

In contrast to the above perspective, Maria described a message from her Mother that signified intolerance for same-sex exploration, particularly for Maria.

My mom made it known that two males was kind of ok, but two girls [involved in an intimate relationship] was just disgusting. And I think she made that point to me because she...I think maybe she thought I was questioning myself. So I think she was trying to make it like not ok. Like its ok for other people, but not for you. She'd just do that and we'd watch TV or a movie and a girl would kiss another girl and she'd say, 'Oh that's so gross.'

Lee, Zak, and Candace shared the experience of receiving explicit rules and messages of intolerance from their parents. Candace stated that her mother was protective of Candace's sexuality in general, saying:

I just avoided it. Just, the conversation at all, even like sexuality at all. At all. It was just like, 'You better not be having sex with anybody.' Ya know? That kinda thing... 'Wait til you're married.' 'Are you a virgin?' 'Who's that boy you're with?' Just like anything.

Lee stated that women in her family were clearly expected to marry men. Her family endorsed an explicit life plan of career development, entry into a career, and then exit of the career to support a heterosexual marriage and build a healthy family. She said, "We're *not supposed to be highly educated and although you're not supposed to marry when you're very old, you're supposed to marry early and have kids so they would be healthy.*

Religion. Religion played a large role in the upbringing of almost all of the participants. Their families valued religion, attending church services, and following the rules, including limitations on sexual identity exploration that were set forth by their religions. All of the participants found this to be restrictive. Cridias explained that he felt “*caged*” because of his family’s values: “*They didn’t let me be exposed to the world because, you know, they are a very religious family.... Caged.*” Joyner described believing that the church no longer represented her values as a Christian. She felt alienated and judged by the parishioners, whom she viewed to be hypocritical:

Last time we went to church we went to church just to say hey to everyone and I look around and this kid's texting, this guy is on his Facebook, this guy's here is talking about somebody's daughter being a ho when he's got his own affairs to mind. I'm looking around and thinking, 'I guess you all come together for one person and that's great but don't act like you're better than anybody else.'

Church is just a label now rather than it possessing a meaning. I think so, anyhow.

Cridias and Joyner were two of the three participants who rediscovered their faith after leaving their families’ faith communities. Cridias found himself in a church with more accepting values and Joyner defined faith for herself.

For those who debated disclosing their sexual identity, reconciliation of their own faith was a factor in choosing to shed the questioning label in favor of a lesbian or bisexual label. Joyner, who grew up in a Baptist family and continued to work in a church-based setting, found that she was confused by both intolerant messages from the church and by her strong relationship with God. She recognized a need for support by and connection with God, but was uncertain if

God did or would accept her, or would be willing to support her in her process of coming out. She shared the conversations she had with God while coming to terms with her same-sex relationship. In the beginning, she described wondering whether she was repenting for her sins or praying for guidance. Then she wondered whether God would still listen even though she planned to continue living an authentic life as a Lesbian woman.

It's like one of things, like it feels like you wanna talk to Him about it. It's like when I'm talking to God I'm saying, 'Okay I know that this is wrong, but I do pray that it's worth hell-burning for' Ya know? Its like, is that a prayer?

[Laughter] You know what I mean? You're sitting there and you're thinking, 'Dear Whoever Listens to Me: I wish this will work for me but... Ya know? I do feel kinda weird because I actually thought, like, 'Dear God, hold on, can I still talk to you about this or can I not?'

Culture. Culture was an important contextual factor in Questioning. Lee (Hmong) and Zak (American Indian and American Post-punk counter-culture) identified themselves as culturally different from the American mainstream. Zak and Lee found that their culture directly related to their views of sex and sexuality. Below, Zak described post-punk counter-culture and the expectation of openness and exploration:

It [post-punk culture] is a little bit more even with umm with queer culture. It's like kind of like a reactionary thing to the larger the larger culture. I'm not really sure how to describe... It's kind of like an unspoken trying to find your place in the larger culture. You're expected to be queer...you're expected to be open.

Lee explained the symbolic meaning of a word that was used in Hmong culture for women who partner with women in their younger years:

It's just like more like a symbol meaning. We have a word for that... The first word is gold. The second word is flower and the third and last word would be relationship. It just umm actually when the first two words combine together they just mean female, between females.

Both the post-punk culture and the Hmong culture had limitations on openness to various sexual identities. Lee was explicitly expected to have a heterosexual marriage, and Zak observed that bisexuality was viewed as capricious and almost too alternative, even in a subversive post-punk culture.

Geographical Location and Society. At the time of the study, the participants lived in the Southeastern U.S., with some participants residing in more rurally located university towns and others in university towns found in metropolitan areas. All of the participants shared the experience of moving from a northern area to a southern area or from a metropolitan area to a rural area at some point in their lives. They discussed geographical differences that they had observed in societal norms regarding LGBTQ+ issues, whether between either North and South regions or rural and metro areas. Maria had the unique experience during a visit to South America when she learned about what South Americans believe about those who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Zak described himself as geographically transient, having spent time on the east coast working on migrant farms. He observed that some towns that were characterized by residents as “liberal,” like the college town in which he was raised, had hidden socially conservative values. Exposure to these values made him want to travel to places where people were more open-

minded. He described people's views about sexual identity in the town in which he grew up by saying, *"But then we never came out with it. We still kind of umm, It's [a] pretty liberal town but it still, it's pretty it's kind of hush hush even now. But I think it's progressed a lot since then."*

Exposure to LGBTQ+ people or LGBTQ+ Culture. Connected closely to geography was exposure to LGBTQ+ people or LGBTQ+ culture. Some participants found that they had little or no knowledge of any person who was LGBTQ+ living in their town. Conversely, Maria had neighbors who were a married lesbian couple. She found implicit messages of acceptance as reflected by her father's neighborly relationship with the couple. Both Alex and Candace found that they were able to explore their sexual identity more fully once they became connected to LGBTQ culture. For Alex, it was the drag scene in his town, and for Candace it was her university LGBTQ+ student group. Both participants found these to be positive experiences that helped them become more grounded in their identities.

Among the other ways in which participants were exposed to other non-heterosexual people or culture, participants found that few people self-identified as Questioning and that they had no support from those who were LGBT as a person who identified as questioning. They collectively identified a lack of support from the non-heterosexual community. Lee stated, *"I don't know anyone else who is like me."* Candace echoed a similar sentiment saying, *"There are no groups for questioning people. You can't be a part of the LGBT group because people say 'well what are you?' There aren't any questioning people on TV."*

Shared Experience of Questioning

The participants in this study represented three distinct meanings of Questioning as described above. In addition to sharing the differences in perspectives of the meaning of Questioning, the participants also had a "shared lived experience" with Questioning – they

shared the experience of using Questioning as an instrument. In doing so, they claimed for themselves a term that they could use to gain freedom, flexibility, privacy and protection.

Summary

The themes that emerged from this study helped to expand the definition of questioning to include people who used the term as an alternative label, and people who viewed it as a stable identity. Other findings included the importance of relationship and sexual experience, and how people made meaning of their experiences (or barriers to experiences). Contextual factors such as implicit and explicit messages, geographical location, access to LGBTQ+ community and culture, and cultural and religious factors all affected how people perceived their identity. Last, the participants shared the experience of using Questioning as an instrument.

Chapter V: Discussion

In the context of sexual identity, the term Questioning has come to be commonly understood to have three meanings based on the literature: a) A developmental and transitory phase en route toward a stable identity, b) a context-related construct, particularly for people with multiple marginalized identities, and c) a label used to represent identity iconoclasy and post-gay phenomena. Typically grouped together by researchers with sexual and gender minorities in LGBTQ+ taxonomies, the data of those who identified as Questioning on sexual identity demographic measures rarely have been disambiguated from the larger LGB sample. Although it is well understood that LGBT people are at-risk for increased health concerns (e.g., depression, risky behaviors, suicidal ideation), in cases where the taxonomies were separated, researchers observed that people who identified as Questioning were more likely to experience increased risk when compared to their heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender peers (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

Despite increased health risks, Questioning as a sexual identity has not been well understood. The literature lacks a definition that is based upon people's experience with Questioning as a sexual identity. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the shared meaning of Questioning and how participants made sense of Questioning as a sexual identity using phenomenology and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a framework.

I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with ten purposively sampled individuals ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-five-years who self-identified as Questioning and voluntarily participated in this phenomenological study. I sought to gain insight into following research question: What is the meaning and lived experience of emerging adults who identify as Questioning?

Findings from this study suggested a richer and heterogeneous meaning of Questioning. Indeed, components of currently recognized definitions of Questioning (Cass, 2012; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Reiner & Reiner, 2012; SEICUS, 2011; Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Troiden, 1989; The Q Center, 2012) emerged as subthemes in data associated with this study. The most prominently represented subtheme was that of Questioning as a developmental process. In addition, study participants shared context-dependent factors that delay identity disclosure or served as barriers to identity exploration.

The primary ways that participants described questioning in the current study were: a) as a stable sexual identity or an identity in the process of development; b) as a sexual identity label among other possible labels; and c) as a stable part of a bisexual identity. These descriptions comprised a major theme: The Meaning of Questioning. The overarching meaning of questioning was that of participants' instrumental use of the term to suit their individual and particular purposes but that ultimately afforded them freedom, flexibility, and protection related to sexual identity.

Many participants described questioning in ways that were consistent with Questioning as a phase in identity development. They believed that Questioning was a placeholder that allowed them to continue identity exploration, an exploration that they described as typical for individuals who were their age and at their life stage. Participants also used the term, Questioning, to signify a stable identity rather than a transitory developmental phase. The stable identity of Questioning enabled them to remain open to all experience, including romantic, sexual and fantasy experiences. Questioning also served as a primary or secondary identity label in conjunction with what, for the participants, was perhaps a more authentic, secondary sexual identity label (e.g., bisexual, gay, lesbian) that they kept to themselves or shared only with

trusted others, as a way to explain, defer, or avoid explicating complicated sexual identities to external others. Participants who identified as bisexual believed that Questioning would always be a part of bisexuality in that they would continue to seek experiences and that Questioning was a less stigmatizing sexual identity label that they could use.

