

SITUATING MYSELF AS A COUNSELLOR: THE INFLUENCES OF INTIMATE
EXPERIENCE AND INNER WORK ON PROCESS ETHICS

by
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Abstract

The experiences of individuals who deviate from heteronormative identity and roles in society are often neglected and/or overlooked, which merely compounds the oppression that sexual minority individuals very frequently experience. My research is a qualitative, autoethnographic study and interwoven analyses, which will aim to reflect upon aspects of myself and my experiences that have long been suppressed, and have, as a result prevented my full understanding of my ethics. I will further consider the question of how persons' experiences can influence their identity development and why it is important to explore these experiences through inner work. The writing will also incorporate information regarding gender roles, heteronormative assumptions, the culture of athletics, and relationship dynamics with respect to the impact they may have on the overall mental health and level of internalized homophobia, shame and grief of sexual minority individuals in today's society. Finally, I will examine how a better understanding of a sexual minority experience may help counsellors facilitate a therapeutic alliance and build a safe space for their clients.

Keywords: heteronormative, sexual minority, inner work, identity, mental health

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Chapter One:

Introduction

“THINGS THAT GAIN BY BEING WRITTEN ABOUT”

Abstractions, such as happiness or identity. Unexpected things. How those relate to happiness and identity

Clouds and billboards and other things that change

Plants whose names do not do them justice, such as Bindweed or Dill.

Definitions that become more accurate in their expression

Feasts, just for the pleasure of it. Longing, because writing can lessen it.

Different kinds of goodbye

(Lindenberg, 2014, p. 25).

As I began the process of conceptualizing this writing, I found myself struggling to grasp something precise, definite and conclusive that I could focus my study upon. I was preoccupied with a set of hypothetical results or findings that outlined an objective distinction between right and wrong, or good and bad, before I had an understanding of my intentions, and the importance they held for me. Despite the pull I often feel towards neat and tidy standards – as they provide comfort – I find myself most fulfilled, satisfied and proud of my work and myself when I display creativity and authenticity, and push the boundaries of what is expected. I came to realize that this very premise is what I have struggled with throughout my life, especially with respect to gender norms and sexual orientation. The dualities and firm boundaries that exist in society contradict the very essence of how I hope to approach my work as a counsellor – open, flexible, and receptive to the unfamiliar.

With this realization, I began to consider the following questions: (a) How can personal experiences influence the formation of one's process ethics¹?; (b) Why is it important to explore these experiences through inner work?; and (c) How might a better understanding of my sexual minority experience help facilitate the therapeutic alliance and build a safe space in the therapy room? These questions are nonetheless complex, however the process of examining them is important to me both individually and relationally. My hope is that the outcome also invokes curiosity and offers insight to my readers, whether in their personal lives or their work with others.

The society in which we live bombards us with expectations, ideals, and norms, which are often absorbed on an unconscious level, and can only be recognized and deconstructed when we take the time to reflect, and analyze how we truly feel about and fit within them. And this can only be done if we feel safe to do so. I intend to explore my most prevalent life experiences and lessons in order to conceptualize my ethics, analyze how they came to be, and examine the importance they hold to my future work in the counselling field. The ways in which counsellors can help create a safe and supportive space for sexual minority clients will also be discussed.

In this first chapter a brief history related to the treatment of LGBTQ individuals is discussed in order to provide some context for the present-day experience of many sexual minorities. I will then examine the practice of self-reflection and *inner work*, and

¹ The term process ethics, as discussed by Swim, George and Wulff (2001), is considered to be "...the respectful and meaningful interpersonal space between therapist and client" (p. 14). My use of this concept will reflect relations in my personal life as well as professional relations within therapy.

detail the significance it has in my life. Although my focus will be on personal experience, I argue that such inner work is paramount to the personal growth of all individuals regardless of the unique circumstances of their life. Finally, I will introduce autoethnography as my method of research, describe what this form of research entails and elaborate on my decision to use such an approach.

The second chapter will explore orientation and identity in a heteronormative² society. Within this exploration, a number of my intimate life experiences will be discussed with respect to my gender expression, my sexuality and orientation and the ongoing process of *coming out*, or rather *moving into* my authentic sense of self. I will outline various assumptions that often result from living with a heteronormative frame of reference and consider the effect such assumptions had, and continue to have, on the ongoing formation of my identity. Scholarly arguments and research findings will be referenced throughout the chapter to support any conclusions or hypotheses that are drawn.

In the third chapter, I examine the influence of community and culture on relationship dynamics and evaluate the ways in which my earlier experiences potentially influenced how I interact with myself and others. The culture of competitive sports and the impact of team dynamics will be discussed when considering the formation of my identity and current ethical stance, as it was a large part of my life growing up. Although these accounts are my own and do not provide a frame for making generalizations or

² The term heteronormative refers to automatic and often unconscious beliefs and assumptions that “reinforce heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the ideal norm” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2009).

drawing conclusions about the experiences of others, I invite readers to contemplate the communities and cultures unique to their lives in hopes of broadening the dialogue, encouraging difference and deepening our understanding of how we relate to one another.

