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“I DON’T FIT INTO THE IDENTITY YOU EXPECT ME TO HAVE”:
DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP IN LGB STUDENTS
AT A FAITH-BASED INSTITUTION

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business
Department of Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Sara Bretz

May 2018

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Sara Bretz

entitled

“I Don't Fit into the Identity You Expect Me to Have”:
Development of Self-Authorship in LGB Students
at a Faith-Based Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to build an understanding of how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students grow in their self-authorship development at faith-based, small, private, liberal arts institutions. Self-authorship is one's ability to define one's own internally held beliefs, values, relationships, and identities. Five sexual minority students participated in qualitative, semi-structured interviews inquiring about their experiences at an eastern U.S. faith-based institution with an established educational group focusing on issues of sexuality and gender. Findings included the importance of faith-related development and experience, clarity in communication, support systems, perspective weighing, and leadership experiences. Implications for future practice include (1) create a sexual minority student group; (2) create opportunities for open dialogue regarding institutional practices and policies on sexuality; (3) and provide classes, groups, or seminars exploring biblical contexts and perspectives of sexuality.

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“Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art.... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.”

-C.S. Lewis

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Self-Authorship.....	3
Faith-Based Institutions.....	3
Conclusion and Question.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review	5
Faith-Based Institutions.....	5
LGB Experience in College.....	5
Religious Experience of LGB Students	11
Self-Authorship.....	16
Homosexual Identity Development	18
Conclusion.....	20
Chapter 3 Methodology	21
Qualitative Phenomenological Design.....	21
Context	23
Participants	23
Procedure.....	24
Data Analysis.....	26

Benefits.....	27
Chapter 4 Results.....	29
Faith-Related Development and Experience	30
Clarity in Communication	31
Support Systems	33
Perspective Weighing.....	35
Leadership Experience	36
Conclusion.....	38
Chapter 5 Discussion	39
Chronological Development of Self-Authorship.....	41
Faith-Related Development and Experience	42
Ability to Weight Perspectives	43
Significance of Leadership Experience.....	44
Importance of Intersectional Experience.....	45
Need for Clarity in Communication with the Institution	45
Creation of Healthy Relationships	46
Cognitive Dissonance.....	47
Implications for Practice	49
Implications for Research.....	52
Limitations to the Study	53
Conclusion.....	54
References.....	55
Appendix A: Intake Survey.....	64

Appendix B: Interview Questions65

Appendix C: Informed Consent66

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2012, approximately 3.5% of the population in the United States identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) (Gates, 2017). This percentage increased to 4.1% in 2016. Millennials—individuals born between 1980 and 1998—are almost twice as likely as previous generations to identify as sexual minorities and account for 7.3% of that generation (Gates, 2017). This significant uptick in individuals identifying as sexual minorities in this birth cohort increases the demand for research into how best to understand and care for these individuals.

Sexual minority college students often experience higher occurrences of mental illness, suicidal ideation, unmanageable stress, and substance abuse than heterosexual students (Holland, Matthews, & Schott, 2013; King et al., 2008; Riley, Kirsch, Shapiro, & Conley, 2016; Walls, Wisneski, & Kane, 2013). These students need support and care in order to function well at their universities and feel prepared to move onto the next stages in their lives. An effective way to provide this care is to first develop an understanding of the experience of LGB students at universities and how they make meaning of their experiences. This meaning making is often tied to the development of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

Self-authorship is the internal reliance on creating a holistic self-defined understanding of one's own identity based upon personal characteristics and interactions

with the environment (Baxter Magolda, 2007, 2014). Developing self-authorship helps individuals internalize their own identity. Looking into this phenomenon is valuable because sexual minority students often have complicated developmental experiences. Self-authorship development creates opportunities for meaning making in the midst of confusion.

Self-Authorship

Individuals create a self-authored identity when they recognize external forces no longer have control over how they view themselves (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Students in college take learning experiences and apply those outcomes to other aspects of their lives. This learning cannot just focus on academic development but must also include a larger connection to other learning experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2007)

Interpersonal development is one major element of self-authorship. Meaning comes from one's own understanding of experiences and dedication to integrating his or her identity. Individuals must make an effort to critically evaluate their views of themselves and how those views determine their actions and decisions. Additionally, self-authorship impacts intrapersonal development. When individuals find ways to understand themselves in relation to others, they build authenticity in relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2006). Exposure to various views and experiences encourages individuals to think critically about how their own upbringing and life experiences have affected their development and understanding of themselves and others (Rockenbach, Riggers-Piehl, Garvey, Lo, & Mayhew, 2016).

Faith-Based Institutions

Views regarding sexuality issues tend to vary greatly among Christian faith traditions. These traditions inform diverse responses to and understandings of sexual minorities. These various views typically invoke unique responses in LGB individuals. Some may find the more traditional views limiting or culturally dependent while others may view the more progressive views as scripturally unsound or sacrilegious (Dessel, Bolen, & Shepardson, 2011; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). Some believe identifying as a sexual minority is a sin regardless of behavior (Chapman, 2016; Falwell, 2000), while others believe the only Christian option is to be celibate (Fine, 2012).

The other end of the spectrum maintains God's love and goodness does not waver dependent on sexual orientation (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Gold & Stewart, 2011). Some denominations or faith communities fully accept sexual minorities and legitimize their worth, seeing their sexual identity as an important and beautiful part of who they are. Others have a more traditional understanding of sexual morality and expect certain standards of behavior and belief in order to align with the vision and views of the church.

Christian colleges vary in their policies and outlooks regarding sexual orientation. Understanding the context of a typical Christian college is difficult but ultimately aids in developing some of the best ways of caring for LGB students. All denominations and schools differ in their understanding of sexuality issues. Few schools have a policy regarding orientation, but many have specific expectations for behavior. Often these expectations are vague in nature and inconsistent in implementation (Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, & Brooke, 2009). Educators should spend adequate time and energy working with their sexual minority students and aiding them in their individual development.

Conclusion and Question

Studying the development of self-authorship can aid educators in better understanding and caring for sexual minority students in their growth and development. As students progress through their college careers, they consider many aspects of their identity in order to reach a more integrated state. Self-authorship is an integral part of development because it allows individuals to create their own identity out of meaningful experiences. Sexual minorities must make meaning in their lives in intentional and significant ways in order to process their development and self-fostered identity. As individuals work through their development throughout college, attending a faith-based institution significantly affects their process. All of these influences on sexual minority identity development lead to the question considered in the present study: How does attending a small, faith-based, liberal arts college affect self-authorship development in LGB students?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

College experience, faith, identity development, and homosexual identity development are all subjects in academic study that researchers use to inform their work. Individuals draw conclusions based upon similarities and differences between the factors, but no clear lines exist among the four aspects. As researchers work to connect the four elements, they must first assess the literature separately. This section explores all four, finding potential areas of overlap and recognizing disconnects between each.

Faith-Based Institutions

The student experience at faith-based institutions is unique; as such, defining these institutions is a paramount concern to provide context for this study. Faith-based colleges and universities are closely tied to their mission, which often includes an element of contributing to the public good (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016). In their drive to develop students holistically and serve the larger world, these institutions prioritize “the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture” (Holmes, 1987, p. 6). As faith-based institutions strive to remain impactful and relevant, they must continue to address gaps in their ability to care for and support all students.

LGB Experience in College

College proves to be a significant time of development for young adults. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students are not exceptions to this trend. However, the college

experience holds unique elements for sexual minority students (Fine, 2012; Stevens, 2004). Recognizing the differences for students aids educators in supporting them well.

Challenges of fitting in. When LGB students arrive on campus, most begin looking for a social circle that is both accepting and contains other LGB students. If the university has a form of a Gay-Straight Alliance—a social support group connecting sexual minority individuals and heterosexual allies with each other—LGB students may join identifying as a heterosexual ally while looking to connect with other LGB students (Bible, 2013). In a society dominated by gender roles and expectations, LGB students may feel added pressure to conform to traditional gender expression. In fact, a traditional view of gender roles among college students correlates more significantly with negative attitudes toward LGB individuals than religiosity, gender, and fraternity membership (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012), though this pressure does not affect women as strongly as men (Bible, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). As individuals integrate their sexual identity, their discomfort with their own gender and sexuality expression decreases. When they do not feel significant conflict between conforming to social norms and finding their own identity, anxiety and stress declines (Bible, 2013).

Curriculum and pedagogical infusion. As is the case for many underrepresented students, many sexual minority students feel both inadequately and inaccurately represented in their classes. This student subset of students believes faculty should make efforts to increase visibility and recognition of sexual minority issues (Furrow, 2012). Heteronormative assumptions may cause LGB students to feel marginalized in classes.