A second major theme, the Role of Experience, informed participants' meaning of Questioning. Participants gained insight into their self-identity as Questioning or use of a Questioning label from their experiences within themselves and with other individuals, particularly in the areas of attraction, relationships, and sexual intimacy. All participants discussed their experiences in terms of being either active or passive. Some regarded their sexual experiences as confirmatory evidence of their identity, while others discussed the barriers that inhibited their ability to obtain experience.

In the following section, I discuss the themes associated with this study in the context of the literature. Within the discussion of themes I have highlighted the role of language, differing views of sexual identity development in other minority populations, and the role of biphobia. I concluded the chapter with the limitations of this study, implications of findings for clinicians, and recommendations for future research.

Questioning as an instrumental term and the dynamics of language. Each participant in this study shared the experience of using Questioning to represent themselves. To each of them, Questioning was a word that provided them with a different aspect of the same ideas: Freedom, protection, privacy and flexibility. It is evident from the research that the language and labels used to describe sexual orientation and identity are in flux (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). For example, homosexual, a term considered pejorative (APA, 2012), once had been one of the most widely used terms in the U.S. to describe those who were LGBTQ+; heteroflexible, once

called bicurious, is now used to describe non-exclusive heterosexuality (i.e., not exclusively heterosexual and at least willing to entertain some notion of other-sex orientation). Other terms such as pansexual, polysexual, and *demisexual* are not well understood by clinicians, researchers or the public. In the most recent information on terminology provided by the American Psychological Association (2008), these terms were not defined at all, despite their use within the community. In my personal experience with training health professionals, these are terms for which they consistently seek clarification. At the heart of this discussion about the meaning of Questioning is the dynamic use of language and labels used to describe sexual identity. Research on the persistence of shame and stigma, particularly in relation to bisexuality, the empowerment and acceptance of youth who decline labeling themselves or being labeled by others, and the potential that taxonomies do not exist at all (Diamond, 2013) provides a backdrop for the following discussion about the dynamics of language.

Shame, stigma, and the term bisexual. Participants in the current study believed that Questioning was the primary sexual identity label to which they subscribed, although three of the participants identified as bisexual as a secondary identity. Many of the participants discussed bisexual stigma and the social risks of identifying as bisexual. Thus, within this sample, bisexual shame and stigma were palpable.

Historically, bisexuality was considered to be a transitory phase between gay or lesbian and heterosexual identities (Rust, 1995). Despite being recognized as a stable identity (Weinberg, Williams & Prior, 2001) this persistent idea of transition continues to exacerbate biphobia both in research and within the public primarily because, at the time of this study, bisexual people continued to be viewed by the general population as inauthentic at best and promiscuous at worst. In Herek's 2002 study on heterosexual attitudes toward bisexual men and women, only

intravenous drug users were rated less favorably than individuals who were bisexual. According to Herek, biphobia was more salient for men due to a presumed increased risk of transmitting HIV, or possibly because female same-sex sexuality was more positively viewed by American society (meaning that it is often sexualized). The participants' perspectives echoed these public opinions. For example, some of the bisexual women in the current study reported that men would ask to observe or take part in a same-sex encounter - some of the men who made the request were their romantic partners. Such requests made the women feel uncomfortable and distrustful of their partners.

Findings from the present study suggested that the term, Questioning, may be used by those who identify as bisexual as a safer, less stigmatizing way to disclose sexual identity. As is true for non-heterosexually identified people in general, disclosure of sexual identity can affect friendships. This is particularly true for individuals who have self-identified as bisexual, about whom it was reported that coming out posed an increased risk of negatively impacting friendships (Breno & Galupo, 2008). The sexual identity label of bisexuality is arguably the most stigmatizing and socially dangerous of all of the sexual identity labels in use at the time of the study. The findings from the current study suggested that participants who viewed bisexuality as a stable sexual identity found it too stigmatizing to self-identity as bisexual.

Post-Gay Ideologies. Ghaziani (2011) wrote that post-gay ideology or phenomena involves defining ourselves as the whole of our identity parts, meaning that sexuality need not be our superordinate identity. In this way, we become less different than others. For example, in my own experience it is common for people to wonder whether a person is gay based on the way that they look or act. They focus on her sexual orientation (really, her gender expression) rather than holding curiosity about other aspects of her. Presuming a post-gay ideology, we would be free

(both LGBT people and those inquiring about us) to assert other aspects of our identity as well. Thus, as Ghaziani states, we are “building bridges toward each other”, rather than creating them, by becoming more accessible and like the dominate groups (p. 101).

Ghaziani also makes the point that this does not mean our society has overcome prejudice and homophobia. He quotes from Seidman (2002), "As individuals live outside the closet, they have more latitude in defining themselves and the place of homosexuality in their lives," but states that gay people must still live in a world in which they are a minority.

Whereas some participants in this study wanted to be signified by the term Questioning (since it enhanced their ability to find and interact with supportive others who shared a Questioning self-identity), other participants contended that labels reflecting sexual identity were unnecessary and too restrictive. It is possible that they are already thinking of this in terms of post-gay ideology, however, this was not directly stated. It was unclear in this study whether participants wanted to be defined by characteristics other than sexual orientation in concert with post-gay ideology or if they were simply disinterested in, or disconnected from existing identity labels.

Non-existence of a sexual identity taxonomy. Some researchers have suggested the existence of more "in-between" sexual identity categories than are commonly recognized, such as “mostly heterosexual” and “mostly gay/lesbian,” (Vranglova & Savin-Williams, 2012). Other researchers purport that complete or accurate taxonomies of sexual orientation and identity do not exist (Diamond, 2013). This is to say that, similar to assertions that race and ethnicity are false categorical variables, using sexual identity taxonomies may misrepresent the richness and complexity of individuals’ unique sexual identities. Although sexual identity terminology might be useful for research purposes and for capturing varying expressions of sexuality, such terms or

taxonomies cannot accurately reflect the nuances, richness, or complexity of a particular individual's sexual identity.

This disavowal of sexual identity taxonomies has both confused and conflated arguments for the use of the term, Questioning, as both a sexual identity and sexual identity label. It is possible that Questioning as a sexual identity, as suggested by findings from this study, does not exist at all. Perhaps, since some participants believed that they were not currently represented by an alternative label, Questioning was simply one way that participants were attempting to distance themselves from overly simplistic sexual identity taxonomies.

Some of the participants who used Questioning as a label implied that they were doing so to reflect the complexity of an identity that they were still coming to understand, or already understood, to be more complex than was represented by single term in an existing taxonomy. In this way, it could be said that the post-gay phenomenon might resonate with some of the participants. It could also be that using the term, Questioning, meant that, as Diamond suggested, sexual identity taxonomies were not useful for understanding one's self. Nevertheless, such taxonomies may still be useful in social situations until society recognizes people's desire to be more than their sexual identity label, as some researchers suggest will eventually happen (Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011). Thus, the ways in which people use questioning as a label has implications for understanding why and how people choose to use them.

Questioning as a Sexual Identity and Identity Development

The theme, Meaning of Questioning, included two patterns of Questioning related to the self-perceived stability of Questioning in participants' lives: Questioning as a stage or phase in the sexual identity development process and Questioning as a stable identity. Younger participants tended to view themselves in a stage of identity development. They actively or

passively experienced their sexual identity by dating, engaging in sexual activity or relationships, or by exploring their feelings about attraction, arousal and desire. They perceived that this phase would end and possibly be demarcated by a special experience or relationship that would elucidate their identity. In contrast, Questioning was a stable identity for some participants that was more reflective of their open-minded and exploratory personality than it was about their sexuality. To place these patterns within an interpretive frame, I will explore how the participant's stories compared to known patterns of both sexual minority identity development and other identity development.

Sexual Minority Identity Development. Sexual identity development was experienced for some of this study's participants between 18 and 21 years old during a phase that has been coined *emerging adulthood* that is purported to continue until age 25 (Arnett, 2000). Although emerging adulthood aligns with some parts of Erikson's young adult phase of development, the goal of which was to develop a coherent identity to provide intrapersonal support for future intimate relationships. Based on age and their stated areas of identity development, the participants in this study also seem to align with Arnett's emerging adulthood concept, defined by exploration, change, and access to unsupervised activities.

In analyzing the data from a temporal and developmental perspective, there seemed to be a split based on both age and experience of the participants. There was consistency among the three eighteen-year-old participants in that they viewed questioning as a transitory phase or developmental process. Cridias and Lee, both twenty-two years of age, also shared this view and expressed the belief that they were somewhat late in developing intimate relationships and making sense of these experiences. Lee had not yet experienced an intimate relationship or physical sexual experience. Although Cridias and Lee, viewed themselves as delayed in

development, the other older-age participants, Zak, Maria, Alex and Candace, seemed better able to define and explain their perspective regarding their sexual identity. They were also more aware of the meaning they accorded their experiences and more aware of the social nuances and challenges that asserting their identities entailed. Demonstrated by both Cridias' and Lee's experience, limited exploration was a factor that seemed to delay this advancement. Cridias both intensely desired and rejected the notion of a romantic relationship; whereas Lee was challenged by understanding the differences between close friendships and romantic relationships, thus preventing her from seeking an intimate relationship.

In this small purposive sample, participants who were 21 to 25 years of age tended to view Questioning as a label or a stable identity rather than part of a process of identity development. Twenty-five-year-old Candace was most settled into questioning as a stable identity, but was also most restricted in exploring her identity due to her commitment to a marital relationship. Thus, age, development, and experience were relevant factors in how people defined Questioning as a sexual identity.