My experience with internalized homophobia, and subsequently shame, grief and depression will then be discussed in chapter four. It is important to note that not all LGBTQ individuals will experience internalized homophobia, and the experience of those that do will vary greatly. However, a general awareness of how it can manifest is important for individuals and helping professionals alike.

Lastly, the fifth and final chapter will summarize my key themes and offer implications for therapy. The therapeutic modalities that coincide with my ethical stance and approach to counselling will also be outlined and deconstructed.

Historical Experiences of Discrimination

Before I move into my personal experiences as a gay-identified female, I will provide some historical context with respect to sexual minority identification and societal views. Without some context of where another person is coming from, it is unreasonable to believe that we can connect with them, or truly appreciate what they are saying (B. Steyn, personal communication, February 19, 2017). A basic knowledge of the history will allow for a more meaningful understanding of my personal narrative and the potential challenges that other LGBTQ individuals may face.

The following is an outline of select developments related to the treatment and rights of sexual minorities. During the 1930s to 1960s, it was common for people to be removed from federal jobs and positions in the military if it was known, or even suspected that they were homosexual (Hash & Rogers, 2017). Prior to the 1980s,

reparative or conversion therapy models, aimed to cure lesbian or gay-identified individuals of their homosexuality, were common (Arthur & Collins, 2010). The AIDS epidemic in the 1980s brought forth further discrimination, hostility and disgust towards homosexuals, and in the 1990s many state constitutions were being amended to specify that marriage occurs "...only between a man and a woman" (Hash & Rogers, 2017, p. 4). Despite same-sex marriage now being legal in many countries, it is still devalued and viewed as deviant by many individuals, organizations, and systems around the world.

In the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (DSM-I), published in 1952, homosexuality, which Hoy-Ellis, Ator, Kerr and Milford (2016) indicate was "...not then differentiated from gender identity and expression" was designated as a sociopathic personality disturbance and was not removed from the DSM until 1973 (pp. 56-57). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) still considers transgender identity to be a diagnosable condition, which is termed Gender Dysphoria in the current DSM-5 (Hash & Rogers, 2017).

Although there has been a growing acceptance for individuals who deviate from heteronormative identity and roles as healthy and deserving of equal rights and inclusion, many LGBTQ individuals still experience discrimination, oppression and abuse in their community (Hoy-Ellis et al., 2016). They are also often neglected and/or diminished in mainstream discourse, which merely compounds the oppression that sexual minority individuals experience. It is crucial that individuals within these communities continue to tell their stories, to gain insight into the ways in which their experiences have influenced how they position themselves in society, and to help educate others. This underlying premise highlights the importance of promoting awareness through lived experience.

As a society, we must become aware of the micro-aggressions³ that sexual minority individuals experience if we are to make any real change. Despite my focus being on the LGBTQ population, such awareness is necessary with respect to all marginalized individuals and/or groups. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) state that as counsellors, “An inability to perceive our countertransference responses, to recognize our personal distortions and blind spots...will severely limit our effectiveness” (p. 559). The more awareness we are able to gain into our limitations and possible blind spots the better situated we will be to navigate ethical dilemmas and build therapeutic alliances with our clients. This is one of the many reasons I have come to value self-reflection and inner work.

Personal Inner Work

My human nature often contradicts the goals of my human teleology; doing what I hope will make me invulnerable actually makes me less fully human (Bankart, 2007).

Over the past year I have embarked on a journey of self-reflection that has set into motion a multitude of questions regarding the development of my inner world and sense of identity. According to Cohen (2009), inner work involves reflective practices, self-observation, and an ability to witness our experiences and internal processes. A fundamental aspect of this exploration centers on the desire to achieve congruence “...between outer presentation of self and inner experience” (p. 176). This desire for

³ Microaggressions are often brief exchanges – conscious or unconscious, and verbal or non-verbal – that “communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 1).

congruence is also associated with the separation that exists between the multiple selves that make up my identity and ultimately form my ethics, values, and overall worldview. My ability to achieve increased harmony within myself is not only central to my personal development but also my effectiveness as a therapist.

I have come to the realization that my tendency to disengage from my inner world has been influenced by my past experiences and the contexts in which they are situated. This prevents me from embracing myself as a whole and fully experiencing the livelihood of the here and now. Cohen (2009) captures this concept richly in the following statement: “This inner work liberates energy, potential, and capacities and talents that have been buried under the rubble of pressure to conform in the service of survival” (p. 191). Although I have begun to uncover aspects of myself that have long been suppressed, I recognize that this is an ongoing process that needs to be considered within a broader sociocultural context.