The majority of these professors likely do not do so mindfully; however, a portion use homophobic slurs and express intolerant sentiments in their classes (Bible, 2013; Stevens, 2004). Sexual minority students observe little openness to discussion and limited familiarity in their classes. While many courses do not discuss sexuality issues specifically, professors tend to make assumptions about students' sexual orientation in casual conversation or use exclusively heterosexual examples in classes (Braun & Clarke, 2009). These practices may create feelings of marginalization, lack of acceptance, or gaps in understanding (Furrow, 2012).

While these issues alone greatly affect students' psychological wellbeing, their academic life may begin to suffer as well. Without the support of faculty members and administrators, LGB individuals may have trouble performing well in classes (Fine, 2012; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Woodford and Kulick (2015) suggested institutions include sexual minority competency in faculty evaluations. According to research, faculty members and students exhibit more commitment to addressing hostile attitudes toward sexual minority students in arts and science departments than in others (Holland et al., 2013).

Campus initiatives. Institutions of higher education encompass much more than formal courses. While some universities may claim they have little control over the resources offered to LGB students because of low endowment or large enrollment, this claim is not necessarily true. Fine (2012) found no statistical significance between those specific factors and an ability to improve campus climate for sexual minority students. This lack of statistical significance indicates universities, no matter their financial

resources, are capable of providing safe and welcoming communities to their sexual minority students.

Education surrounding LGB issues should not only come from sexual diversity centers. Rather, they should be included in general diversity centers (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) studied social support and sexual minority identity development and found minority support groups to be the biggest predictor in higher levels of identity development for LGB individuals. That support comes from other sexual minorities but also from heterosexual students. These centers should offer community forums and seminars drawing sexual majority students as well as sexual minority students (Bible, 2013). Open communication and increased understanding lead to improved social relationships for all parties (Bible, 2013; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Hooghe and Meeusen (2012) found homophobia decreases when heterosexual students build close relationships with LGB individuals. Additionally, academic success increases on campuses that make significant efforts to combat heterosexism through engendering commitment to interpersonal relationships between homosexual and heterosexual students (Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Encouraging these relationships through inclusive diversity centers educate heterosexual students and improve the experience of homosexual students.

Sexual minority students tend to exhibit higher occurrences of mental health issues than heterosexual students (Holland et al., 2013; King et al., 2008; Riley et al., 2016). Additionally, LGB college students are 1.5 times more likely to live with depression and anxiety and more likely to commit suicide than heterosexual students (Riley et al., 2016). Sexual minority students also experience more stress than sexual

majority students because, in addition to the stressors many college students experience (e.g., academic, living situation, distance from home), they have added stressors resulting from their sexual orientation (e.g., social stigma, safety issues, feeling unknown). Because of these stressors and implications for mental health issues, part of the campus climate responsibility falls upon counseling services (Bidell, 2011).

Clearly, counselors have training to support individuals working through mental health issues, but Gold and Stewart (2011) propose counselors also receive training specific to sexual minority issues. Riley et al. (2016) found LGB students to have more maladaptive coping skills than heterosexual students. Additionally, weapons possession, drug use, and alcohol abuse occur at higher rates with LGB individuals (Walls et al., 2013).

Outside of counseling, students seek support in their peers. Gay-Straight Alliances on college campuses create social support and networks (Bidell, 2011). Support groups like these significantly affect identity development and integration (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Groups with a bystander-intervention training component decrease overall heterosexist attitudes (Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Students in support groups are less likely to abuse substances or experience suicidal ideation, and they are more likely to feel self-acceptance (Walls et al., 2013). Students at schools with support groups report feeling safer and more accepted. This perception of safety may not mean an absence of victimization, but it may indicate that individual students and the larger administration handle discriminatory situations more effectively (Bidell, 2011; Walls et al., 2013).

Resilience. Sexual minority college students exhibit high levels of general resilience or the ability to fully function despite challenging circumstances or experiences (Beasley, Jenkins, & Valenti, 2015). In fact, LGB individuals are more likely than heterosexual individuals to attend college and academically succeed despite a lack of safety and support (Walls et al., 2013). Although researchers experience difficulty when attempting to separate measures of general resilience from resilience specific to sexual minorities, most identify significantly higher results for sexual minorities (Beasley et al., 2015). This resilience tends to be a characteristically common attitude for many LGB students (Bible, 2013).

University qualities positively impacting climate. Campuses with a higher female-to-male student ratio tend to be more accepting of sexual minority students (Fine 2012; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Often, women have a more positive attitude toward sexual minorities than men (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Additionally, tolerance levels are higher among liberal Christian traditions, non-Christian faiths, non-religious, upperclassmen, feminists, humanists, and relativists (Holland et al., 2013; Kocet, Sanabria, & Smith, 2011).

Colleges prioritizing diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender create an openness to difference and encourage students to explore their identity and feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation (Stevens, 2004). Schools with a lower student-faculty ratio appear to be healthier places for sexual minority students to be (Fine, 2012). Researchers postulate schools with a low student-faculty ratio may have more highly vocal faculty members who encourage equality and create closer relationships with individual students to increase awareness of campus climate. These vocal faculty

members may internalize a greater responsibility to advocate for their sexual minority students because fewer people do so and they know the students more personally (Fine, 2012). Additionally, a lower student-faculty ratio allows educators to respond more frequently and quickly when they witness discriminatory behavior based on sexual orientation to protect students (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Religious Experience of LGB Students

While the level of acceptance of sexual minority individuals in many religious circles is growing, sexual minorities often experience significant distress when faced with conflicts between their sexual orientation and faith. Mainline Christianity is the central focus of the greater literature's analysis on the interaction between faith and sexuality, and individuals react to these challenges differently. Typically, they neglect their faith, separate orientation from faith, neglect their orientation, or adopt general spirituality. However, some find ways to integrate their faith and orientation.

Neglect faith. The environment for many sexual minority people of faith is overwhelmingly negative (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Wright & Stern, 2016). Some congregations force individuals to communicate their sexual orientation or "come out," to their community, while others ask them to leave the church. Many sexual minorities do not feel others recognize the difficulty of their experiences (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). The heteronormative environment often feels oppressive as most LGB individuals see themselves as a deviation from the norm and do not feel validated in their minority experience (Wright & Stern, 2016).

Additionally, LGB young adults are likely to experience a split in relationships if their most intimate community is religiously oriented (Fine, 2012). Often, they avoid

expressing beliefs and experiences with religious family members and friends because they do not feel accepted (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Yarhouse and colleagues (2009) reported religious LGB individuals typically feel more oppressed and mistreated by other Christians—not by religious teachings. Some people hope to change their church's understanding of sexuality issues (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015). Churches more committed to literal and traditional biblical teaching are less accepting and have more negative attitudes toward sexual minorities (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015). These conflicts may result in LGB individuals leaving their faith traditions to search for more positive environments and communities.

Separate identity from faith. Especially during the formative years of college, many LGB students of faith reject labeling themselves as being a sexual minority but still have same-sex relationships (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse, & Lastoria, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). They recognize organized church as a cultural institution outside of spirituality (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Viewing traditional religious practices as a separate historical and contextual element of faith development allows sexual minority individuals who feel uncomfortable at religious services to still consider themselves spiritual (Hill et al., 2000). Some put their faith development on hold while focusing instead on sexual identity development (Gold & Stewart, 2011). Individuals from progressive upbringings who still feel they need to choose between sexuality and Christianity tend to choose sexuality—perhaps because those who leave Christianity tend to view God as more hostile, meaning they are less likely to reconcile their faith and sexuality (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Others see religion as an extrinsic force and

created by society while seeing spirituality as intrinsic and individually determined (Kocet et al., 2011).

Compensate with faith. Individuals from more traditional upbringings are more likely to step away from their sexual orientation and focus primarily on strengthening their faith to negate their “devious” impulses (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Many pray for change and ignore their sexuality, hoping the issue will disappear (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Wright & Stern, 2016). Some individuals may seek therapists to help them change their orientation through Conversion Therapy after not finding success in doing it for themselves (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Kocet et al., 2011). While Conversion Therapy appeals to some therapists, many support Affirmative Therapy, working through a lens of acceptance to process sexual orientation and encourage individuals to explore both their sexual orientation and faith (Kocet et al., 2011).