Marcia (1967) expanded Erickson's constructs of crisis and commitment into four statuses of identity development: Identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement based on experience of an identity "crisis," which meant a state of exploration. When comparing the participants to Marcia's identity development model, the participants' perceptions reflected an age-related split between those most aligned with Marcia's stage of moratorium, reflecting a low commitment exploration status, and those in Marcia's identity achievement stage, referring to a high commitment status attained through exploration. The participants who viewed their identity as emergent and part of an identity development process aligned with Marcia's concept

of being in moratorium). Paradoxically, the participants who viewed their Questioning identity as stable, or in identity achievement according to Marcia, were committed to the idea of continued exploration of their sexual identity. Although it might seem that based on Marcia's model, Lee might fall into a status of identity diffusion secondary to both a lack of commitment and experience, this would not be true to Lee's perspective about intrapersonal exploration. No participants in this study seemed to have experienced foreclosed identities (i.e., commitment to an identity without exploration), in that they were all committed to exploration. This is likely because the study sought people who identified as Questioning, which may be antithetical to a no-exploration status. Is it also possible that the "no exploration status" may exist for some individuals who are Questioning; however, this study did not capture that perspective. The perception of Questioning as a transitory phase of identity development based on Marcia's and Erikson's models was supported by data from some but not all study participants, since some participants perceived themselves to have a stable identity of Questioning.

Many studies have identified developmental patterns of identity status that reveal identity status changes over time, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood. Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia (2010), conducted a meta-analysis of such studies and found that only about half of adolescents/young adults remained stable in their identity status, and "relatively large mean proportions of samples were not identity achieved by young adulthood" (p, 694). They found that across most studies, moratorium status increased steadily until age nineteen and then decreased. However, the status of foreclosure and diffusion decreased during high school years, but fluctuated during late adolescence and young adulthood. Kroger et al. (2010, p. 684) noted that during later adolescence and young adulthood identity commitments, "are likely to be socially supported and implemented, hence they evoke little motivation for change." For this

study, those who viewed Questioning as a stage of transition generally felt support from their parents, friends or other trusted adults. This support may have allowed these participants to feel comfortable identifying as Questioning, at least to themselves, rather than identifying as heterosexual and questioning their attractions, desires and thoughts. The difference between the two could be seen as being authentic and may be the difference in saying “I might not be heterosexual” versus “I am open to anything.”

Both Erickson’s and Marcia’s models were based on heterosexual populations, thus raising questions about potential differences in minority and non-minority identity development trajectories. Given that the study population was *potentially* a sexual minority population as reflected by their general interest or engagement in same-sex experiences and half of the population identified as ethnic or racial minorities, an exploration of identity development in light of Queer identity and *other* identity development models is warranted.

For sexually diverse identities that are not socially supported, the patterns may differ. For example, Diamond’s 2008 longitudinal research on sexual patterns of women found a considerable amount of movement between identity labels over a twenty-year period. This inquiry garnered information that illustrated that the identity labels were also reflective of behavior, but were in no way predictive. Thus, although a woman may change identity statuses over time, the number of times her status changes and the movement between the statuses do not suggest that she will move toward or away from status-typical behaviors (i.e., lesbians will engage in experiences only with women). This concept of fluidity seems to be captured by the participants who preferred using multiple labels and by those who viewed their Questioning identity as stable.

Queer identity development models. Queer identity development models, first explored by Cass (1979) and later by Coleman (1982) and Troiden (1989), had described similar stages. In fact, these three models shared four stages, beginning with an initial awareness of same-sex attraction, desires or fantasies, then followed by exploration which led to acceptance of non-heterosexual identity (or tolerance thereof), and ended with a successful integration of non-heterosexual sexual identity into an overall identity. Although it is unclear whether participants began *identifying* as Questioning during their initial awareness of same-sex attraction (this did not come out in the data), data provided by some of the participants reflected some the phases of exploration and acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity. The question of whether self-identification as Questioning equates to acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity remains unanswered.

Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) described the developmental milestones of sexual minority youth. They reported that sexual identity awareness began around eight to eleven years of age, same-sex sexual behaviors emerged between ages twelve and fifteen years, and self-identification as gay or lesbian occurred between fifteen and eighteen years of age. Participants in the present study did not reveal meeting these milestones in their personal histories, and no questions were asked that elicited this specific information.

Another study (Dubé, 1997) found that the sequence of sexual activity and labeling is not experienced universally among sexual-minority males. Men over the age of 26 were more likely than younger adults to engage in sex with men prior to identifying themselves as gay. Men under 26 years of age were equally likely to follow a sex-first or identify-first sequence. This age cohort difference was attributed to the recent emergence of positive gay images in the media that has increased the salience of gay and bisexual identity labels for contemporary youths. Men who

engaged in sex before identification reported difficulties adjusting to their sexual identity, more male sex partners, and higher rates of heterosexual involvement. These findings suggest that models of sexual identity development do not equally apply to cohorts of men. Although identity development trajectory was not explicitly examine for in the current study, it is, however, important to note that there was variability amongst the men in both their same-sex experiences and their use of the term, Questioning, reinforcing Dubé's findings.

Data from the present study did reveal that some participants who self-identified as Questioning perceived that they continued to engage in the process of sexual identity development. It is also possible that the development of other sexual identities such as bisexuality served to delay or extend the developmental process of sexual identification. It may also be that the sexual development of those who self-identify as bisexual differs in important ways from that of individuals who self-identify as gay or lesbian.

Bisexual Identity Development. Several models of bisexual identity development have been described in the literature including a four-stage model developed by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994). This model, first developed in the 1980's, focused on bisexually identified men in a geographical area that was reportedly welcoming to and supportive of individuals who were LGBT. Weinberg et al. (1994) identified the stages of bisexual identity development to include initial confusion, finding and applying the bisexual label, settling into the identity, and continued uncertainty. An updated study (Weinberg et al., 2001) revealed the stability of these stages over a period of fifteen years.

A newer model of bisexual identity development (Bradford, 2004) suggested that what the author termed *bi-negativity* deeply affected identity development. Bradford proposed four stages of development: questioning reality, inventing the identity, maintaining the identity, and

transforming reality. Successful outcomes associated with Bradford's model included believing in one's own experience, creating an individual definition of sexual identity, and finding a sense of community and personal satisfaction. Bradford argued that bisexual identity was achieved by "transcending the culture" (Bradford, 2004. p 21).

Interview data from the current study suggested that participants experienced the first two of Bradford's (2004) stages: questioning reality and inventing the identity. In fact, participants for whom Questioning was part of the process of sexual identity development reported experiences and perspectives consistent with the initial stages of most Queer identity development models (e.g., Bradford, 2004; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989; Weinberg et al., 2001). Bradford's third stage of bisexual identity development model - maintaining the identity - is characterized by experiencing encounters with isolation and invisibility, and using that experience to build a sense of one's own community. Participants whose data reflected Questioning as a stable identity reported experiences consistent with that stage; however, the fourth stage - transforming adversity - which Bradford described by partaking in bisexual advocacy, was not reported by participants in the present study. Thus, it is possible that the stages of the Queer or bisexual identity models are not directly applicable to those who are Questioning. Perhaps the participant's development would be more like McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) continuous model because the stages are so dependent on contextual factors and experiences. Also, it seems that these sexual identity development models have stages that are more resonant with data from those engaged in the process of sexual identity development, whereas the experiences of those who viewed Questioning as a stable identity were more aligned with Bradford's bisexual identity development model. Therefore, Queer identity model stages are an

"almost" fit and seem to explain some of my participant's perspective of development, but not all of it.

Other Identity Development. Eight of the ten participants described exploring another identity prior to considering their sexual identity. Such identities included ethnicity and race as well as athletic identities. Ethnic and racial identity development and the development of other non-minority identities, like an athletic identity, may delay the recognition or acceptance of a minority sexual identity (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999). Five study participants in the current study identified as ethnic or racial minorities. Studies have shown that ethnic minority youth may experience delayed sexual identity development secondary to perceived pressure to choose between a minority sexual identity and a minority ethnic or racial identity (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 2004). Additionally, African-American boys may hesitate to identify as a sexual minority because of the stigma associated with sexual minority status that exists in the Black community (Manalansan, 1996). Thus, other research has suggested that individuals who are Questioning may experience the process of sexual identity development for a longer period of time after recognizing personal same-sex attraction (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 2004).

Consistent with a prolonged process of sexual identity development in racial or ethnic minority youth, Dubé & Savin-Williams (1999) reported that only 21% of Asian American males were on target with developmental trajectories regarding same-sex experiences before sexual identification. Also consistent with Dubé & Savin-Williams' observations, data from Asian-Americans and Black participants in the current study revealed delayed sexual or romantic experiences.

Jamil, Harper and Fernandez (2009) research focused not only on milestones, but with processes of intersecting identity development. In their qualitative study of thirty-nine adolescent

(sixteen to twenty-two years of age) Latino and African American men identifying as gay, bisexual or Questioning, they found that ethnic identity development was gained through positive, negative and neutral experiences. External experiences, such as racism, positive ethnic/racial cultural experiences and noticing cultural dissimilarities, began as early as elementary school for this cohort. Sexual identity development was reported to be more a more conscious and cognitive process by which participants became aware of same-sex fantasies. Although they did have same-sex sexual experiences, they described more of a cognitive process in analyzing the meaning of these experiences. Dissimilar from their ethnic/racial cultural experiences, the youth in this study did not have a label for their sexual identity experiences.

Converse to Dubé & Savin-Williams' viewpoint of sexual identity development lagging behind ethnic identity development for youth with intersecting minority identities, Jamil and colleagues' found ethnic and sexual identity development occur in tandem. Their participants suggested highly divergent processes for the development of either identity, with participants reporting that the salience of their cultural experiences (e.g., direct teaching about traditions such as food or dance) was connected to their sense of ethnic identity. Whereas these experiences enveloped the participants, sexual identity related experiences were gained through active exploration of internet resources and experiences with other men in which neither men discussed what the experience was or meant. In the current study, active exploration was key for understanding developing sexual identities. Ethnic identity was not a topic that was brought up by the participants, except to say that they identified as a specific racial/ethnic label; however, for some of the participants who had religious identities, this tandem, yet divergent path seemed to fit very closely with their development in that they felt stable in their religious identity, but

needed to seek out same-sex experiences. Cridias was most alike this population in the way that he obtained same-sex experiences without labeling them as such.