Autoethnographic Research

My research is a qualitative, autoethnographic study, which is supported by scholarly research and relevant theoretical frameworks. Autoethnography, as I understand it, makes use of self-reflection and personal observation to gain insight into the social and cultural contexts in which we live. I am drawn to this method of study because it allows me to place myself in my research – to connect my inner experiences and reflections with the wider social and cultural contexts. It recognizes the subjectivity and uniqueness of my experiences without diminishing the value and importance they hold in relation to the lives of others. Arthur and Collins (2010) provide a captivating metaphor for the unique and multidimensional nature of individual experience and identity:

If you hold a kaleidoscope steady, a beautiful pattern appears through the lens based on the positioning of the coloured beads and the flow of light through the reflective sides of the instrument. Shifting the kaleidoscope even slightly or changing the environment will result in a different, unique, but equaling beautiful imagine. Opening the kaleidoscope and adding a different combination of coloured beads will again produce a new display (p. 249).

The ways in which we identify, and the meanings we derive from our experiences are boundless and will transform over time and between contexts. If we take the time to really look into the kaleidoscope and acknowledge the various positions that are possible, we will enjoy a much broader lens through which to see the world and others in it.

According to Stacy Jones (2008) an autoethnography involves "setting the scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation...and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives (p. 208).

Throughout my exploration I hope to not only create a connection from my past to my present life experiences but also from my worldview and understanding of events to that of the readers. By this, I do not mean uniformity but rather an acceptance for difference and diversity and an increased understanding of others experiences.

Despite the potential benefits and advantages of autoethnographies, there are also criticisms of this method of study, which I feel are important to acknowledge. According to Mendez (2013) autoethnographic studies have been criticized for their subjective nature, and strong emphasis on self: "...for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualized" (p. 289). As a result of the researcher-participant

relationship being blurred, the credibility of such research is often called into question (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). I was initially reluctant to consider this type of study because of these unfavourable evaluations.

I began to explore this further and questioned my attraction to writing an autoethnography. Am I merely seeking attention by having others read my personal experiences and thoughts? Is this method of inquiry self-serving? Am I looking for validation or acceptance from my readers? Is my *story* and personal experiences important enough for others to read? The answers to these questions are just as subjective as the method itself. However, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state, “Objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations” (p. 5). I realized my purpose for writing an autoethnography is not to find answers, or *objective realities*, but rather instigate further questions and uncover alternate views. I believe my story is important enough to share; not because I can provide answers, or because I need to be accepted, supported, or even agreed with; but merely because it is my story. It is important to note that a focus on self does not imply “self in a vacuum” (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. 2). My experiences involve a variety of others and have the potential to inspire reflection on their lives whether they can relate to my personal views or not.

As I reflect on and document experiences that have contributed to the formation of my ethics, select individuals in my life will appear in my autoethnography but will not be interviewed. Since my thesis is a public document I will protect participants' confidentiality by refraining from using their names. However, as a result of their relationship with me, participants are aware that they may be identified and understand the inherent risks of that.

It is unrealistic to believe I can examine my own experiences and personal development without mentioning others. To do so would be to deny the interconnection and relationship of human life: “Who we become, the opportunities we are given or denied, the decisions we make, the actions we take, the meaning we derive – these are all tangled up in social relationships” (Settersten, 2015, p. 217). Along with the inner work and relational exploration that this process will incorporate, relevant memories and present-day experiences will also be provided in the form of journal entries, personal notes, metaphors, short stories, lyrics, poems and artwork. It is my hope that readers will take the opportunity to question my words and perspectives and contemplate the relevance they have to their own lives and the culture in which we live.

Chapter Two: Orientation and Identity

In this chapter I will be focusing primarily on my sexual orientation with considerable attention to gender expression. My extended engagement in sports from a young age and the influence that athletics had on my identity will also be examined. I will provide various narratives from my childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, which will include an analysis of both the ways in which the aspects of my sexual identity were supported and the ways in which they were not supported. Subsequently, I will discuss the influences and the defining moments that were significant to my coming out⁴ experience, while keeping in mind that *coming out* is not a singular event but rather an ongoing process.

Before I begin to share some of my personal stories, I would like to introduce a set of lyrics that, for me, provide a powerful portrayal of my inner struggle with my identity and journey to embrace the many aspects of who I am.

“Honest”

I can't say a true thing

It's hard to be that honest

I know you're not asking

⁴ According to Urbach (1996), “coming out can never be accomplished once and for all...sustenance of gay identity (where straight identity is presumed) depends on continuous acts of declaration” (p. 69). Disclosure is an ongoing process that is influenced by many factors such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and so forth.

But I told you that I promised

There's always two thoughts

One after the other:

I'm alone

No you're not

I'm alone no you're not

I know I'm pretending

When I try to have an answer

It's not what I intended

And I don't know what comes after

There's always two thoughts

One after the other:

I'm alone

No you're not

I'm alone no you're not

(Closner & Closner, 2016, track 10).

I heard this song live for the first time at a small venue in Vancouver as recently as last month. Without reading the lyrics, or analyzing the potential meaning behind the musical composition, the song spoke to me in that moment in a way that is difficult to put into words. I felt a tension between the familiar and safe, and the unrecognized and insecure; the love and warmth provided by my family and the pain and separation found within me.