Adopt general spirituality. Some individuals choose not to engage in any specific religion and instead opt for a universal understanding of faith and spirituality (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Many have vague ways of referring to a higher being, some primarily drawing from nature representations (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015; Gold & Stewart, 2011). In this case, individuals move away from religiosity and focus instead on spirituality (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015).

Integrate faith and orientation. Sexual minorities who can find cohesion between their faith and orientation experience less stress and conflict. Some create cohesion by internalizing truths about God loving them for who they are regardless of their sexuality (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Yarhouse et al., 2009). They believe God would not create anything that was not inherently good, that is, the identity they were born with

cannot be characteristically bad (Gold & Stewart, 2011). Pastors and counselors can both communicate those messages of self-acceptance (Foster et al., 2015; Kocet et al., 2011). However, counselors must understand the difference between religion and spirituality, explore unresolved feelings, encourage integration, and help individuals connect to their communities (Kocet et al., 2011; Wright & Stern, 2016). Christians and non-Christians at the same developmental stage of identity integration report similar satisfaction levels regarding their sexuality. This similarity suggests identity integration is a better predictor of contentment than faith (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

Others take aspects of faith and piece them together to make sense to them individually (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Developing this kind of spiritual resilience requires taking an active role in one's own faith development (Foster et al., 2015). Individuals who find success in this redefine Scripture and tradition, look for specific faith communities, and work for social justice (Foster et al., 2015; Yarhouse et al., 2009). They also prioritize integrating their faith and sexuality and developing their faith identity through reconciliation (Gold & Stewart, 2011). This type of in-depth biblical work is a responsibility of affirming churches. When church communities create support groups in order to strengthen social networks and reduce stigma for sexual minority congregants, they encourage personal growth (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Fostering formal groups (e.g., Bible studies, small groups, prayer networks) creates opportunities for informal, personal relationships (Foster et al., 2015). Kocet and colleagues (2011) found LGB individuals who are members of gay-affirming churches show similar levels of self-acceptance as heterosexual individuals.

General Christian messages. As evidenced in Trammell's (2015) analysis of testimonies published in *Christianity Today* by sexual minority Christians, the general message to Christians describes the gay Christian experience as "painful, debilitating, and embarrassing" (p. 12). Major Christian voices (e.g., Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, James Dobson) state homosexuality or bisexuality is a conscious, sinful choice made by individuals and is in direct opposition to biblical teaching (Chapman, 2016; Falwell, 2000). While these views are beginning to diversify as the general culture becomes more accepting, specific denominations may hold their commitment to a traditional understanding of sexuality as paramount.

College setting. Faith-based universities may not be the most positive influence for students working through issues regarding their sexual orientation. Often, they are less likely to have LGB resource centers and fewer support systems (Fine, 2012; McEntarfer, 2011; Stratton et al., 2013). If schools have resources for students, they are rarely easily accessible or identifiable due to stigma and conflict within the school (Yarhouse et al., 2009). With less outside support, LGB students at faith-based institutions tend to introspect more and develop their identity in a vacuum (Stevens, 2004). This high level of introspection could encourage high levels of self-awareness but also may encourage social isolation. Stratton et al. (2013) found colleges that enforce sexual ethics specifically regarding same-sex behavior are not fundamentally harmful unless administrators use them to limit the emotional and spiritual development of LGB individuals. Although some LGB students may view these policies as innately discriminatory, the administrators of such institutions typically see them as an expression of religious identity (Yarhouse et al., 2009). The varied responses indicate individual

differences greatly affect the ways in which religion influences identity integration and satisfaction. Some individual differences may stem from meaning-making and self-authorship abilities and styles.

Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda (2007) developed the theory of self-authorship to explain the “internal capacity to define one’s belief system, identity, and relationships” (p. 69). In order to understand one’s role in greater society, individuals must have a developed self-concept (Kegan, 1980). The developmental process happens when young adults combine intellectual knowledge with internally created beliefs, values, emotions, and identity (Baxter Magolda, 2007, 2014). The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education lists seven major learning outcomes of liberal arts higher education: inclination to inquire, leadership, well-being, moral reasoning, integration of learning, effective reasoning and problem solving, and intercultural effectiveness. Baxter Magolda (2014) found a significant link between self-authorship and development of those learning outcomes. Additionally, she found students who scored high on self-authorship possessed above average critical thinking skills, complex problem-solving ability, mature relationship development, intercultural maturity, leadership proficiency, and coping skills to manage life’s challenges.

Intellectual development. Most students enter college believing authorities possess certain knowledge without room for adjustment or individualization (Baxter Magolda, 2006). Throughout their time in college, students may move from an authority-based understanding of truth toward one that is more fluid and self-created. As college students interact with class material and their classmates, they develop their reasoning

ability and complexity (Perry, 1970). Recognizing that goal inspires pedagogical, academic advising, co-curricular, and faculty training innovation. Furthermore, the focus on a self-created conceptualization of knowledge is driven by relationship and includes holistic development (Baxter Magolda, 2006). Those relationships require mutual respect and interdependence between the student and professional in order to encourage personal development. Both parties must respect each other's feelings, encourage each other to view difficulties as opportunities for growth, and work together to analyze individual problems (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Relationship-driven intellectual growth assists students in developing habits of self-authorship.

Self-authorship and value development. In line with an authoritative understanding of knowledge, many students enter college lacking a clear understanding of the origin and/or nature of their values and opinions. Only focusing on knowledge development in college does not adequately aid students in their personal development (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Maintaining a holistic understanding of development is helpful because it recognizes the interdependence of cognitive, identity, and relationship development. Additionally, it integrates psychological and sociological perspectives when individuals create meaning that is contextually, culturally, and environmentally dependent (Baxter Magolda, 2014; Kegan, 1994).

Interaction with people marginalized for reasons of sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, nationality, and religion also encourages significant value development and self-authorship as students recognize the unique experiences of individuals (Rockenbach et al., 2016). Baxter Magolda (2007) also postulated students who do not experience significant levels of stress or conflict may not develop meaningful

self-authorship. Carpenter and Peña (2016) affirmed the role of conflict in development in their study of first-generation college students and the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and ability. When their experiences test their values, those values strengthen.

Mentors' role in development. Educators must prioritize understanding the ways in which they can contribute to students' individual development. Students need mentors and support to reach more integrated identity development (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). Students in leadership positions are more likely to get this because of their consistent contact with advisors. Mentors committed to the personal success of their students are more effective in helping them reach their leadership potential (Renn, 2007).

Homosexual Identity Development

While the principles of self-authorship apply to most students regardless of sexual orientation, specific differences appear. Social support appears to affect identity development more significantly in sexual minorities than in the general population (Bidell, 2011).

Social support. Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) studied the interaction of social support and aspects of identity development and found a correlation between extensive and supportive social networks and identity development. They categorized social networks into campus groups, family, friends, significant others, and faith community. The researchers considered identity uncertainty, internalized homonegativity, identity affirmation, acceptance concerns, identity superiority, concealment motivation, identity centrality, and difficulty in the identity development process in their analysis of identity development stages (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016).

Campus groups for LGB students had high predictive effects on identity development, reduced acceptance concerns, positive identity affirmation, reduced internalized homonegativity, and increased identity centrality. Moreover, connecting with individuals experiencing similar identity development issues decreased internal and external conflict regarding sexual identity and orientation identity. Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016), while addressing multiple facets of identity development, never considered overall wellbeing. Therefore, professionals may have trouble drawing generalized conclusions from their findings.

Oswald (2000) also studied social support and the development of sexual minorities. However, the study included analysis of growth in friends and family members of the 6 lesbian and bisexual women who participated. The majority of participants mentioned the need for open communication. In fact, many reported negative communication had a positive effect on relationships because it allowed for more authentic relationships than relationships that ignored pieces of individuals' identity in order to avoid conflict (Oswald, 2000).

Many of the friends and family members of the sexual minority women in this study experienced development and change in their beliefs regarding sexual orientation. They began to recognize their own majority experiences and consider how those experiences would have differed if they were not heterosexual. Most became more accepting of sexual orientation variances, and several even reconsidered their own sexual orientation (Oswald, 2000).

General homosexual identity development. Individuals who do not feel they have a specific label to connect with tend to have a less developed identity (Brandon-

Friedman & Kim, 2016). Most identity development models include three basic stages: individuals experience confusion and conflict, individuals gradually accept their LGB orientation, and individuals fully synthesize sexual orientation with gender identity (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). This integration happens to different degrees depending on the setting in which individuals exist (Stevens, 2004). Identity integration relies on finding empowerment through “self-acceptance, disclosure to others, individual factors, environmental influences, and multiple identities exploration” (Stevens, 2004, p. 191).