These two viewpoints of Dubé & Savin-Williams and Jamil and colleagues suggest unknown factors mediating the development of intersecting minority identities for ethnic and sexual minority men. The intersectionality of the participant's racial or ethnic identities with a developing marginalized sexual identity was a topic not explored by these participants, but the topic would lend itself nicely to longitudinal follow-up.

In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, three other participants had identities associated with their athletic engagement, which they believed took time away from socializing with peers during their adolescent years. Alex, for example, identified as an athlete who had competed nationally throughout high school. He described feeling that he did not notice attraction to anyone until his senior year of high school.

It is possible that, similar to prolongation of the process of sexual identity development due to other marginalized identity development, individuals with other developing identities will take longer to develop a marginalized sexual identity. It would make sense that people would pursue the development of personal identities that brought them positive reinforcement, rather than risk or stigma. A possible explanation for the participants' sexual identity exploration phase lingering into late adolescence or emerging adulthood may be due to the development of other identities; however, this possibility remains only hinted at by the participants.

Questioning as Part of Bisexuality

Some participants who acknowledged the actual or potential personal sexual identity of bisexual expressed that Questioning would always be a part of their sexual identity. Weinburg et al. (1994) noted that the stage of "continued uncertainty" in their model of bisexual identity

development, was commonly experienced among a sample of bisexually identified participants whom they studied. The researchers considered “continued uncertainty” as a final developmental stage that was created by the absence of social validation. Bradford’s model (2004) replaced “continued uncertainty” with “importance of community of support” as a final stage.

In the current study, participants indicated a desire for community support and decreased perceived stigma, but some participants also expressed a *desire* for continued uncertainty about their sexual identity. Some of the participants viewed uncertainty as integral to Questioning and an attribute with which they were comfortable. The continued uncertainty that Weinberg et al. described as a stage in bisexual identity development resonated with participants who self-identified as Questioning in the current study. Both Questioning and Bisexual sexual identities are understudied, underrepresented, and often collapsed into larger samples that include other sexual minority categories. Individuals who self-identify as Questioning or Bisexual lack community representation and resources for support, perhaps more so for people who identify as Questioning. Findings from the current study indicated that bisexuality and Questioning, as both sexual identities and identity labels, have many similarities and may not be separate. For some participants, Questioning was a label that those who also identified as bisexual chose in order to avoid the stigma associated with bisexuality.

Social Concerns of Identifying as Questioning

In the current study, the process of developing a sexual identity as bisexual or Questioning tended to persist into early adulthood and several participants experienced a lack of visible resources for support. Some participants expressed feeling pressure to come to a decision about sexual identity that was sometimes precipitated by social norms or recognizing a personal desire for alternative experiences. For example, having same-sex roommates into adulthood was

atypical for their same-age peers. Others realized that engagement in a committed relationship with a person of another gender led them to question their sexual identity because they suspected or acknowledged same-sex attraction.

Older study participants voiced difficulties in finding or connecting with others who were Questioning outside of a college environment. Candace reported a lack of groups for people who identified as Questioning; when she tried to join bisexual groups, she observed that such groups were comprised primarily of very young or much older women who were interested in dating other women. Candace said the only category that really fit her publicly was “*ally*” (i.e., a person who may not identify as LGBTQ+, but who stand in support of those who do). She wanted to maintain her connection to the LGBTQ+ community because she did not view herself as heterosexual. At the same time, she did not view herself as LGBTQ+, so she settled for identifying herself as an ally, although being an ally did not represent her either.

The Role of Experience

All of the participants in this study discussed sexual and relational experience and attraction as factors associated with a Questioning identity. Participants defined experience as a range of behaviors including same or other-sex romantic encounters, dating, long-term relationships, and sexual encounters that ranged from intimate kissing and touching to penetration. Many participants valued such experiences, stating that they needed something more, different, or special in terms of romantic or sexual experiences. Existing research related to sexual experience informs participants’ view of experience as central to a Questioning sexual identity or label.

Diamond et al. (1999) summarized the current understanding of the role of romantic and sexual involvements in heterosexual youth compared to youths with sexual minority or emerging

sexual minority identities. They concluded that, although non-heterosexual women tended to engage in higher rates of heterosexual sex than men, fifty percent of gay and bisexual men and the majority of lesbian and bisexual women reported engaging in heterosexual sex (p. 181). These authors discussed four prototypical adolescent relationships: sexual relationships, dating relationships, passionate friendships, and romantic relationships. They discussed and compared the typical barriers and experiences of each type of relationship by homosexual and heterosexual youth. Although the authors identified romantic relationships as the most important arena for identity development among heterosexual youth, they reported that sexual minority youth faced barriers that led to a need for alternative routes to identity development. For example, the authors discussed difficulties in traditional dating among same-sex adolescents, stating that when potentially risky same-sex dating options are available, two options existed for dating: To date a member of another sex or to not date at all. The authors contended that this barrier in dating may make sexual experiences and relationships more important in identity development, because it allowed adolescents to explore same-sex sexual arousal and attraction, thus “testing” and potentially, “validating an emerging same-sex sexual identity” (p.181).

Kerpelman and Pittman (2012) hypothesized that people attempted to control their environment by maintaining existing identities and “actively ‘try[ing] on’ different selves” through exploratory activities. The researchers also discovered that peer relationships, or more specifically a positive response by peers toward an individual’s behavior, made an exploration of identities more likely. Thus, a link potentially exists between the role of attraction, relational, or sexual experience, and the use of Questioning as a label. Individuals who self-identified as Questioning could remain open to sexual or dating experiences that might have otherwise been closed to them if they had identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Those who used the label in a

way that enabled them to be open to experience could also be engaged in further refining their sexual identity as a consequence of those experiences.

Given the weight of experience in identity development, as described both in the literature and by the participants in the current study, I considered barriers to obtaining desired experiences. Although other-sex dating, romantic and sexual experiences may be permitted and possibly promoted by parents, same-sex experiences are more likely to be obstructed by parental rules, religious or cultural practices, and discriminatory school policies (Nadal et al., 2011).

Although study participants did not report being explicitly prevented from engaging in same-sex experiences, it is possible that mixed and negative messages about such behavior may have prevented participants from fully engaging in relational or sexual experiences. Additionally, self-imposed barriers to experience, such as celibacy in Cridias' case, or engagement in a monogamous relationship in Maria's case, may lead to persistent confusion about identity or early foreclosure on sexual identity. Thus, some participants' perceived delay in development may be related to the barriers created by negative or mixed messages and the associated stigma associated with the behaviors.

Returning to the Purpose: Implications for a Population at Risk?

Once they were disambiguated from a sexual minority category and viewed independently, Questioning youth have been shown to be at greater risk for mental health issues than their heterosexually identified *and* gay or lesbian identified peers (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). The desire to understand what contributed to the differences in mental health risk served as a catalyst to this study because, to date, little or no research on people who identified as Questioning has been conducted. This study did not explore differences in mental health risk in an effort to elucidate more about how people who identify as

Questioning define and make meaning of it such that future operational definitions of Questioning would be more relevant. Thus, information from this study could provide a foundation for continued exploration of Questioning to the end that the differences between those who are Questioning and their sexual minority peers could be explained and better understood.

Five of the ten purposively sampled individuals who participated in this study viewed themselves as being in the midst of an emerging sexual identity. Novel data gleaned from this study revealed that participants were aware that their sexual identity was emergent. Some of the participants explored their sexual identity through romantic or sexual same- and other-sex experiences. Some participants viewed Questioning as a fixed and stable sexual identity that allowed them to have an extended or permanent freedom of exploration. Others viewed Questioning as an alternative label that they could use to manage situations and other people's perceptions of them. Some participants viewed themselves as bisexual but believed that that Questioning was an appropriate label for them because the act of questioning was integral to bisexuality. All participants in the study used the term Questioning in an instrumental way that afforded them freedom, flexibility, and protection related to sexual identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this information enriches the understanding of emerging adults for whom the developmental process was salient, it does not provide information about the meanings salient to adolescents who may be grappling with this process. This study involved a population of people in a socially conservative part of the U.S. In some ways, the study expands understanding of sexual identity in that many studies involve participants from metropolitan areas, which means that there has been increased exposure to LGBT populations and culture through media;

however, it may have involved individuals who lagged behind others in sexual identity development due to the existing sociopolitical climate at the time I conducted the study.

To provide some focus for the further exploration of those who identify as Questioning, several directions exist. The first is in relation to those who viewed Questioning as an emergent sexual identity. In Kerpelman's 2012 text on adolescent identity development, it is purported that an “experiential foundation” was a salient piece of identity exploration and subsequent commitment to a sexual identity. Romantic relationships helped adolescents explore different roles, which contributed to general identity formation (as opposed to sexual identity). Several constructs that influenced general identity development were touched upon in the current study such as attachment and stress. Furman and Shaffer (2003) contended that, “adolescents who find it difficult to experience closeness with partners may have disadvantages in their capacity to make decisions about who they are becoming” (p.1436). Furman and Shaffer (2003) attributed the “difficulty” that confronted the adolescents to stress, suggesting that that stress could arise from many sources, including mixed and negative messages about same-sex experiences from trusted adults, sociopolitical messages and policies, and barriers to obtaining experience. Thus, it would be useful for future research to be longitudinal in order to capture the development of identity of this population *in vivo* (i.e., while they identify as Questioning).

Participants in the present study who viewed Questioning as a stable identity were paradoxical in their acceptance and assertion of an identity that presupposed moratorium (i.e., assumed continued exploration). Understanding how an individual might come to this paradoxical identity, perhaps in relation to the post-gay cultural phenomenon, would expand both the concept of identity development and the understanding of sexual identity taxonomy.

The participants who used Questioning as an alternative identity label were savvy about social expectations and used Questioning, in part, to manage other's perceptions of them. Future research involving a large, anonymous, random sample of sexual minorities, could address the prevalence of Questioning as a sexual identity choice. In addition, respondents could select as many sexual identity labels as they believed applied to them.