Lyric and song have been a point of connection for me when I have felt lost in an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation. The words, *There are always two*

thoughts...I'm alone no you're not, bring my attention to my long-lasting struggle with my identity and the dichotomy between normal and abnormal that is all too often imposed on us as we explore who we are. Throughout my life I fought to mend the gap that existed between what my body and soul felt was true and what society told me was right. This resulted in a great deal of pain, denial, and a whole lot of *pretending*, especially with respect to my sexual orientation as a gay-identified female. Although being *gay* does not define who I am as a whole, without it I feel inauthentic and ultimately incomplete.

My experience of coming to terms with my sexual attraction to females was difficult, confusing and unpredictable. I cannot pinpoint a particular moment, or even an age when I realized my feelings towards the same sex were *different*, let alone when I could identify my feelings as being *gay*. I do however know that I did not accept that I was gay until I was 20 years old, and I occasionally still think about what my life would be like if I were straight. This is not because I am unhappy – or because I am ashamed of who I am or whom I love – but a result of living in a heteronormative society that assumes that if you are a woman, you are looking to spend your life with a man, and vice versa. Heteronormative assumptions, which “...refer to automatic unconscious beliefs and expectations that reinforce heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the ideal norm” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011, p. 2), often result in the oversight and/or exclusion of sexual minority individuals and relationships.

Although there has been a growing acceptance for sexual minorities as healthy and deserving of equal rights and inclusion, many LGBTQ+ individuals still encounter

homophobia⁵, and experience discrimination, oppression and various forms of abuse (Hoy-Ellis, Ator, Kerr & Milford, 2016). The following passages found in *The Dictionary of Homophobia: A Global History of Gay and Lesbian Experience* (Tin, 2008) illustrate homophobic speech in varied contexts throughout history:

1. “Imagine exactly what sexual practices between men are, and try not to vomit.
–Camille Mauclair, *Les Marges*, March 1926” (p. 19).
2. “Don’t come and tell us, under the pretense that it is an accepted–celebrated even–perversion, that it is not a perversion. Homosexuality remains what it is: a perversion.
–Jacques Lacan, “Le Transfert,” in *Seminaire* (Seminar of Jacques Lacan), vol. 8, 1960-6” (p. 19).
3. “Homosexuals are worse than pigs and dogs.
–Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe, 1995” (p. 20).
4. “I cannot be favorable to those that I call the gravediggers of humanity, those who do not guarantee the future, homosexuals.
–Francois Abadie, senator, France’s Radical Left Party, *Nouvel observateur*, June 2000” (p. 20).

I chose to include these excerpts because of the power and animosity that they contain and the strong feelings they have the potential to evoke. Beliefs and messages such as these may not be as commonplace or blatant today, however they are far from nonexistent or illusory.

⁵ Homophobia encompasses a wide range of negative feelings, beliefs, attitudes and/or actions towards individuals or groups who identify as LGBTQ+

I will now move into a narrative of the individual and relational experiences in my life that I have derived significance and meaning from when contemplating the formation of my sexual orientation and identity.

Childhood: Confessions of a *Tomboy*

Although I was the younger daughter of two girls, I might have been viewed in some sense as the son my father never had. I was a very obvious *tomboy* who played football at lunch with the boys, built tree forts on the weekends, and practiced jujitsu techniques at home with my dad. I began to excel in a variety of sports and athletic activities from a young age and this became an aspect of my life where I felt comfortable and confident in my abilities. Some of my fondest childhood memories involved swimming in our backyard pool with friends – wearing boy’s swim shorts with no shirt on – and running out to the ice cream truck with my hair tucked up in my Chicago Bulls or L.A. Lakers baseball hat.

I was aware of my preference towards the stereotypical ‘boy stuff’ from a young age but do not recall feeling any sense of shame as a result of this. It was not uncommon for me to be mistaken for a boy, which only became more frequent when I decided to cut my hair at age 10 like the boy I was *in love* with. Although it now seems more plausible that I was in love with the idea of looking like him. Despite this – and aside from brief and occasional feelings of embarrassment – these instances did not evoke negative self-talk or internal conflict the way that my sexual attraction and struggle with my orientation did.

In reflecting on this, a number of other factors come to mind that can potentially explain, independently or in combination with one another, why my aberration from the

female gender role did not induce feelings of discord. Firstly, my parents provided me the freedom from a very young age to choose what I wore, how I wanted my hair cut and how I chose to express myself in other ways. Further to this, my parents did not shame my ‘tomboy’ appearance and behavior so I did not feel as though I needed to hide or suppress this part of myself. In their survey and review of the socialization of gender, Leaper and Friedman (2007) assert that the development of children’s gender self-concepts are influenced by a number of social contexts, including family members, peers and schools: “These social contexts both reflect and perpetuate gender roles and gender inequalities in the larger society” (p. 561). The acceptance I received from my environment, both in and outside of my home during my childhood allowed me to openly explore my gender beliefs and preferences.