Conclusion

While it is informative to investigate faith development, college experience, general identity development, and sexual identity development, connecting those aspects without having specific data to tie them together does not prove as effective as research directly investigating these potential connections. Evaluating the intersection of these factors adds to the body of research needed to care for sexual minority college students. This study primarily aimed to answer the following question: How does attending a faith-based, small, private, liberal arts college affect self-authorship development in LGB students?

Chapter 3

Methodology

In order to answer the research question guiding this study, a qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative research designs are helpful in understanding general phenomena. Oftentimes, little is known about these phenomena, and they are difficult to define, making qualitative research valuable in its ability to explore many aspects of the phenomena. Creswell (2008) articulated that qualitative research is beneficial in “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). This focus on ascribing meaning creates opportunities for a more individualized mode of research. Qualitative means of study are less prescriptive than quantitative means and lend to deeper exploration and understanding (Creswell, 2008).

Qualitative Phenomenological Design

Because self-authorship is not easily defined or measured, qualitative instruments are beneficial in attempting to evaluate levels of self-authorship development in students. Self-authorship is relatively applied and interpreted. Likewise, qualitative research design explores loosely understood phenomena (Creswell, 2008). In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to examine the development of self-authorship in LGB students. Phenomenological study is the process through which researchers develop an understanding of and “describe the essence of a lived phenomenon” through “studying several individuals who have shared the experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 104). A

phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the experiences of the LGB student population as they develop self-authorship. (Creswell, 2013). Studying the experience of LGB students at a faith-based institution and conceptualizing their development of self-authorship as a result focuses primarily on their experience and response to the general impact of that specific educational setting.

In utilizing transcendental phenomenology, a researcher allows for as unbiased an interpretation as possible in the conduct of the study. The researcher was committed to suspending personal interpretations and biases in an act of *epoche*, or bracketing. This allowed the researcher to analyze the data and draw conclusions primarily based in research rather than personal experience or understandings (Creswell, 2013).

Transcendental phenomenology occurs in several stages: (1) bracketing one's individual biases; (2) collecting data from participants; (3) reducing data into major themes and trends; (4) developing a description of what participants experienced and how they experienced it; and (5) combining those descriptions into a general essence of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013). This specific form of phenomenology allowed the researcher to interpret participants' experiences as sexual minorities at a faith-based institution through the lens of self-authorship rather than her own lens of personal understanding.

The value of qualitative research is in its ability to identify the meaning individuals attribute to experiences and identities (Pickering, 1980). Self-authorship is the capacity for a person to translate various experiences into something individually meaningful (Baxter Magolda, 2007). The strengths of qualitative research and self-authorship lie in their consideration of personal meaning-making in response to

situations. Because self-authorship is unique to each individual in its application and development, qualitative research lends itself to self-authorship studies in its the individualized method of analyzing themes and principles.

Context

This study was conducted at a small, private, liberal arts, faith-based higher education institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. At its founding, the institution had a specific denominational affiliation but is now nondenominational. This university has no policy in place that disallows same-sex attracted students from attending the school or divulging their orientation to the greater community. However, “homosexual behavior” is included in the list of prohibited behaviors in the institution’s student handbook.

Some students at this institution are currently working to increase visibility for sexual minority issues on campus. Students, along with the student affairs department, recently formed an organization focused on education surrounding gender- and sexuality-related issues. This group aims to encourage open conversations concerning these topics on campus and develop a campus-wide climate of inclusion and care.

Participants

The researcher interviewed five student participants, as well as one professional who works closely with the new student organization. These participants were found through criterion purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is the act of choosing specific demographics of people to participate in a study. Criterion sampling specifically studies individuals who experienced the same phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Sampling in this way allowed the researcher to make general conclusions about the population

studied. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: someone who (a) is at least 18-years-old; (b) identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual; and (c) identifies with some sort of faith. Participants who have not disclosed their sexual identity to their community were still included in the study. However, all participants were active members of the sexual minority educational group on campus. Additionally, one professional educator was interviewed in order to gain insight into the context of the institution and communicate a different perspective. Typically, qualitative phenomenological designs mandate the researcher interview between 8 and 12 participants (Creswell, 2013). Because of the sensitivity of the research topic and the behavioral expectations of the institution, few students responded to the call for participants. While having only five participants may limit the scope of the research, each student voice illuminates the experience of sexual minority students at the institution.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the participating institution, the researcher contacted two student affairs professionals working closely with the sexual minority educational group to present the opportunity for students to participate in the study. These student affairs professionals functioned as “gatekeepers” for the project. A gatekeeper exists to protect the individual participants and institution when an outside researcher enters a closed group or culture (Creswell, 2013). To obtain participants, the gatekeepers sent an email to students involved in the sexual minority group explaining the study and process for contacting the researcher if they are interested in participating.

After participants made initial contact with the researcher, they received a detailed email containing more specific information, including the purpose of the study, potential risks, efforts made to respect confidentiality, and protocol for removing themselves from the study at any time. The researcher and each participant agreed upon a specific date, time, and location to meet in a private interview room in an academic building on campus.

Prior to the official interviews, a pilot interview was conducted to evaluate the protocol and suggest edits. This pilot interview was conducted with a sexual minority individual who graduated from a small, faith-based, liberal arts college. Facilitating a trial interview allowed the researcher to anticipate potential answers to questions and improve items as necessary. At the suggestion of the pilot participant, the researcher emailed a copy of the questions (Appendix B) to each participant two days prior to the interview so they had time to reflect on the questions and ask clarifying questions.

Upon arriving at the interview, participants received an intake survey (Appendix A) with questions detailing their age, race, gender, orientation, and year in school. This demographic data corresponded to an alias assigned to each participant and was used to describe themes that applied to specific sub-populations within the sample. Each participant received an informed consent form (Appendix C) to read and sign ensuring their complete understanding of the process. Prior to recording the interview, the researcher informed participants that a recording device would be used and made them aware the recording would not be shared publicly in any way to avoid breaching confidentiality.

Finally, the researcher gave participants information for contacting the on-campus counseling center in the event the interview caused a strong emotional or psychological response with which they needed help processing. The researcher notified the counseling center of the study to give them context if a participant sought professional support in response to participating.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. This less formal structure allowed for follow-up questions and clarifying thoughts to be expressed. The interview questions focused primarily on the students' experiences at their institution and the perceived impact it had on the development of their sexual identity through the lens of self-authorship. These questions included items related to significant learning experiences, influential social support, decision-making processes, periods of hardship, and reflections about the meaning they found in those experiences.

Data Analysis

The process of data collection, analysis, and reporting is not linear but is interwoven and often occurs concurrently (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were transcribed and coded, identifying common elements in each interview. These codes were categorized into major themes present in the research. The researcher then utilized the process of triangulation, in which the researcher returned to the original data to corroborate it with the themes identified in the analysis of interviews (Creswell, 2013).

Additionally, the researcher employed member checking, which involves allowing participants to review the analysis of their individual interview. Member checking aids researchers in assuring their analysis is consistent with each participant's experiences (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). The researcher sent each participant an individual

email noting the major themes identified and provided an opportunity for the participants to respond if they felt misrepresented.

Finally, the researcher incorporated a peer debriefing technique. A peer debriefer has the responsibility for simultaneously supporting and challenging the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer debriefer asks challenging questions and helps the researcher minimize personal bias. In this study, the peer debriefer was a higher education professional who worked significantly with sexual minority students on a large and individual scale at a small, private, liberal arts, faith-based institution.

Benefits

While sexual minorities are an increasingly studied population, the existing research focuses primarily on their general experiences. While the existing research provides incredibly valuable information, the conversation must continue to grow in its scope to remain relevant and increasingly comprehensive. The evaluation of connections between self-authorship and the development of LGB individuals is not found in the literature. In fact, the majority of research on sexual minority populations does not relate to developmental theories outside of sexual identity development. This research provided valuable insights into a widely respected developmental theory and how best to apply it to a unique population.

Participants in this study had the opportunity to intentionally process their development of self-authorship and sexual minority experience in college. Some of these students may not reflect on their experiences regularly, so this chance gave them space to recognize their own struggles and successes in the college experience and developmental process.

Additionally, understanding self-authorship development plays a significant part in predicting critical thinking skills, cross-cultural competency, and student engagement (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Developing a conceptualization of self-authorship in students identifying as sexual minorities helps to identify areas in which educators can foster further development.