Last, the group who identified as bisexual but found Questioning to be a persistent part of their experiences were recognized as the most at-risk sexual minority group simply because of their bisexual identity. It is possible that adding a persistent uncertainty, or continued ambiguity related to Questioning, shown in other research to be damaging (e.g., Furman & Shaffer, 2003) may delay the acceptance of a positive bisexual identity. Perhaps, then, the participants who viewed themselves as in development *and* who had other marginalized identities, such as an ethnic or racial identity, will emerge with a bisexual identity.

A longitudinal study should follow sexual identity development from adolescence into early adulthood, formally assessing Questioning identity as a sexual identity. Most studies on identity status have focused on occupational and ideological development, but not sexual development. Kroger et al. (2010) recommended studying identity status change or stability by completing identity status assessments during high school and following the individuals annually or biannually into early adulthood. They also suggested it was vital for researchers to, "examine general contextual and specific relational climates for individuals in terms of the context's propensities to enable or constrain identity development" (p. 696).

Clinical Implications. Educators, clinicians and others who work with young people should keep in mind the heterogeneity of the meaning of Questioning and the use of the term in a way that is instrumental. One should not assume that a person means that they are in an identity

development phase, nor should they assume that they are en route to a stable identity.

Professionals should consider asking more questions about what Questioning means to those that they may work with, provided the environment affords safety in order to discuss such concerns.

One participant who came out to herself during the course of this study was asked what advice she might give to someone else in her position. She replied emphatically, “*Go do an interview!*” The act of asking detailed questions and allowing people the opportunity to verbalize ideas and feelings they may have never said aloud may help them to gain more perspective about their identity.

Although some research has shown this population to be at-risk, and future studies should further explore this risk, other studies have shown that integration of multiple identities has benefits. Research suggests that higher levels of identity integration as a result of earlier integration decreased distress and increased self-esteem in a sample of adolescents (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). It makes sense that as clinicians, educators or parents, the earlier we can provide education on the range of meaning in sexual experiences, the more quickly adolescents can begin to integrate other identities. For participants who experience multiple marginalized identities, Jamil (2009, p 212) suggest that youth be “equipped with means of coping with different types of oppression” and building community-based mentorship programs where sexual minority youth of color can connect with others like themselves. Thus, this exploratory research can help guide clinicians toward a more open meaning of questioning and perhaps aid in more timely integration.

Study findings offer clinical implications for psychology graduate students who have reported that they do not receive adequate training on LGBT topics (APA, 2011). It would be

useful to add information gleaned from this study into developing or existing trainings on sexual or gender minorities, or perhaps in training on identity development.

Summary

Kroger, et. al. (2010) found in their aforementioned study that identity development might be achieved through access to new life experiences that are moderated by personality factors like ego strength and openness. A consistency among the participants was the perspective that being Questioning allowed them to be open, not just toward their sexuality, but to life in general. To end this study, quotations from the participants reveal simply what questioning is about to each of them. These quotations represent the variety of perspectives represented throughout this study, and serve as a reminder to be curious, unassuming, and open to various possibilities of expression.

“It lets me be free in my thinking, I know that.” – Cridias

“[Being Questioning] helped me to branch out and become more open with other people and myself... it gave me huge boost of confidence ...it gave me the ability to just be myself.” – Zak

“Saying that I’m questioning, even to myself, lets me have time. ... I can be in both worlds and have both things. I just can't have everything, not yet. Not right now” - Joyner

“Sexuality to me is more like building a sand castle. You can build the thing very beautifully but once a wave comes it may break. This is Questioning”- Lee

“Just go with the flow.” Kristen

References

- American Psychological Association. (2008). Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality. Washington, DC: [Retrieved from www.apa.org/topics/sorientation.pdf].
- American Psychological Association. (2009). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition [Abridged]*. (5th ed.) (p. 272). American Psychological Association.
- Garnets, L., Hancock, K. A., Cochran, S. D., Goodchilds, J., & Peplau, L. A. (1991). Issues in psychotherapy with lesbians and gay men: A survey of psychologists. *American psychologist*, 46(9), 964.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469-80.
- 55, 469-480.
- Bauermeister, J. a, Johns, M. M., Sandfort, T. G. M., Eisenberg, A., Grossman, A. H., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2010). Relationship trajectories and psychological well-being among sexual minority youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(10), 1148–63.
- doi:10.1007/s10964-010-9557-y
- Birkett, M., Espelage, D. L., & Koenig, B. (2009). LGB and questioning students in schools: the moderating effects of homophobic bullying and school climate on negative outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38(7), 989–1000. doi:10.1007/s10964-008-9389-1

- Bogaert, A. F. (2006). Toward a conceptual understanding of asexuality. *Review of General Psychology, 10*(3), 241–250. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.10.3.241
- Bradford, M. (2004). The bisexual experience. *Journal of Bisexuality, 4*(1-2), 7–23. doi:10.1300/J159v04n01_02
- Browne, K. (2005). Snowball sampling: using social networks to research non-heterosexual women. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 8*(1), 14.
- Cass, V. (1979). Homosexuality identity formation. *Journal of Homosexuality, (October 2012)*, 37–41. Retrieved from http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J082v04n03_01
- Cass, V. C. (1984). Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical model. *Journal of Sex Research, 20*(2), 143-167.
- Coker, T. R., Austin, S. B., & Schuster, M. a. (2010). The health and health care of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Annual Review of Public Health, 31*, 457–77.
- Coleman, E. (1982). Developmental stages of the coming out process. *Journal of Homosexuality, 7*(2-3), 31–43. doi:10.1300/J082v07n02_06
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (p. 472). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Currah, P. (1996). Defending genders: sex and gender non-conformity in the civil rights strategies of sexual minorities. *Hastings Law Journal, 48*. Retrieved from <http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/hastlj48&id=1391&div=&collection=journals>

- D'augelli, A. R. (2002). Mental health problems among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths ages 14 to 21. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 7(3), 433–456.
doi:10.1177/1359104502007003010
- De Oliveira, J. M., Lopes, D., Costa, C. G., & Nogueira, C. (2012). Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS): construct validation, sensitivity analyses and other psychometric properties. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 15(1), 334–47. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22379723>
- Diamond, L. M. (2013). Concepts of Female Sexual Orientation. In C. J. Patterson & A. R. D'Augelli (Eds.), *Handbook of Psychology and Sexual Orientation* (p. 332). New York: Oxford University Press; 1st ed.
- Diamond, L. M., & Butterworth, M. (2008). Questioning gender and sexual identity: dynamic links over time. *Sex Roles*, 59(5-6), 365–376. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9425-3
- Diamond, L. M., Pardo, S. T., & Butterworth, M. R. (2011). *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9
- Diamond, L. M., Savin-Williams, R. C., & Dubé, E. (1999). Sex, dating, passionate friendships, and romance: Intimate peer relations among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. In W. Furman, C. Feiring, & B. B. Brown (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives on adolescent romantic relationships* (pp. pp. 175–210). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- dickey, l. m., Burnes, T. R., & Singh, A. a. (2012). Sexual Identity development of female-to-male transgender individuals: a grounded theory inquiry. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 6(2), 118–138. doi:10.1080/15538605.2012.678184
- Dubé, E. M., & Savin-Williams, R. C. (1999). Sexual identity development among ethnic sexual-minority male youths. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(6), 1389–98. Retrieved

from

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2846409&tool=pmcentrez&rendertype=abstract>

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (p. 336). W. W. Norton.

Escoffier, J. (1998). *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (p. 278). University of California Press. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?id=-bA2HFf6xowC&pgis=1>

Floyd, F. J., & Bakeman, R. (2006). Coming-out across the life course: Implications of age and historical context. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 35(3), 287–96. doi:10.1007/s10508-006-9022-x

Furman, W., & Shaffer, L. (2003). The role of romantic relationships in adolescent development. *Adolescent romantic relations and sexual behavior: Theory, research, and practical implications*, 3-22.

Breno, A. L., & Galupo, M. P. (2008). Bias toward bisexual women and men in a marriage-matching task. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 7(3-4), 217-235

Garnets, L., & Kimmel, D. (2003). *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences (Between Men--Between Women)*. Columbia University Press.

Ghaziani, A. (2011). Post-gay collective identity construction. *Social Problems*, 58(1), 99–125. doi:10.1525/sp.2011.58.1.99

Halpin, S. a, & Allen, M. W. (2004). Changes in psychosocial well-being during stages of gay identity development. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 47(2), 109–26.

doi:10.1300/J082v47n02_07

- Harrison, J., MacGibbon, L., & Morton, M. (2001). Regimes of trustworthiness in qualitative research: The rigors of reciprocity. *Qualitative inquiry*, 7(3), 323-345.
- Herek, G. M. (2002). Heterosexuals' attitudes toward bisexual men and women in the United States. *Journal of sex research*, 39(4), 264-274.
- Huegel, K. (2011). *GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens* (p. 240). Free Spirit Publishing. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon.co.uk/GLBTQ-Survival-Bisexual-Transgender-Questioning/dp/1575423634>
- Human Rights Campaign. (2012) Growing up LGBT in America. Retrieved from <http://www.hrc.org/youth>
- IOM (Institute of Medicine). (2011). *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding* (1st ed.). The National Academies Press.
- Jamil, O. B., Harper, G. W., & Fernandez, M. I. (2009). Sexual and ethnic identity development among gay-bisexual-questioning (GBQ) male ethnic minority adolescents. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(3), 203–214. doi:10.1037/a0014795
- Kahn, M. J. (1991). Factors affecting the coming out process for lesbians. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 21(3), 47–70. doi:10.1300/J082v21n03_03
- Kann, L., Olsen, E. O., McManus, T., Kinchen, S., Chyen, D., Harris, W. a, & Wechsler, H. (2011). Sexual identity, sex of sexual contacts, and health-risk behaviors among students in grades 9-12--youth risk behavior surveillance, selected sites, United States, 2001-2009. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Surveillance Summaries (Washington, D.C. : 2002)*, 60(7), 1–133. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21659985>

- Mohr, J. J., & Kendra, M. S. (2011). Revision and extension of a multidimensional measure of sexual minority identity: The Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*(2), 234.
- Kerpelman, J. L., Pittman, J. F., Saint-Eloi Cadely, H., Tuggle, F. J., Harrell-Levy, M. K., & Adler-Baeder, F. M. (2012). Identity and intimacy during adolescence: Connections among identity styles, romantic attachment and identity commitment. *Journal of Adolescence, 35*(6), 1427–39. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.03.008
- Konik, J., & Stewart, A. (2004). Sexual identity development in the context of compulsory heterosexuality. *Journal of Personality, 72*(4), 815–44. doi:10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00281.x
- Kroger, J., Martinussen, M., & Marcia, J. E. (2010). Identity status change during adolescence and young adulthood: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence, 33*(5), 683–98. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2009.11.002
- LeVasseur, J. J. (2003). The problem of bracketing in phenomenology. *Qualitative health research, 13*(3), 408-420.
- Lev, A. I. (2004). *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working With Gender-Variant People and Their Families*. New York: Routledge.
- McCarn, S. R., & Fassinger, R. E. (1996). Revisioning sexual minority identity formation a new model of lesbian identity and its implications for counseling and research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 24*(3), 508-534.
- Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 159– 187). New York: Wiley.