A substantial aspect of my *tomboy* nature revolved around my participation in sports. I started playing soccer at six years of age and it became a significant part of my childhood. Although I was involved in a number of other sports throughout my life, soccer became my focus and primary devotion in later years. A longitudinal study conducted by Fredricks and Eccles (2002) found that parental beliefs and evaluations of their child’s athletic ability predict changes in the child’s sports competence and value beliefs. I began to excel in a variety of sports and athletic activities from a young age and this became an aspect of my life where I felt comfortable and confident in my abilities. The support from my parents reinforced my self-assurance with respect to my athleticism, which was a significant facet of my gender-identity at that time in my life.

Although the involvement of girls in sports was much more prevalent during my childhood than it has been historically, there was, and still is a number of assumptions

and stereotypes made about females who are involved in traditionally ‘masculine’ sports. During a number of interviews conducted by Kauer and Krane (2006) with female collegiate athletes, it was revealed that the main stereotypes that they encountered were that they were masculine and lesbian: “Because female athletes are running, swimming, jumping, and training on traditionally male terrain, women in sport often are devalued, sexualized and discriminated against in society” (p. 43). With this said, as females’ participation in sports increases, gender-role stereotypes should continue to become less prevalent (Suitor & Reavis, 1995).

Despite these assumptions, I believe my experience and involvement in athletics influenced my ability to feel comfortable with my gender-expression. As Reicherzer (2005) argues, “Adolescence is an age of heightened self-consciousness. A primary developmental task is to identify a peer group that serves to affirm one’s identity” (p. 167). With respect to my gender-expression, team sports provided me with this affirmation and group membership and influenced my ability to feel comfortable with my gender expression. On the other hand, in regards to my sexual orientation, I lacked exposure to any family or peer groups that I could identify with, which is something I will discuss in greater depth in the following section.

I will now take a quick detour into language for the purposes of clarity. Language is neither neutral nor objective, and can influence our perceptions of individuals and events (Coates & Wade, 2007). Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (2012) argue the need for a greater understanding of language, especially considering the evolution of language and symbolic meaning, in order to differentiate between what is and is not helpful in distinct

contexts. It is important then to illuminate discussion around the use of words and labels, and in doing so here; I hope to better situate my experiences for readers.

The terms sex and gender are often misunderstood and/or misused. Sex, as defined by Collins and Arthur (2010), "...refers to biological differences between males and females, whereas gender refers to the socially defined qualities and characteristics attributed to males and females" (p. 340). As previously noted, I did not feel incongruent with my biological sex and I consider my gender identity⁶ to be female. I did however feel incongruent with the set of cultural norms that deems gender as masculine and feminine. As I continue reflecting on my experiences I urge readers to keep this in mind, as well as the following notion:

No two individuals, no matter how similar their backgrounds, life experiences, or heritage, will internalize culture in the same way; there will always be difference in worldview, values, assumptions about human nature and the change process, and meaning making. These gaps in worldview will be more or less significant, depending on the nature of the presenting concern and the context in which the client lives out the particular issue or experience (Collins & Arthur, 2010, p. 247).

With this recognition, I believe we are in a better position to suspend our unique experiences and biases in order to receive another's story without preconceived notions or judgments.

⁶ Gender identity, as defined by Reicherzer (2005) is "An individual's self-identification as a man, woman, transgender, gender variant, or other identity category" (p. 164). Gender identity is self-defined and not imposed on an individual by societal and cultural norms.

Adolescence: Building a White Picket Fence to Deflect the *Gay* Label

My sexual attractions and overall sexuality was something I was able to avoid, or at least temporarily suppress, throughout my childhood and into my early adolescence. Although I continued on this path throughout my high school years, it became more difficult as I navigated the changes – both physical and emotional – throughout puberty.

I do not recall my parents ever talking to me about sex in general, let alone the sexual identities of anyone outside of the heterosexual norm. The knowledge I gained about sex was from friends, the minimal amount of sex education provided in school, and the different forms of media I was exposed to. Neimeyer et al. (2011) discuss the limiting portrayals that exist in Western norms and the potential challenges for children and youth who do not fit within these norms:

For homosexual children and their allies, nearly all the windows have been bricked up, and their mirrors have been broken. This pattern of fragmentation – in schools, in media, and, worst of all, at home – establishes a cycle that perpetuates into adolescents and on through to adulthood for too many...The majority of developmental youth who have been denied positive or realistic representations of behavior for their entire lives, and otherwise inundated with two-dimensional stereotypes, are often left to blindly sort the claiming of personal identity without constructive charters (p. 252).

The lack of gay-affirming models in Western culture often leaves sexual minority individuals to "...absorb the skewed depictions and...ingratiate and embrace the very biases that debase them" (Neimeyer et al., 2011, 251).

I cannot recover a specific moment or message that shaped my perceptions of homosexuality, however my awareness that the predominant societal views stigmatized sexual orientations outside of the ‘norm’ induced my internalization of these beliefs. This internalization activated a long and painful struggle with my own acceptance of my sexual orientation as well as an acceptance that my orientation may have long-term effects on my relationships with family and friends. For these reasons, the idea that “...heterosexuality is the only valid way of living...” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2001, p. 2) became ingrained in me from a young age.