Finally, research on educational efforts put into this kind of development provides student affairs professionals with the context and background for supporting students who identify as sexual minorities. When educators have a more full picture of the development of their students, their ability to care for students increases significantly and they can become more effective in their work. Increased understanding leads to increased capability of care.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of the study was to better understand the experience of sexual minority students at a small, faith-based institution—particularly regarding their development of self-authorship. As students become more self-authored, they gain the ability to determine their own identity and develop their own beliefs and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2006). Additionally, the study aimed to assess the efforts the institution put forth to support sexual minority students in their self-authorship development.

As previously stated in Chapter 3, this study employed a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology studies a lived phenomenon, allowing for the gain of a holistic understanding of the student's experience (Creswell, 2013). As transcendental phenomenology requires, the researcher separated her own biases, collected data from the participants, divided the data points into themes, and developed a comprehensive characterization of the student experience as well as a description of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

Throughout the five interviews with the sexual minority students and one interview with a professional at the institution, five major themes appeared: (1) Faith Experience; (2) Clarity in Communication; (3) Development of Support Systems; (4) Perspective Weighing; and (5) Leadership Experience. Each theme had smaller, more

specific subthemes. The study refers to each participant by a number, and the names of organizations within the institution have been changed to protect anonymity.

Faith-Related Development and Experience

All five participants identified a faith-related characteristic to their experience at least once throughout the interview. This theme presented itself through comments regarding biblical translation or context, complications and conflict, and theological perspectives.

Biblical translation and context. Four of the five participants mentioned the importance of biblical translations and contextual understanding to their perspective development and experience. They talked about translation differences in terminology and the complicated cultural context surrounding biblical passages that others often use to discount sexual minorities' experiences. Participant one said,

And then, once I got to [this institution], I got to hear more about the biblical stuff. Like, the biblical arguments and that was pretty helpful for me. Like, just understanding cultural context and historical things. It was super helpful. . . .

When I got here I got to talk to people who had firm beliefs that the bible or that Christianity could be affirming of same-sex relationships and that was really helpful for me, like, to overcome that mental barrier that I had.

The students all said they were able to better understand their identity and form their own beliefs because they intentionally studied theological sources. These sources helped them build their own foundational biblical perspective.

Complications and conflict. Four participants identified significant tensions regarding their sexuality and faith. They felt pressure to choose between their faith and

sexual orientation, and three participants mentioned a temporary or permanent loss of faith. The conflict presented itself through questioning if one can be a Christian with a strong faith commitment while not fitting into the heterosexual norm. Participant five said he asked himself, “Should I be open about [my] sexuality and celebrate it and get into a relationship? Or, should I pull back and hide who I am . . . in the name of religion and God and what I feel is right?” Three students said they were rebuilding their faith and feeling okay about it, while participant three said she has reconstructed her faith into “something that is not Christianity.”

Theological perspectives. Four participants discussed identity versus expression theology of sexuality. Often, Christian institutions identify with one of two perspectives. Side A affirms sexual minority identity and same-sex relationships. Side B affirms identity but does not support same-sex relationships. While it respects Side A as a legitimate view, the institution studied identifies with Side B, and each participant mentioned this tension. The administration does not tell students their orientation is unbiblical but does mandate they avoid same-sex relationships while at the institution.

Participant four specifically appreciated the institution’s intentionality in explaining different viewpoints: “[I]t’s helped me for them to describe sexual minorities within a more accepting Christian faith viewpoint—rather than a completely traditional Christian viewpoint or a completely anti-Christian viewpoint.” The students understand the nuances of sexuality because of how the institution examines various perspectives.

Clarity in Communication

Three of the five participants mentioned frustrations due to a perceived lack of clarity in communication with the administration. They felt the institution was not

forthright about their behavioral expectations for students and the role of various organizations.

Behavioral expectations of the institution. Three students said they had trouble understanding the behavioral requirements for them in terms of relationships. When talking about a romantic relationship she had with a female-to-male transgender student, participant two said, “[W]e don’t get the benefits of being friends who can hang out with the door closed. We don’t get the benefit of being of couple who can, who have to follow these rules but can identify as a couple.” Participant three said she recognizes why the rules exist but also recognizes the ways “they hurt people.” According to the participants, these expectations are often neither communicated clearly nor implemented uniformly across campus.

Roles of institutional organizations. During the spring of 2017, Alliance, an existing group for sexual minority students and heterosexual allies, applied to become a recognized organization on campus. The dean of students and director of Student Involvement immediately pulled the application and requested to meet with the two students who listed themselves as the leaders of the organization. Together, they resolved to create Spectrum, a new organization focusing on education and support regarding sexuality and gender issues.

Spectrum has three elements designed to present students with sexuality related topics. Spectrum Programming creates opportunities for large-scale programs regarding issues such as consent, gender roles, healthy relationship building, and communication skills. Spectrum Support provides individual and group support for students processing through sexuality related issues such as sexual assault, domestic violence, and sexuality-

related addictions. Finally, Spectrum Light supports sexual minority students specifically with bi-weekly meetings focused on LGBT+ topics with an educational leaning. While this organization created new opportunities for students, it also generated confusion regarding its roles and those of Alliance.

Participants one and three are student leaders in Spectrum, and they, along with the professional supervising Spectrum Light, mentioned confusion between what they and Alliance are expected to do and provide. Professional one said,

I think they're having a bit of a . . . group identity crisis, yeah, just figuring out what their purpose is and how they best, yeah, just like, help the LGBT student population here. Or like, how does that differ from [Spectrum Light]? Yeah, just like, what does that look like?

Near the start of the 2017 fall semester, students from Alliance met with administrators and participant three to talk about their role and what they provide the LGBT community at the institution. Participant three said this meeting was helpful because she could communicate her vision and hope for Spectrum Light while affirming the value of Alliance and its impact on students.

Support Systems

All five participants mentioned the roles that various support systems play in the development of their identity and experience as a student. When asked how the students know they have supportive relationships, they mentioned affirmation of their sexual orientation, shared experience, and reciprocal relationships.

Affirmation of identity. Four participants said supportive friends and family members respect their identities, attractions, perspectives, and experiences. Participant

five said, “[T]he group of friends that I . . . stick with, they’re very accepting, they’re very open, they’re very fun to be with. But, at the same time, if you want a serious talk with them, you can do that.” The students mentioned the importance of finding people who supported them in their sexual minority experience.

Shared experience. Four students mentioned the importance of shared experiences in developing and strengthening friendships. While three specifically mentioned sexuality, they all referred to other pieces of their experience, including nationality, relationship status, field of study, and faith perspective. When asked where she finds her significant social support, Participant three said,

. . . definitely from my friend group that I’ve met through being part of like, different LGBT organizations at [this institution]. So, [Alliance] or now leading [Spectrum Light]. So that’s been a big part of it and I think that a lot of students I talk to kind of are in the same boat.

These students valued shared experience because they felt it helped them be “on the same page” with those around them and feel united.

Reciprocity in relationships. Two participants said they do not want to feel they burden others or put more trust in them than they receive. Participant one said,

Well, I guess those are relationships that I’m not, like, I don’t feel like I’m bothering them when I go to them for, like, help or if I just want to talk to someone. And it’s reciprocated, so like, they come to me as well, so I know it’s a two-way thing and not just, like, me going to irritate someone.

These students knew their relationships were meaningful and supportive when others asked them for support as well. Their security in relationships came from the trust others placed on them.

Perspective Weighing

Four of the five participants identified growth in their own ability to consider others' points of view and understand the ways in which one's experiences affect one's outlook. The students talked about this theme in both the ways they understand their own perspectives and the ways they try to comprehend others' experiences.

Fully understand one's own perspective. Three participants said they must think more about what they believe and what they feel because their experiences do not fit within the norm of students at their institution. Participant two said,

[This institution] has made me make my own choices more and kind of, like, helped me understand what I believe. But a lot of that is because, in a lot of ways, I go against the status quo of [this institution]. I think about theology really differently. I think about sexuality really differently. And I think it's only affirmed those things because I'm so different than all the other, like, traditional beliefs held at [this institution].

These students spend significant time and energy reflecting on their experiences and trying to measure how the experiences affect who they believe themselves to be.

Trying to understand other's experiences. Three students also talked about the importance of understanding where others are coming from when their beliefs seem to be in opposition. They said they try to ask good questions, not make assumptions, and communicate clearly but graciously. When asked about how she reconciles differences

in opinions and belief systems when in conflict with others, participant three said she prioritizes “trying to understand . . . experiences we have that are causing our perceptions to be different and how to make them still work together in a way.” Participants focused on the importance of building a contextual framework to better connect with and understand those who are different from them.