- Mohr, J. J., & Fassinger, R. E. (2000). Measuring dimensions of lesbian and gay male experience. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, (33), 66–90.
- Moradi, B., Mohr, J. J., Worthington, R. L., & Fassinger, R. E. (2009). Counseling psychology research on sexual (orientation) minority issues: Conceptual and methodological challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56(1), 5–22.
doi:10.1037/a0014572
- Morgan, E. M. (2013). Contemporary issues in sexual orientation and identity development in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(1), 52–66. doi:10.1177/2167696812469187
- Morgan, E. M., & Thompson, E. M. (2011). Processes of sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual women. *Journal of Sex Research*, 48(1), 16–28.
doi:10.1080/00224490903370594
- Morgan, E., Steiner, M., & Thompson, E. M. (2008). Processes of sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual men. *Men and Masculinities*, 12(4), 425–443.
doi:10.1177/1097184X08322630
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Nadal, K. L., Issa, M.-A., Leon, J., Meterko, V., Wideman, M., & Wong, Y. (2011). Sexual orientation microaggressions: “Death by a thousand cuts” for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 8(3), 234–259. doi:10.1080/19361653.2011.584204
- Nutt Williams, E., & Hill, C. E. (2012). Establishing Trustworthiness. In C. E. Hill (Ed.), *Consensual Qualitative Research: A Practical Resource for Investigating Social Science Phenomena* (First.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4313031.aspx>

- Ott, M. Q., Corliss, H. L., Wypij, D., Rosario, M., & Austin, S. B. (2011). Stability and change in self-reported sexual orientation identity in young people: Application of mobility metrics. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 40*(3), 519–32. doi:10.1007/s10508-010-9691-3
- Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research, 34*(5 Pt 2), 1189–208. Retrieved from <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1089059&tool=pmcentrez&rendertype=abstract>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (p. 688). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Plummer, K. (2010). Generational sexualities, subterranean traditions, and the hauntings of the sexual world: Some preliminary remarks. *Symbolic Interaction, 33*(2), 163-190.
- Pryor 1994 bisexual identity development
- Reiner, W. G., & Reiner, D. T. (2012). Thoughts on the nature of identity: how disorders of sex development inform clinical research about gender identity disorders. *Journal of Homosexuality, 59*(3), 434–49. doi:10.1080/00918369.2012.653312
- Remafedi, G., Resnick, M., Blum, R., & Harris, L. (1992). Demography of sexual orientation in adolescents. *Pediatrics, 89*(4), 714-721.
- Robinson, J. P., & Espelage, D. L. (2011). Inequities in educational and psychological outcomes between lgbtq and straight students in middle and high school. *Educational Researcher, 40*(7), 315–330. doi:10.3102/0013189X11422112
- Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., & Hunter, J. (2004). Ethnic/racial differences in the coming-out process of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths: a comparison of sexual identity

development over time. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10(3), 215–28.
doi:10.1037/1099-9809.10.3.215

Russell, S. T., Clarke, T. J., & Clary, J. (2009). Are teens “post-gay”? Contemporary adolescents’ sexual identity labels. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38(7), 884–90.
doi:10.1007/s10964-008-9388-2

Rust, P. C. (1995). *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty, and Revolution (Kritik)* (p. 387). NYU Press. Retrieved from
<http://www.amazon.com/Bisexuality-Challenge-Lesbian-Politics-Revolution/dp/081477444X>

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2001). A critique of research on sexual-minority youths. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24(1), 5–13. doi:10.1006/jado.2000.0369

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SEICUS). *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth*. (2011) (pp. 1–3). Washington, DC. Retrieved from seicus.org

Singh, D., Deogracias, J. J., Johnson, L. L., Bradley, S. J., Kibblewhite, S. J., Owen-Anderson, A., ... Zucker, K. J. (2010). The gender identity/gender dysphoria questionnaire for adolescents and adults: further validity evidence. *Journal of Sex Research*, 47(1), 49–58.
doi:10.1080/00224490902898728

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (p. 232). SAGE Publications Ltd.

The Q Center. (2012). Retrieved from www.theqcenter.org

- Thompson, E. M., & Morgan, E. M. (2008). "Mostly straight" young women: Variations in sexual behavior and identity development. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(1), 15–21. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.44.1.15
- Troiden, R. R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17(1-2), 43–73. doi:10.1300/J082v17n01_02
- Van Manen, M. (1995). On the epistemology of reflective practice. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 1(1), 33-50.
- Varjas, K., Dew, B., Marshall, M., Graybill, E., Singh, A., Meyers, J., & Birckbichler, L. (2008). Bullying in schools towards sexual minority youth. *Journal of school violence*, 7(2), 59-86.
- Vrangalova, Z., & Savin-Williams, R. C. (2012). Mostly heterosexual and mostly gay/lesbian: Evidence for new sexual orientation identities. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 41(1), 85-101.
- Weinberg, M. S., Williams, C. J., & Pryor, D. W. (1995). *Dual attraction: Understanding bisexuality*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, T., Connolly, J., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2003). Questioning and sexual minority adolescents: high school experiences of bullying, sexual harassment and physical abuse. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health = Revue Canadienne de Santé Mentale Communautaire*, 22(2), 47–58. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15868837>
- World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care. 2011

- Worthington, R. L., Savoy, H. B., Dillon, F. R., & Vernaglia, E. R. (2002). Heterosexual identity development: A multidimensional model of individual and social identity. *The Counseling Psychologist, 30*(4), 496–531. doi:10.1177/00100002030004002
- Zhao, Y., Montoro, R., Igartua, K., & Thombs, B. D. (2010). Suicidal ideation and attempt among adolescents reporting “unsure” sexual identity or heterosexual identity plus same-sex attraction or behavior: Forgotten groups? *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 49*(2), 104–113. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2009.11.003

Appendix A: UMCIRB # 2-002150

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY



University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · www.ecu.edu/irb

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB To: Julie Harris; CC: Christy Walcott, Julie Harris

Date: 2/6/2013

UMCIRB 2-002150 Re: Questioning "Questioning"

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 2/6/2013 to 2/5/2014. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

The approval includes the following items:

- Consent Forms Interview/Focus Group
- Scripts/Questions
- Surveys and Questionnaires
- Interview/Focus Group
- Surveys and Questionnaires
- Scripts/Questions
- Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
- Surveys and Questionnaires
- Recruitment Documents/Scripts

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418

IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418 IRB00004973

Study.PI Name: Julie Harris; Study.Co-Investigators: Christy Walcott

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Initial Interview

Rapport Building Questions

- What brought you to ECU?
- Tell me a little about your hometown, about your family?

Main Questions

- **Now the I'd like to ask you some questions related to your orientation.**
- **You have indicated that you are questioning your sexual identity or gender. Can you talk about what questioning means to you?**
 - **Probe:** What is it that you are questioning?
 - **Probe:** What do you think other people mean when they say questioning?
 - **Probe:** How clearly do people understand what you mean when you say questioning?
 - **Probe:** In what ways is it important to you that your identity as questioning is understood by others?
 - **Probe:** What is your life like as a questioning person?

How does being questioning relate to other people your in your life?

- Probe: Relationships you have?
- Probe: Decisions you make?
- Probe: Quality of your life?
- Probe: What you envision as your future?

In what ways have people or your environment influenced your identity as questioning?

- **Probe:** events that led you to identify as “Questioning?”
- Probe: Thoughts, such as how you think about yourself as Questioning?
- Probe: Relationships?
 - Family?
- **Have you felt like you were able to have experiences similar to people who do not consider themselves questioning?**
 - Probe: Dating?
 - Probe: Intimacy?
 - Other things that have influenced you as people who is “Questioning?”
- **When was a time that you identified with another orientation/gender identity?**
 - **Probe:** Was there ever a time when your orientation/gender identity seemed very clear to you?
 - **Probe:** In what ways have you compared or contrasted yourself as someone who is questioning to others?
- **How has identifying yourself as questioning been beneficial to you?**

- **What have been the negative consequences, if any, of identifying yourself as questioning?**
- **What other information do you think would help me understand what questioning means to you?**

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Interview One (Estimated time: 90 minutes)	
10'	Introduction and Informed Consent process (verbal)
15'	Completion of questionnaires
60'	Interview guide-facilitated in-depth, open-ended interview
05'	Closure and Follow-up
	Confirmation of second interview time and date
	Obtain contact information for interview reminder
Interview Two (Estimated time: 60 minutes)	
05'	Re-Consent process (verbal)
45'	In-depth, open-ended interview Follow-up questions or clarifications from Interview One and interviews with other participants. Use of Likert scales as catalysts for discussion
10'	Closure and Follow-up
	Assess member check participation interest
	Assess interest in receiving final copy of study
	If interest indicated, reaffirm contact information