Although I had a few boyfriends between the ages of 10 and 13, as I further reflect on the development of my sexual self, in terms of my orientation, I believe I knew from a fairly young age that my attractions to the same sex were ‘different’ in some way than the majority of girls. I did not fully conceptualize or understand how these attractions were different however until the age of 13 when I was beginning middle school. At this time I began to experience sexual attractions to members of the same sex, and lack thereof to the opposed sex. The feelings of attraction to individuals of my own gender that began emerging were incongruent with my peers, and in contrast with the societal and cultural norms I had picked up on and come to know. As a result of this, I chose to suppress these feelings instead of explore them.

This innate sexual attraction I had to other females made it extremely difficult for me to develop an acceptance of myself considering my perception that homosexuality was wrong. Rathus, Nevid, Fichner-Rathus, and McKay (2016) noted that, “...LGBTQ youth...face the additional burden of integrating their sexual orientation into their self-concepts while growing up in a heterosexist society” (p. 299). I was not only terrified of

others uncovering my secret, I was also internalizing the shame I felt about it, and thus perpetuating my fear and isolation.

The confidence and sense of community that athletics provided me with my gender expression and *tomboy* appearance was not provided with respect to the expression of my sexual orientation. Bremner (2002) discusses sporting cultures and states that homophobia often discourages women from participating or associating themselves with many sports because of a fear that they will be labeled as a lesbian. As a female who participated in many male dominated sports during my adolescence I was aware of this stereotype and the stigma that was attached to homosexuality. As a result, Maurer-Starks, Clemens, and Whalen (2008) state that, "...heterosexual women take exhaustive measures to avoid the lesbian label, ultimately alienating their lesbian teammates" (p. 329). I would argue that these measures are not only taken by heterosexual women but may also be true for homosexual women, before or during their coming-out process.

The extent to which I trained myself to suppress my thoughts and feelings regarding my same-sex attractions not only resulted in a lack of feeling towards my orientation but all other aspects of myself as a sexual being as well. My propensity to numb my shame and fear by withdrawing from my sexual attractions in turn numbed my ability to feel the pride and happiness that results from establishing genuine intimate connections. From a developmental perspective, accepting oneself as a sexual being is the second of four major developmental tasks of adolescent sexuality "...that begins in and likely extends beyond the adolescent years" (Rathus, et al., 2016, p. 197). My reluctance

to even begin the process of accepting myself as a sexual being invariably delayed my progression to the following tasks related to sexual exploration and awareness.

Much of my teenage years were spent in what seemed like a constant battle between two unyielding constructs: repudiate myself as a sexual being, or force an attraction, or in the very least a romantic relationship, with the opposite sex. In my mind these options did not exist on a spectrum, and did not allow for flexibility or variation. If I would continue on as a normal and accepted member of society I would navigate between these two fixed constructs as I saw necessary. I did not believe living authentically and embracing my attraction to the same-sex existed as a third option. This way of thinking was deeply rooted and did not begin to unravel until the year following high school graduation when I moved away from my hometown of Kelowna to attend post-secondary education at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Young Adulthood: New Possibilities (*I'm Alone No You're Not*)

As I approached young adulthood, which for the purposes of this reflection will be defined as 18 to 25 years of age, I was yet to have a sexual encounter or romantic relationship that I considered authentic or meaningful. Following graduation from high school I was extremely fortunate to be offered a full-ride scholarship to play soccer at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). As hard as it was to venture out of my comfort zone and as vulnerable as I felt, I have always looked back on this experience as a significant turning point in my life.

My first year at University was one of the most difficult, yet life-changing times of my life. Aside from vacations and family trips it was the first time I was not only exposed to, but also immersed in a community with so much diversity. My eyes were

opened up to many different ethnicities, languages, beliefs and I think the most crucial for me at that point in my life, sexual orientations. The internal struggle that occurred as a result of my feeling of being ‘the only one’ was, for the first time in my life, being challenged. Although this affirmation was not an instantaneous resolution to the long and complex struggle going on within me, it was the spark that opened up possibilities that I had long ago given up on.

As a member of the university’s soccer team I spent a great deal of time with my teammates and began forming a number of close relationships with individuals from various backgrounds. It was the first time in my life that I was in contact with other females who did not identify as heterosexual. Up until this point the most exposure I had to the LGBTQ2+ population was through the media, which most often provided stereotypical portrayals of lesbians as social outcasts. Neimeyer, Harris, Winokuer and Thornton (2011) state that homosexual youth are depicted as outsiders of culture, as opposed to proponents: “Mentally, socially, and emotionally, gays and lesbians are saliently presented as tragic heroes, with a flamboyantly tragic flaw...mentally compromised, emotionally unstable, and morally conniving” (p. 253). The realization and ‘real-life’ exposure to other females who openly identified as LGBTQ2+ was extremely impactful; my deeply rooted, and firmly held beliefs that non-heterosexual orientations were both inappropriate and shameful slowly began to dismantle.