Leadership Experience

As mentioned earlier, participants one and three have substantial leadership roles in Spectrum. While this theme of leadership did not occur in the majority of participants, the theme is significant because the two students who are involved in the organization answered almost every question through the lens of their position in Spectrum. They both specifically noted their gains in learning how to be more assertive and humble and in managing expectations of multiple groups. Additionally, the professional interviewed said their experience in Spectrum is significant because of the connection they make with educators and the leadership development opportunities Spectrum provides them.

Assertiveness and humility development. These students, along with a handful of others, had a significant role in designing and creating Spectrum. They had to trust their own judgment while also communicating clearly and honestly with others.

Participant one said,

A leadership position in [Spectrum Support] has taught me a lot about, like, humility and being, like, an active activist, like, not a passive activist anymore. But having to intentionally do things to move the cause forward. . . . So, like, in this position, that’s one thing I’m actively trying to push more. And I think that’ll be helpful in other parts of my life if I learn how to be more assertive.

They both mentioned moments when they had to step back and acknowledge they did not have all the answers while still trusting themselves to be authorities in what they could.

Managing expectations of multiple groups. As previously mentioned, Spectrum Light and Alliance had conflict early on about roles and expectations. The two student leaders had to navigate their confusing relationships with the administration and their peers. Additionally, participants one and three both talked about the tension of trying to care for students and also respect the administration. They said some students hesitate to confide in them and seek support from them because of their connection to “the system.” Often, they must operate as the connecting voice between students and administration in communicating concerns. They each talked about a recent conflict in poster design for an event that they had to manage. Again, they talked about weighing perspectives and communicating clearly.

Connections with educators. The student leaders of Spectrum did not previously have the opportunity to connect individually with educators on campus. Their position in the organization provides them with a network of educators at the institution. When asked about her relationship with her faculty advisors, participant three said,

So, I oftentimes talk to [my advisors] about, like, my frustrations with, like, what we can and can't do or the way our actions are being perceived. And they've kind of, like, helped me. We can't always fix it, but they help me, like, work through some of that.

They receive the developmental care from advisors they would not otherwise obtain.

Sexuality-related leadership opportunities. The institution is relatively unique in its provision of leadership positions for students related to sexuality issues. This

further legitimizes the sexual minority student experience and recognizes the role these students play in the larger campus community. The professional interviewed said:

A big part of developing [Spectrum] was creating legitimate leadership development opportunities for students within the umbrella of sexuality. Which, there just wasn't that before. Um, so I don't think the student body recognizes that as a . . . win for, like, the student experience. Um, but I think, at least to a certain extent, that's a win for the LGBT community, to have . . . someone who's, like, investing in, you know, one or a handful for students that are, yeah, intentionally having some of these conversations.

This investment in sexual minority students communicates that the institution recognizes the value the students add to the campus climate and are putting effort into how they care for them.

Conclusion

Faith development elements came up in each interview conducted with the students. Specifically, participants discussed gains in understanding biblical translations and context, managing conflicts and complications between their faith and sexuality, and balancing various theological perspectives.

Participants mentioned the need for clear communication between administration and sexual minority student groups. Due to confusion regarding behavioral rules and the roles of different organizations, students felt frustrated. When they were able to ask specific questions and receive honest answers, they felt more at ease in the institution.

The indications of support and role of support systems in participants' lives were common threads throughout their responses to questions in the interviews. They talked about the importance of affirming beliefs, shared experience, and reciprocal relationships.

Participants focused on the process of learning how to weigh multiple perspectives throughout their time at the institution. They work to understand their own perspectives and the experiences of others. Several talked about how this helps them build relationships and grow in their self-concept.

Finally, while not an experience shared by most participants, two students often spoke about their leadership roles when answering questions about their experience. Those roles aided them in developing assertiveness coupled with humility, learning how to manage expectations of multiple groups, and building connections with educators. The professional interviewed mentioned these elements and also recognized the messages that the existence of the organization communicates to various stakeholders in the university.

The five sexual minority students interviewed in the study showed significant development in their ability make meaning of their experiences and self-author their identities and beliefs. Their experiences at a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution appeared to aid in their development, as it provided opportunities to think critically about their own perspectives and how their sexual orientation affected their time at the institution. Although they identified challenges that may not have occurred at a non-faith-based institution, several of the students recognized the unique learning opportunities they had through those challenges. Their university experience appeared to aid their self-authorship development.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The present study sought to illuminate the experience of LGB students at a small, faith-based, liberal arts college, specifically in terms of their self-authorship development, as defined by Baxter Magolda (2007). A literature review focused on LGB students' college experience and religious experience, self-authorship development, and homosexual identity development. Following research in existing literature, five semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with sexual minority students at a small, faith-based, private, liberal arts institution in the mid-Atlantic region. These interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. The previous chapter explained each theme: (1) Faith Experience; (2) Clarity in Communication; (3) Development of Support Systems; (4) Perspective Weighing; and (5) Leadership Experience.

This chapter reviews the themes presented in the previous chapter and connects them to the literature in order to draw conclusions about their significance and identify suggestions for future practice and research. Additionally, it identifies other significant findings and conclusions drawn from the interviews. This study reported literature confirming the important role institutional culture plays in the identity development of sexual minority students (Bible, 2013; Bidell, 2011; Fine, 2012; Holland et al., 2013; Riley et al., 2016; Stevens, 2004; Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Yarhouse et al., 2009). This discussion will provide context from the literature to give meaning to and help

interpret the results of the study. Additionally, it will provide implications for practice and research and acknowledge the study's limitations.

Chronological Development of Self-Authorship

An individual's self-authorship develops during his or her college experience (Baxter Magolda, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 2007; Perry, 1970). Thus, response variation between the two seniors and the two first-semester students interviewed was expected.

First-semester students. One participant was a first-year student, and another was a transfer student; both were in their first semester at the institution. These participants often referenced their parents' or churches' perspectives when answering questions about their sexuality. They showed a significant reliance on authority figures and struggled to separate their own beliefs from beliefs belonging to others. Many students come into college without a clear understanding of what their own values and opinions are or from where those values and opinions originate (Baxter Magolda, 2007). As explored in Chapter 2, this individual confusion may be even more pronounced for sexual minority students in the Christian tradition because of the substantial conflict they may feel between their faith and sexuality.

Senior students. The two seniors interviewed were also the two students in leadership positions with Spectrum. They displayed high levels of self-authorship development in several ways. They evidenced their development in the manner with which they talked about others' perspectives on difficult issues. Additionally, they were the only participants who asked follow-up questions of the researcher during and after the interview process. Their intentionally critical engagement throughout the study was clear. They also referenced authority figures' perspectives and beliefs fewer times than

the other participants. Baxter Magolda (2006) found students move from a static, authority-based conceptualization of truth to one more individually inspired and flexible throughout the college experience. Participants one and three displayed this transition through the ways they discussed their own views and perspectives of truth.

Faith-Related Development and Experience

The study's participants all discussed the mutually impactful relationship of their faith and sexuality. Their willingness to discuss their religious development indicated they spent a significant amount of time reflecting on their faith—either inspiring them to reconcile it with their sexuality or reconstruct it so they felt harmony.

Reconciliation between faith identity and sexual orientation. The participants' responses to questions concerning their faith indicated attending a faith-based institution prevented them from foreclosing on the issue. Because of required Bible and theology courses, religiously-grounded behavioral expectations, and campus-wide sexuality programming, the students did not have the option to ignore the conflicts they felt between their faith and sexuality. The students who continued to identify with the Christian tradition spent intentional time developing an understanding of biblical translations and context. Foster and colleagues (2015) found this purposeful research helped sexual minority Christians redefine their identity within a context of Christianity. These individuals relied on interaction with their support systems, investment of time and energy into researching Scripture, and critical reflection to reach identity integration. Intentionally engaging with biblical and theological perspectives while thinking analytically about their upbringing, culture, and context gave students a more informed understanding of their sexuality in terms of their religious beliefs.

Additionally, Yarhouse et al. (2009) found LGB students who retained their faith often sought LGB-affirming faith communities. The participants in this study who still identified as Christians mentioned these efforts as affecting their faith experience and development. They built relationships with other sexual minority Christians, and those connections helped them feel supported in their self-reflection and internal processing. These relationships and communities also contributed to a more full understanding of their own religious identity.