Appendix D: Sample of Researcher's Reflexive Journal Excerpt

6/ 12/2014	<p>I just finished interviewing Lee and I'm so surprised by what she shared. First, I'm not sure that I've ever met anyone who believes they are asexual. I have no idea what it means to be asexual or if people consider it to be an orientation. She used really great analogies to describe it like a circuit board that is detached. I think I need to dive into asexuality and find out how I can best represent Lee. I wish I had thought to look into that before the interview so I could have asked better questions.</p>
7/ 30/2014	<p>I've been transcribing more of the data and I'm beginning to realize that people aren't sharing much in common. I'm beginning to think that there isn't any shared experience, except stigma, maybe. I don't want to color my participants in this negative light. I need to bracket this idea of shared negative affect. I need to figure out what else they share.</p>
9/ 22/2014	<p>I just read the data again for the first time in several months. Some people seem like they are just bisexual and not actually questioning at all. This is disappointing and I wonder if it skews the sample.</p>
12 /2/2014	<p>All transcription is complete. Thinking about the big picture, I am starting to see patterns emerge. Something about what people call themselves and maybe something about identity development. I am trying to bracket identity development so that it doesn't take over, but it is very difficult to not see this pattern through that lens.</p>
2/ 2/2014	<p>I keep trying to think of these participants in a quant way. I want to see them as numbers so I can connect them to other data. I think I am doing this because it is hard to code and develop themes... I'm just falling back on what I know.</p>

Appendix F: Analysis and Interpretation Memo Excerpt

Memoing came in many forms for me, all of which were collected in a binder. Below are samples of a written code reduction memo (1), a verbal concept map (2)

Hierarchical Name	Description
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Geographical	Values, beliefs and identity associated with geographical area.
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Geographical\\Conservative Town	Town is perceived to have conservative values on LGBT and sexual issues.
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages	Messages from parents, religious groups and others
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Biphobia	
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Explicit Rules	Parents!
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Messages from Parents	Pro or Anti m
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Messages from Parents\\Mixed messages	Both acceptance and not-yet marriage
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Messages from Parents\\Negative messages	Reacts to biphobia
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Messages from Parents\\Messages	to stereotypical beliefs
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Messages from Parents\\Religious family	Worse re: not feeling
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\negative messages	to decisions
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Other's behaviors on their ID	Others
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Other's Perception of Sexual Identity	Other people perceive one's sexual identity to be non-heterosexual
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Public's attitude about LGBT	Perception of the public on LGBT issues
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Religious Messages from the Church	Messages that don't come directly from family's perceptions.
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\transphobia	Messages that came from the church's teachings
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Personality Factors	Personality factors that contribute to decisions regarding sexuality
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Relationship Factors	e.g. shy, outgoing is a relationship with Charles. Penetration on
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Religious Factors	Religious factors, such as messages, familial beliefs or values that affect sexual ID
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support	Supportive relationships, demonstrations of support or messages of support - non family
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support\\Family Support	" but family
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support\\limited social support	" but limited
Nodes\\Development of Identity	Retrospective perception of identity development
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Identity Development	Pivotal moments in identity development or their understanding of their own development.
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Identity Development\\Personal Understanding of Identity Development	A person's stated belief about their understanding of their identity development - e.g. "I thought I was ..."
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Other Identity	Identity other than sexual identity e.g. athlete, artist
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Personal Belief About Sexual Identity	One's personal belief about sexual identity; positive or negative.
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Slow to Develop identity	Sexual identity development was behind typical milestones
Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others	Disclosure of Sexuality identity to Others; not the same as coming out to someone for the first time - more like a discussion than sharing of a big secret
Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others\\Coming Out	Experience of coming out as something other than heterosexual
Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others\\Disclosure	Disclosure of identity, either as part of coming out, part of normal disclosure. Could also be lack of disclosure

2/2 | Phase 3

Knowing but

① Not being able / ready to convey

② too confusing

③ being ready → not being ID -

④ proof - for others - proof of perfect partner

⑤ bisexual - interactive bisexual

need for privacy -

⑥ receptive for partner

⑦ receptive for public → bisexual

? unsure about acceptance

Proof

② Not knowing

③ Proof - need for proof

experience → not enough
right kind

developmental

→ ⑥ confusion

don't know what other foreign men

if I'm attracted
to you
3/10

accepted

identity

③ ~~static~~ identity - part of dev.

OR w/ ambiguity → static ID.

Appendix G: Sample Codebook

Hierarchical Name	Description
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Other's Perception of Sexual Identity	Other people perceive one's sexual identity to be non-heterosexual
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Messages\\Religious Messages from the Church	Messages that do not come directly from family's perceptions. Messages that come from the church's teachings
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Personality Factors	Personality factors that contribute to decisions regarding sexuality
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support	Supportive relationships, demonstrations of support or messages of support
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support\\Confidence in Continued Support or Acceptance	Person is confident that they will be accepted no matter what they decide to do. This directly contrasts fear of loss of support
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support\\Family Support	
Nodes\\Contextual Factors\\Support\\limited social support	
Nodes\\Development of Identity	Retrospective perception of identity development
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Identity Development	Pivotal moments in identity development or their understanding of their own development.
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Other Identity	Identity other than sexual identity
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Personal Belief about Sexual Identity	One's personal belief about sexual identity; positive or negative.
Nodes\\Development of Identity\\Slow to Develop Identity	Sexual identity development was behind typical milestones

Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others	Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others; not the same as coming out to someone for the first time - more like a discussion than sharing of a big secret
Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others\\Coming Out	Experience of coming out as something other than heterosexual
Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others\\No out for Questioning	The sense that there is no "coming out" for people who identify as questioning
Nodes\\Disclosure of Sexuality Identity to Others\\Recloseting	
Nodes\\Exploration	Activity or behaviors, explicit or implicit discussion of passive or active exploration
Nodes\\Exploration\\Attraction2	Sense of attraction or lack thereof
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Accepted Identity	Acceptance of questioning as part of a transitional identity or as part of a stable identity
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Accepted Identity\\Ambiguity	One is accepting of the ambiguous nature of sexual identity and expects that they will continue to actively question their sexuality throughout their life.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Accepted Identity\\Developmental	One finds that questioning is a typical part of sexual identity development trajectory and feels that one day they will no longer be questioning.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Accepted Identity\\Post-Gay	One believes that there are no stable identities and that identifying as questioning allows for easier movement between the categories.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Asexual	
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Demisexuality or Pansexuality	
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know	Active or passive exploration of sexual identity. Needing more information before settling into a stable identity

Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Confusion	Person is not sure what experiences mean. For example, a woman is not sure if being attracted to another woman makes her gay, or bi.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Needs more evidence	This person is actively questioning and looking for more experience that would suggest a non-hetero identity.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Needs more evidence\\Evidence - Different	This person needs new experiences that will prove non-heterosexual identity.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Needs more evidence\\Evidence - Different\\Evidence - Romantic or Relationship	Needs a romantic or relationship experience to prove non-heterosexual identity
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Needs more evidence\\Evidence - Different\\Evidence - Sexual or physically Intimate	Needs sexual or physically intimate experiences
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Needs more evidence\\Evidence - More	Person needs more of the same evidence to prove non-heterosexual identity
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Don't Know\\Needs more evidence\\Needs Public Relationship	Needs a relationship that can be public; not on the down low
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Hiding identity	
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing	Personal understanding of one's sexual identity
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Bisexual	Specifically does not like the category of bisexual. Would not identify as questioning if there were a word that had less negative connotations that would accurately describe them (e.g., pansexual)
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Frustration of Private Relationship	Wanting relationships to be public; frustrated they cannot be because of fear of disclosure.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Frustration of Private Relationship\\Experiences are limited by social norms	Experiences are limited by social norms; frustration with limitation. Created slow development
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Needs Relationship	Knowing that one self-identifies as non-heterosexual, but does not have a non-heterosexual relationship to share with family.

Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Needs Relationship\\Needs Relationship - Fight	Needs strong heterosexual relationship that would be worth the risk of losing family relationships for.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Needs Relationship\\Needs Relationship - Proof for Others	Needs a strong non-heterosexual relationship to prove to family that they are not heterosexual.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Not Ready to Disclose	Knowing what your sexuality is but not being ready to disclose it; typically associated with a non-heterosexual identity
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Reconciling Faith	Knows their non-hetero ID, but is holding onto an ambiguous label while reconciling ID with religious beliefs.
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Too complex to explain	Knowing what your sexual identity is, particularly that it doesn't fall into a typical category, but feeling that it is too difficult to explain
Nodes\\Identity Status\\Knowing\\Too complex to explain\\Belief in Explanation	Other people don't believe his explanation of identity

Appendix H: Coding Sample

Phase One of Coding in OneNote

The image shows a OneNote page with a transcript of a conversation on the left and a list of codes on the right. The transcript is a dialogue between a person (P) and an interviewer (I). The transcript is as follows:

P: That...that what?

I: That you sort of have that piece of you that's part of you?

P: It doesn't bug me, but like I uh, it like a curious part of me. Will I be ever be able to know for sure. I'm curious but I never tried it. Ya know, you never know until you try. [laughter]

I: Sure. Except for you then questioning is about...you just kinda wanna know. Are you straight? Are you [L]? Is that something you think you...

P: I don't know...hmmmm... Like it, whenever I look at girl, it's not a sexual... thing. It more like, "that girl is really pretty, I wanna hang out with her and maybe hangout on the couch and hold her hand and kiss her." Kinda thing. It's not like, I wanna have sex with her necessarily. Like I to get to know her. [laughter]

I: Okay, no. So I think what you're saying make a lot of sense, it's like a degree of sexuality.

P: Yeah. [blinks at straight homosexual, then kinda thing, then she I wanna do her kinda thing I don't know]

I: Okay. Yeah. So you got a level of sexual attraction and it's like not all the way of full on doing. It not the level of just saying, "She's pretty, I think she's pretty", "I like her body, or I like her hair."

P: I'm kinda like in the middle, somewhere in that gray area. Yeah.

I: And for you to feel, to even that validate specific kind of a part of that. In a scale and continuum, you'd feel like you need to have the experience?