I formed a few relationships – while at UTEP – significant to the transformation of my views regarding my attraction to the same-sex, and what it meant for me. For the purpose of confidentiality, I will not be going into detail regarding these relationships. I will note that they were not of a romantic or sexual nature, but rather trusting and

supportive friendships with other females who were either questioning their sexuality or gender identity, or already openly identifying as non-heterosexual. Each connection was unique and taught me something different, however they all contributed to a more open, non-judgmental, and fluid way of thinking about sexual identity⁷ as it applied to myself as well as others.

As I was given the opportunity to witness and support the coming-out process of others, I found myself celebrating uniqueness – in the process itself, and as the quality that makes us who we are – and reflecting on my own experiences without an overwhelming cloud of shame⁸. The following year I slowly began to disclose my sexual orientation, which I identified as being gay, to select friends in El Paso and my hometown of Kelowna. Over the next couple of years I had ‘come out’ to the majority of my family and others peers.

The Never Ending Closet

It is important for me to elaborate on the meaning of ‘coming out’ and the intimate and extensive nature of such a process. Although I do not necessarily like the term ‘coming-out,’ it is so widely used – though often misunderstood – that I believe it is important to acknowledge and ‘open up’ for further consideration.

⁷ Sexual identity is complex, socially constructed and comprised of several components: self-identification, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour (Collins & Arthur, 2010, p. 329).

⁸ Although my feelings of shame, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, were not suddenly erased or non-existent, and continue to come up at times, I was able to acknowledge these feelings, and thus, begin working with them.

For me, ‘coming-out’ started well before I took any action to tell others about my sexual attraction to females, and continues to be a part of my everyday life. A significant aspect of ‘coming out,’ which is often overlooked, is the coming out to oneself – the acknowledgement and acceptance of one’s sexual minority identity to oneself – which I struggled with for much of my adolescence and early adulthood.

Another facet of coming out involves the expression and/or disclosure of one’s sexual identity to others. As noted by Arthur and Collins (2010), “disclosure is a continuous process that characterizes lesbian experience throughout the lifespan” (p. 375). Although I am considered to be ‘out’ to my family, my friends, and I would presume most of my acquaintances, every time I enter into a new situation, environment, community, group, class, job, and so on, I am most often assumed to be straight and therefore put in a position to ‘play straight’ or disclose otherwise.

There are numerous factors that can influence an individual’s decision to disclose their sexual orientation and identity, including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and so forth. The risks and consequences of disclosure are widespread and can come in various forms such as stereotypes and unfair judgments, or a loss or breach to one’s job security (Arthur & Collins, 2010), personal safety, and connections.

It is important to note that each and every individual has the right to disclose or not disclose whenever, to whomever, and for whatever reason they choose, without having to explain or justify any aspect of their decision.

In closing this chapter, I would like to share a poem as a way of drawing attention to the fluid nature of identity, the embodiment of our selfhood and the interpersonal realms that influence us.

I Don't Call Myself a Poet but I Wrote a Poem

As I move into the next chapter I will be shifting my focus away from individual identities and into relationship dynamics, both self-to-self and self-to-other, in order to explore the complex interconnections and relationships that exist among us.

“Interconnection”

I need you, and I need me

But I need us

Not to fill my holes

But to see where they lie/

 You can judge me

 But I will shrink

 And our holes will grow

 But if you see me, I will see you/

 Connect with me however you choose

 Through the familiar,

 The unknown,

 Neither, or both

 For what I think I know now

 May not be so, now

 Because everything floats

 In the space before me, and after you

 (A. Kleinfelder, 2017).

Chapter Three:
Relationship Dynamics

“FOR WHAT BINDS US”

There are names for what binds us:

strong forces, weak forces.

Look around, you can see them:

the skin that forms in a half empty cup,

5 nails rusting into the place they join,

joints dovetailed on their own weight.

The way things stay so solidly

wherever they’ve been set down –

and gravity, scientists say, is weak.

10 And see how the flesh grows back

across a wound, with a great vehemence,

more strong

than the simple, untested surface before.

There’s a name for it on horses,

15 when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,

as all flesh

is proud of its wounds, wears them

as honors given out after battle,

small triumphs pinned to the chest–

20 And when two people have loved each other

see how it is like a
scar between their bodies
stronger, darker, and proud;
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric
that nothing can tear or mend.
(Hirshfield, 1983, p. 4).

The way in which I receive and make meaning of this poem is unique and personal interpretations will vary from one person to the next. For me the words speak to the depth of connection and the resilience inherent in us, the inevitable flow of energy and continued transformation, and the power of love and relationship.

The unbounded nature of interpreting words exemplifies the complexity of language, interaction, connection, and thus human relationship. Rosen and Lang (2005) ask a question that I believe to be central to my autoethnography: “How do we create a context for people to speak and listen in ways that will span differences and make their lives richer?” (p. 158). Similarly, how do we open up the space between each member of the process in order to help mend potential ruptures? Although there are no simple or all-inclusive answers to these questions, they may provide direction, and possibly hope for gaining a better understanding for ourselves, and others.