Leaving Christian faith. After thinking critically about her faith development and biblical perspectives while enrolled at the university, participant three no longer identified as Christian. However, she still believed in “something higher.” She used part of the 12-step program in Narcotics Anonymous to conceptualize this higher power quoting, “[W]e humble ourselves to a higher power that’s slowly restoring our sanity.” This ambiguous way of discussing spirituality aligns closely with research by Gold and Stewart (2011) and Cragun and Sumerau (2015) in which they found sexual minority individuals often place their belief in a nonspecific higher being figure. Additionally, participant three critiqued the systematic elements of religion. Individuals who leave a conventional Christian tradition often view religion as something more extrinsic and determined by others, while they see their own spirituality as more intrinsic and individually determined (Kocet et al., 2011). Participant three’s perspectives and experiences were typical of others who had similar identities and understandings.

Ability to Weigh Perspectives and Understand Multi-Faceted Issues

The participants’ ability to weigh perspectives was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. Knowing where one’s own beliefs and values originate and

understanding how one creates them indicates the level of self-authorship development in the individual (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Several of the participants mentioned learning how to communicate their own perspectives well.

When relaying a conversation a friend had with a maintenance worker who was upset about Alliance advertisements on campus, Participant 2 said,

He just kept repeating the same [Bible] verses over and she'd, like, take these verses and be like 'okay, so this is what it is in Hebrew and this is what it's literally translated to, and this is what um, it meant in that context' and he'd just, like, repeat the verse.

She and several other participants expressed feeling frustrated with individuals who appeared to have narrow views of sexual orientation because the students themselves made a significant effort to create their own understanding of sexuality. They spent intentional time combing through Scripture and talking with professors and mentors to better shape their perspectives. Therefore, they felt discouraged when others had strong—yet seemingly uninformed—views of sexuality.

However, while recognizing that frustration, the participants who were further along in their development of self-authorship integrated their own psychological and sociological perspectives while realizing others create meaning dependent on their own culture, context, and environment (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Kegan, 1994).

Significance of Leadership Experience

Responses from participants one and three indicated a more advanced development of self-authorship. Both students are seniors at the institution. As mentioned above, their age could contribute to the further progression of their self-

authorship development; however, many of their answers to various questions related to their leadership experiences and the mentoring relationships they developed through their positions. Bible (2013) found LGB individuals need mentors and support systems to advance their identity development. Renn (2007) said students in campus leadership positions more likely develop mentor-mentee relationships with educators. Participants one and three both talked about their advisors' commitment to their growth and personal development. Mentors who prioritize development in their relationships with students more effectively empower students to realize their leadership potential (Renn, 2007). As the participants grew in their leadership ability, they also grew in their self-authorship.

Importance of Intersectional Experiences

Sexual minority students who interact with other marginalized people often progress further in their self-authorship development (Rockenbach et al., 2016). Participant two had several of these perspective-widening experiences through college. Her semester abroad in West Africa and her summer internship on a Native American reservation broadened her perspective of the world and, in particular, Christianity. She spoke at length about her frustrations with students who had a difficult time recognizing their own privilege as she processed through the effect of religiously-motivated genocides of minority groups. Because of her exposure to an underrecognized people group, participant two felt she understood others' perspectives more honestly and fully. In turn, this helped her connect with others who view sexuality differently than she does.

Need for Clarity in Communication with the Institution

As noted in Chapter 4, several participants expressed frustration with what they perceived to be vague or inconsistent policies regarding behavioral expectations for

sexual minority students. Furthermore, the administrators did not appear to align with each other on communicating and implementing those policies. As Yarhouse et al. (2009) stated, some sexual minority students feel behavioral policies are discriminatory in nature, while the administration views the policies as an appropriate expression of the institution's religious identity. This disconnect between the administration and students in understanding policy motivation appeared to cause internal and external conflict and uncertainty for several of the participants.

Creation of Healthy Relationships

All of the participants spoke, to some extent, about their relationships with others and how they determined if those relationships were supportive. They identified honesty and group support as critical elements in their formation of healthy relationships.

Honesty in communication and connection. Students discussed healthy relationship development through reciprocity and openness in communication. Relationships that include holistic development require substantial interdependence and mutual respect (Baxter Magolda 2006, 2007). In their individual characterization of supportive relationships, the participants aligned with Baxter Magolda's (2007) description of relationships encouraging personal development. The participants said they knew relationships with others were meaningful when they respected each other's feelings, viewed challenges and conflicts as opportunities for learning, and cooperated in analyzing each other's problems.

Additionally, several participants recognized the importance of managing conflict in their relationships. Oswald (2000) found some negative communication can positively affect relationships for sexual minority individuals because it allows for more honest and

authentic relationships. Discussing the miscommunication between students from Spectrum Light and Alliance allowed them to share power and trust each other more, which had the effects of fostering self-authorship development and building community. Conflict helps students understand their perspectives more fully and build meaningful connections with others (Cohen et al., 2013).

Sexual minority student groups. Several of the students identified either Alliance or Spectrum Light as places in which they felt supported and valued. Bible (2013) suggested sexual minority students often seek out groups of students who accept and contain other LGB students. Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) said LGB campus groups positively affect the identity development of sexual minority students. Additionally, connecting with others experiencing similar identity development difficulties lessened internal and external conflict in relation to sexual orientation. The students who identified the important role LGB groups play in their social support development affirmed Brandon-Friedman's and Kim's (2016) findings in that they seemed more confident in their identity and felt less conflict between themselves and others in relation to their sexual orientation.

Cognitive Dissonance

Woven throughout the results of the study is the concept of cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual's internally held beliefs or values oppose one another. As the number or pervasiveness of these competing cognitions increase, the individual feels more tension and stress. Cognitive dissonance affected each of the individuals' experiences throughout the themes delineated in Chapter 4.

Faith-related development and experience. As evidenced by participants' responses to questions about tensions regarding their sexual orientation, individuals often either abandon their religion or attempt to alleviate dissonance and to integrate their sexuality with their religion (Festinger, 1957; Mahaffy, 1996; Meladze & Brown; 2015). Spending time and energy thinking about biblical translation and context, complications and conflict, and theological perspectives helped participants put cognitive dissonance into perspective and minimize stressful tension they felt between their sexuality and faith.

Clarity in communication. The participants felt unsure about behavioral expectations of the institution, particularly in relationship to sexual minority support organizations. This confusion led them to question their own security and positions. When students are not in supportive and safe environments, they are less likely to make significant strides in their self-authorship development (Bible, 2013). This lack of clarity potentially complicated the development of self-authorship for the participants.

Support systems. As mentioned in Chapter 4 and discussed earlier in this chapter, trusting and honest relationships were necessary for students to feel supported and cared for. They felt conflict in relationships with individuals who did not know about or affirm their sexual orientation and had difficulty finding comfort in them. When individuals experience cognitive dissonance in their relationships, they are more likely to experience mental health issues (Bond, Lusher, Williams, & Butler, 2014). Therefore, creating secure, meaningful relationships with others positively affects students' mental health and general wellbeing. When students felt affirmed in their identity, had shared experiences with others, and built reciprocal relationships, they had freedom to explore their sexuality. That secure support helped them process issues of cognitive dissonance.

Perspective weighing. In order to properly weigh perspectives, individuals must be aware of how they constructed their own beliefs over time. Working through issues of cognitive dissonance allows them to feel secure in their thoughts and experiences and understand the thoughts and experiences of others. They have to both value their own beliefs while also valuing the beliefs of others.

Leadership experience. Both participants who had leadership roles in Spectrum discussed their hesitancy to take on an official leadership position. They felt underqualified and unsure of themselves while also knowing there were few others who would be able or willing to step into the role. Recognizing their own limitations while also feeling responsible to fill a need caused significant internal conflict and dissonance. They each thought through their options and processed with others to decide if accepting the position was appropriate for them.

Working through issues of cognitive dissonance is a “catalyst” for self-authorship development (Carpenter & Peña, 2016, p. 93). Each participant expressed feeling some sort of cognitive dissonance. It is possible that those who more easily articulated their thought processes regarding this dissonance were able to do so because they were more advanced in their development of self-authorship.

Implications for Practice

Three specific implications for practice on faith-based campuses emerged from the study: (1) create a sexual minority student group; (2) create opportunities for open dialogue regarding institutional practices and policies on sexuality; (3) and provide classes, groups, or seminars exploring biblical contexts and perspectives of sexuality.

Sexual minority student group creation. As seen in foundational literature and this study's results, students benefit from social relationship building through groups. They find support in their minority identities when they can connect with others who are also a part of their minority group. These groups improve identity development, reduce fear over their sexuality, positively affirm their identity, reduce internal homophobia, and increase identity cohesion (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016). Campuses, particularly of faith-based institutions, can be challenging places for sexual minority students (Bible, 2013). Institutions should work to provide opportunities for students to build a community with individuals experiencing similar difficulties due to their identity.