P: Oh yeah. [like so kinda wanting] like was that nice or was that weird and I wanna go back to guys kinda thing. Just guys, or that was really nice and I'd like to go further on to the scale kind of thing.

I: do you feel that it no longer an option for you? Or at least not at this juncture?

P: At this time, I think it's no longer an option. I don't know. Maybe we'll become swinger when we are in our fifties, and maybe it will come up again, but at this time no.

I: okay. So now you have this ambiguity, that your left with. And how is that sitting with you? Was it different before got married or I guess before you were in a serious relationship, really?

P: How do I feel... about the ambiguity?

I: Ambiguity is a feeling in and of itself? [laughter]

The codes on the right are:

- Static ambiguity; unresolvable ambiguity. | JMH
- Confusion between intimacy and sexual attraction | JMH
- In the middle of appreciating beauty and being sexually attracted. Perhaps being romantically attracted, but not sexually attracted per se. | JMH
- Need for concrete validation | JMH
- Identity foreclosure | JMH

Phase Two Coding in NVivo

: No, no, he okay and relaxed and everything.

So does it bug you?

: That... that what?

That you sort of have that piece of you that's part of you?

: It doesn't bug me, but like I uh, it like a curious part of me. Will I be ever be able to know for sure. I'm curious but I never tired it. Ya know, you never know until you try. [laughter]

Sure. Except for you then questioning is about... you just kinda wanna know. Are you straight? Are you? Is that something you think you...

: I don't know _hmmm_ Like it, whenever I look at girl, it's not a sexual... thing. It more like, "that girl is really pretty, I wanna hang out with her and maybe hangout on the couch and hold her hand and kiss her." Kinda thing. It's not like, I wanna have sex with her necessarily. Like I to get to know her [laughter]. Okay, no. So I think what you're saying make a lot of sense, it's like a degree of sexuality.

: Yeah. I think of playful innocence, crush kinda thing. Not like I wanna do her kinda thing. I don't know

Okay. Yeah. So you got a level of sexual attraction and it's like not all the way of full on doing. It not be level of just saying, "She's pretty, I think she's pretty", "I like her body, or I like her hair."

: I'm kinda like in the middle, somewhere in that grey area. Yeah.

And for you to feel, to even that validate specific kind of a part of that. In a scale and continuum, you could feel like you need to have the experience?

Same Sex Romantic Experience
Other Sex Sexual Experience
Benefits of Identity
Evidence - More
Identity
Dont Know
No Out for Questioning
Coming Out
Complex - Too complex
Religious Family
Cultural
Other Sex Romantic Experience
Drawbacks of Identity
Relationship Factors
Religious Messages from the Church
Demeanorally or Personality
Same Sex Sexual Experience
Other's Perception of Sexual Identity
Personality Factors
Internalized Bias
Evidence - Different
Intimacy and Friendship
Development of Identity
Intimacy
Exposure to LGBT
Ambiguity
Lack of Visibility for Questioning People
Messages from Parents
Coding Density
Same Sex Attraction

Nodes
Code At

Linked Nodes: 29 References: 78 Read-Only Line: 268 Column: 18 100%

Appendix I: Transcription Sample

Candace

Only

51:32

Transcribed by Alysha Gray

I: So you really mixed it up there. [laughter] So you had, so you didn't have any real intense relationships.

P: Two year, off and on relationships. We'd fight and get back together and fight and get back together, you know high school drama.

I: And when you went to college, what was that like for you?

P: It was very liberating, I was actually...uh..I lost my virginity in college, just sort of the freeing nature of college. Parties and alcohol, and that kinda of thing. There was one point, where I almost had a threesome [laughter] It didn't...the guy invited me over and there was another girl there. And he was wanting us to, like, kiss, it was weird because I knew she was gay. And she was really pretty, [laughter] I guess I would have, but...it just my nerves kinda got the best of the situation and I ended up leaving.

I: So that made you feel uncomfortable. Okay.

P: That would have been the first time I would have been with a girl.

I: So you lost your virginity to a boy in college.

P: Yes.

I: And have you had the opportunity to date or have intimate experiences with women since then?

P: No...[laughter] that was it. My one shot.

I: Right, because now you're married. So that kind of puts this box or a lock on things about, unless I'm not sure. I'm making assumptions about your relationship that I don't know.

P: Well, my husband like know that I'm not quite straight, like 100% straight. He know that theres that part of me that's attracted to women but I don't know.

I: does it bug him?

P: No, no, he okay and relaxed and everything.

I: So does it bug you?

P: That...that what?

I: That you sort of have that piece of you that's part of you?

P; It doesn't bug me, but like I uh, it like a curious part of me. Will I be ever be able to know for sure. I'm curious but I never tired it. Ya know, you never know until you try. [laughter]

I: Sure. Except for you then questioning is about...you just kinda wanna know. Are you straight? Are you bi? Is that something you think you...

P: I don't know..hmmm...Like it, whenever I look at girl, it's not a sexual... thing. It more like, "that girl is really pretty, I wanna hang out with her and maybe hangout on the couch and hold her hand and kiss her." Kinda thing. It's not like, I wanna have sex with her necessarily. Like I to get to know her [laughter].

I: Okay, no. So I think what you're saying make a lot of sense, it's like a degree of sexuality.

P: Yeah. I think of playful innocence, crush kinda thing. Not like I wanna do her kinda thing. I don't know.

I: Okay. Yeah. So you got a level of sexual attraction and it's like not all the way of full on doing. It not the level of just saying, "She's pretty, I think she's pretty", " I like her body, or I like her hair."

P: I'm kinda like in the middle, somewhere in that grey area. Yeah.

I: And for you to feel, to even that validate specific kind of a part of that. In a scale and continuum, you'd feel like you need to have the experience?

P: Oh yeah, just to kinda confirm like was that nice or was that weird and I wanna go back to guys kinda thing. Just guys, or that was really nice and I'd like to go further on to the scale kind of thing.

I: do you feel that it no longer an option for you? Or at least not at this juncture?

QUESTIONING “QUESTIONING”

Appendix J: Transcription Guide

Qualitative Data Preparation and Transcription Protocol

TEXT FORMATTING

General Instructions

The transcriber shall transcribe all individual and focus group interviews using the following formatting:

1. Arial 10-point face-font
2. One-inch top, bottom, right, and left margins
3. All text shall begin at the left-hand margin (no indents)
4. Entire document shall be left justified

Documenting Comments

Comments or questions by the Interviewer or Facilitator should be labeled with by typing I: at the left margin and then indenting the question or comment.

Any comments or responses from participants should be labeled with P: at the left margin with the response indented. A response or comment from a different participant should be separated by a return and than a new P: at the left margin.

CONTENT

Audiotapes shall be transcribed verbatim (i.e., recorded word for word, exactly as said), including any nonverbal or background sounds (e.g., laughter, sighs, coughs, claps, snaps fingers, pen clicking, and car horn).

Nonverbal sounds shall be typed in parentheses, for example, (short sharp laugh), (group laughter), (police siren in background).

If interviewers or interviewees mispronounce words, these words shall be transcribed as the individual said them. The transcript shall not be “cleaned up” by removing foul language, slang, grammatical errors, or misuse of words or concepts.

Filler words such as *hm*, *huh*, *mm*, *mhm*, *uh huh*, *um*, *mkay*, *yeah*, *yuhuh*, *nah huh*, *ugh*, *whoa*, *uh oh*, *ah*, and *ahah* DO NOT NEED be transcribed.

Inaudible Information

The transcriber shall identify portions of the audiotape that are inaudible or difficult to decipher. If a relatively small segment of the tape (a word or short sentence) is partially unintelligible, the transcriber shall type the phrase “inaudible segment.” This information shall appear in square brackets.

Overlapping Speech

If individuals are speaking at the same time (i.e., overlapping speech) and it is not possible to distinguish what each person is saying, the transcriber shall place the phrase “cross talk” in square brackets immediately after the last identifiable speaker’s text and pick up with the next audible speaker.

Pauses

If an individual pauses briefly between statements or trails off at the end of a statement, the transcriber shall use three ellipses. A brief pause is defined as a two- to five second break in speech.

Questionable Text

If the transcriber is unsure of the accuracy of a statement made by a speaker, this statement shall be placed inside parentheses and a question mark is placed in front of the open parenthesis and behind the close parenthesis.

Sensitive Information

If an individual uses his or her own name during the discussion, the transcriber shall replace this information with the appropriate interviewee identification label/naming convention.

REVIEWING FOR ACCURACY

The transcriber/proofreader shall do a brief check (proofread) all transcriptions against the audiotape and revise the transcript file accordingly.

SAVING TRANSCRIPTS

The transcriber shall cut and copy each of the transcriptions to a word file. The file should be saved with the Participants chosen pseudonym and interview part in the title

Example: BobbyPart1.docx

Save each file to the Dropbox folder labeled "transcription".

QUESTIONING “QUESTIONING”

Appendix K : Scores from The Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Scale

	Maria	Joyner	Ki	Marlana	Kristen	Candace	Alex	Lee	Zak	Cridias
Subscales										
<i>Acceptance Concerns</i>	4.00	1.00	4.00	-	-	5.00	-	5.00	2.00	3.67
<i>Concealment Motivation</i>	-	-	-	-	5.00	-	-	6.33	3.33	-
<i>Identity Uncertainty</i>	3.75	-	-	5.00	5.00	-	-	-	2.50	-
<i>Internalized Homonegativity</i>	5.67	2.67	3.00	-	4.67	4.67	-	5.67	3.00	-
<i>Difficult Process</i>	4.33	2.67	-	-	-	3.33	-	-	1.00	-
<i>Identity Superiority</i>	4.00	1.67	-	-	-	4.00	-	4.00	3.00	-
<i>Identity Affirmation</i>	5.00	3.00	-	2.33	5.67	-	-	-	1.67	5.67
<i>Identity Centrality</i>	4.80	2.80	-	2.60	-	6.40	-	5.20	4.20	5.40

1 = Disagree Strongly, 7 = Agree Strongly