Additionally, the findings from the study and other literature suggest institutions provide leadership opportunities for sexual minority students. Participants one and three from the present study benefitted from developing meaningful mentoring relationships and felt supported by the institution in unique ways. Baxter Magolda (2001) found leadership skills and self-authorship development correlate with each other. Those skills help with developing "flexibility, adaptability, the capacity to negotiate between one's own and others' needs, and the ability to cope with rapid change, ambiguity, diversity and complexity" (pp. xxi–xxii). Giving students opportunities to lead within their own social groups affirms their value and gives them space to develop as leaders.

Bringing students into conversations on institutional practices and policies. Institutions should be more transparent about what informs their policies and practices regarding sexual minority students. The study evidenced a disconnect between the institutions' intentions behind policies and the students' understandings of why the policies were in place. As cited earlier, Yarhouse et al. (2009) found LGB students often

view behaviorally-based policies as intolerant, while administrators view them as religiously consistent. Administrators asking LGB students about their perspectives on policies could help the students feel more supported and valued.

While some faith-based institutions are acutely committed to their sexuality policies, other institutions are reconsidering their policies and seeking to alter them. Student perspectives and experiences should influence the formation and implementation of policies. When administrators trust students as co-creators in institutional policy, they offer students ownership over their personal experience. Universities should consider students as colleagues in creating policies that significantly affect institutional culture.

Provide opportunities on campus for the communication of biblical perspectives on sexuality. Students in the study referenced institutionally implemented conversations on sexuality and faith and noted the positive impact they had on their development. Institutions should offer community forums and seminars to open communication and increase understanding among various student groups (Bible, 2013; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Many LGB students at faith-based institutions are striving to feel more congruence between their faith and sexuality. Giving them the resources to shape their own biblical understanding will help them grow in their ability to form their own beliefs, relationships, and identities. Self-authorship development relies on an individual's capacity to do these things.

Opportunities for sexual minority students to approach topics of sexuality in large-scale events alongside heterosexual students will help both groups think critically about their own perspectives and build contextual understandings of others. As students build close relationships with LGB individuals, homophobia decreases (Hooghe &

Meeusen, 2012). When an institution validates the sexual minority student experience through programming, sexual majority students see the example and, ideally, follow suit.

Implications for Research

Though the study added valuable insights to the literature on sexual minority student experience, the study's scope was small. Therefore, there are many directions in which future researchers could take the foundational information from the study.

Chapter 3 noted the narrowness of this study's participant pool; only five students elected to participate. Each student had different identities and experiences informing their understanding of sexuality. Also, there was a spread in participants' year in school and involvement in on-campus groups. Duplicating the study with a larger sample size could significantly add to the findings of the study and help it be more widely applicable.

While the study appropriately identified a relationship between self-authorship development for sexual minority students and attendance at a faith-based institution, engaging in a comparative study would be enlightening. Sexual minority students attending an institution without a specific religious affiliation would not be subject to behavioral expectations or theological perspectives that may feel limiting. This could cause self-authorship development to be further along because students have the space to experiment and explore. However, students' self-authorship might be less developed because they may not feel as obligated to think critically about potential conflicts. Responses from a non-faith-based institution would add to the understanding of the results of this study.

Additionally, if one were to conduct the study again in several years, Spectrum would be in place longer and potentially become an established piece of student

experience. All of the participants mentioned this organization specifically, but it is difficult to know the impact it has on the student body at the institution. The professional interviewed talked about the ways in which the organization is still finding its place and evolving to serve students best. Because Spectrum had only been in existence for seven months at the time the researcher conducted the interviews, it is difficult to conceptualize the ways the organization affects students' development. Additionally, this organization has the potential to significantly alter institutional culture, but those effects may take longer than seven months to occur. Repeating the study in five years would allow Spectrum to fall into more of a rhythm of operating and establish itself on campus.

Limitations to the Study

As with all qualitative, phenomenological studies, there is a chance researcher bias affected the results of the study. Though the researcher bracketed her own perspective, relied on supervisors to help eliminate bias in the interview questions, and engaged in member checking with participants, she may have allowed her own perspective to influence pieces of the study. Thus, it is possible that the researcher may have missed pieces of the students' experience due to this potential blind spot.

Again, there were few participants in this study. Each student had different experiences affecting their perspectives in unique ways. The individuals' perspectives brought light to the experience of LGB students and their development of self-authorship. However, one should be hesitant to draw broad conclusions about general student experience in response to the study because of the ways in which having only five participants limits the scope of the study.

Finally, the study is not meant to inform conclusions regarding causation. Clearly, specific experiences at the institution affect students' development of self-authorship, but many other factors impact that development. The researcher did not consider family history, social experiences before attending the institution, or isolated incidents unrelated to the college experience. Thus, while participants' experiences at the institution impacted self-authorship development, those were not the only factors. The study can help draw some connections between institution attendance and self-authorship development, but there is no way to fully separate institution-related experiences and other confounding experiences in their connection with self-authorship development.

Conclusion

University attendance is an important part of a young person's growth. For sexual minority students, their college years are often times of major identity development. Electing to attend a faith-based institution as a sexual minority person is not an easy choice for many people. However, the study suggested attending a small, private, faith-based, liberal arts institution positively impacted LGB students' development of meaning-making and self-authorship. As students become more self-authored, they find ways to conceptualize learning experiences, form their own beliefs, recognize their own identities, build authentic relationships, and learn from failures and setbacks. The intentional time LGB students of faith spend thinking about and forming their own perspectives contributes to a more full understanding of who they are. As professionals at faith-based institutions continue to find ways to care better for sexual minority students, studies such as this one will provide important insight into the student experience and suggestions for improving student care.

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Appendix A

Intake Survey

The Development of Self-Authorship in Sexual Minority Students

Sara Bretz

Intake Survey

1. Age:
2. Race:
3. Gender identity:
4. Sexual orientation:
5. Year in school:

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. When deciding between colleges, what about this specific institution encouraged you to choose it?
2. Can you identify one or two significant learning experiences you've had in college, in class or otherwise?
3. Where would you say you find your most significant social support? When did you develop those relationships?
4. How do you typically respond to setbacks and disappointments?
5. What is a tough decision you had to make in the last year? How did you come to that decision?
 - a. What are the steps you take?
 - b. Where and when do you look for outside input?
 - c. How much do your personal values play into those decisions?
6. When do you remember recognizing your identity as a sexual minority for the first time?
 - a. What was the experience like?
 - b. What kinds of tensions did you hold then?
 - c. Have those tensions changed?
7. How do you think your understanding of your sexual orientation has developed in college?
8. How do you think attending this institution has impacted your understanding and development of agency, or personal choice?

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Title of Project: The Development of Self-Authorship in Sexual Minority Students

Principal Investigator: Sara Bretz
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Advisor: Dr. Tim Herrmann
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1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to study self-authorship in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students at a small, private, faith-based, liberal arts college. The study will help professionals understand how LGB students make meaning in their lives and become more independent. The study will also help professionals understand the experience of LGB students and how they develop support.

2. **Procedures to be followed:** I will ask you to answer eight questions about your experience as a LGB student at Messiah College. I will record the interview in an audio file, which I will destroy after the study.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** You may feel uncomfortable talking about your sexual orientation. Some questions I ask may feel personal or private. They also may remind you of stressful events in your past.

4. **Benefits:** The benefits to you include thinking about how your sexual orientation and your experience at Messiah College has impacted the way you make meaning out of learning experiences and think about your identity.

The benefits to society include adding to research on the experience of LGB students at Christian colleges and giving professionals information on how to care for students better.

5. **Duration/Time:** The interview will last between 40 and 60 minutes.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is private. The data will be stored at Taylor University in a password-protected file. Messiah College's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Human Research Protections may look at records from this study. In the event I publish or present on this research, I will not include personally identifiable information.

Your name will be changed to a pseudonym to protect your identity. Only I will know the identity of each participant.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Sara Bretz at (630) 336-9752 or Dr. Tim Herrmann at (765) 998-5142 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call either of these numbers if you feel this study has harmed you. Questions about your rights as a participant may be directed to Messiah College's Office of the Provost at (717) 766-2511 x5375. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. If you need to contact the Engle Center, you may call them at (717) 766-2511 ext. 6035

8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to join in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Choosing not to participate will not penalize you or remove benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Printed Name

Participant Signature

Date

The informed consent procedure has been followed.

Person Obtaining Consent (Investigator)

Date