In this chapter I will be exploring the dynamics of relationship with an awareness of both self-to-self and self-to-other realms. I will first provide a narrative of the significant experiences in my life that I believe have contributed to my current view of, and position within relational processes. I will then discuss the nature of my current

exploration, the personal and relational patterns that I have become aware of, and the insights that have arisen.

Early Influences

Because core affective experience is vital and alive, it moves. In tracking it together, inviting it, attending to it, naming it, it changes, and what was previously disallowed becomes available for compassion, understanding, and effective response

(Gurman, 2010, p. 39).

As I reflect on some of my earlier life experiences, there are a number of themes that stand out when considering relationships. In order to highlight what I believe to be the most momentous influences, I will focus on three areas of my early life: (a) community, including the impact of athletic culture, (b) family, and (c) peers. Although these will be discussed separately for the purpose of clarity and structure, they are dynamic experiences and are interconnected on various levels.

Community and the culture of athletics. In this section I will be concentrating on the influences that community and my involvement in athletics have had on the development of my identity as a sexual minority individual. As Collins and Arthur (2010) state, “Identity is seen as formed through connection and authentic relationships with others” (p. 376). This underlines the inevitable link between one’s identity formation and the presence of genuine human connection and relationship.

Although I cannot recover a specific moment or message that shaped my perceptions of homosexuality, my awareness that the predominant societal views stigmatized sexual orientations outside of the ‘norm’ induced my internalization of these

beliefs. At that time I did not have an awareness or understanding of the prevalence of heteronormativity in our society or its pertinence to my emerging perceptions. For these reasons, the idea that "...heterosexuality is the only valid way of living..." (McGeorge & Carlson, 2010, p. 2) became ingrained in me as a child and impinged on my relationship with myself as well as with others.

The innate sexual attraction I had to other females made it extremely difficult for me to develop an acceptance of myself considering my perception, which was reinforced by my community, that homosexuality was wrong. I was not only terrified of others uncovering my secret, I was also internalizing the shame I felt about it, and thus perpetuating my fear and isolation. Graham (2016) emphasizes the profound impact shame can have on an individual and their ability to connect with others:

Shame—the territory of embarrassment, rejection, failure, unworthiness, unlovability—has such a powerful impact on the sense of self, the psyche, because of our very human ‘biological imperative’ to connect with other human beings: to belong, to be a part of the tribe and feel wanted, accepted, and loved ...Perceiving one’s self as disconnected, cut off, or exiled from the tribe triggers the neuroception of life threat and triggers the dorsal dive. Thinking shuts down, coping becomes hiding and withdrawal (pp. 13-14).

My belief that I was abnormal on a fundamental level, and my subsequent expectation that I would be rejected and likely ostracized as a result of my sexual orientation had formidable and lasting effects on my ability to share my true feelings and emotions, especially within intimate relationships.

Athletics, on the other hand, and more specifically soccer, became an area of my life and a part of my community that provided me with an alternative experience. As previously discussed, soccer has been a large part of my life since a young age, and became a significant site of belonging for me in a number of respects. In a systematic review of the psychological and social benefits for children and adolescents who participated in sports, Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, and Payne (2013) found that, “team sport involvement was positively associated with social acceptance and negatively associated with depressive symptoms (p. 16). It was also noted that sports appeared to have a positive effect on the self-esteem of adolescents and became a “...highly integrated social force” (p. 18). Although I did not disclose my sexual orientation or attraction to the same-sex during my adolescent years, the sense of belonging and acceptance that my soccer team provided was nonetheless significant.

Family. I would consider my relationship with each of my parents to be fairly connected at this time in my life. However, it is important to note that the connection I had and primarily still have with my father does not exist on a deep emotional level but rather as an unspoken understanding that he loves and cares for me deeply. As a child and adolescent I believe my relationship with him was strengthened as a result of my participation and success in sports and the accomplishments I began to achieve in school.

This dynamic revolved more around perseverance, strength and perfection than it did authenticity, emotional expression or accepting weakness. It has always been very important for me to make my father proud, which I recently learned is similar to the way he felt about his father. It is not surprising to note that my dad’s mother, who he spent

most of his time with as a child, was very reserved, unemotional and held high expectations for him.

These considerations are significant for a number of reasons. For instance, I was not taught to value emotions, overt affection or vulnerability, and although I do not believe this was done intentionally, or even consciously, I do believe this prevented me from gaining an understanding of, and appreciation for my feelings. As a result of this, and many of the cultural norms that I previously discussed, the discrepancy between my presentation of self and my authentic inner reality continued to grow. I was unable to connect with my *felt sense* and often suppressed strong emotions during my youth and young adulthood out of an acute fear of disappointing my family or disrupting our relationship.

Peers. As a child, the majority of my peer relationships were with males. I began to make more female friends during my adolescent years despite not feeling as comfortable with most of them. Some of my discomfort may have resulted from the innate feeling that I was somehow different than the majority of other girls. However, this difference went beyond my ‘tomboy’ appearance and interest in male dominated activities. It eventually became clear that the attractions my female friends were having towards boys were similar to the attractions I was experiencing towards some of them. The nature of these feelings for individuals of my own gender that began to emerge was not shared with any of my peers, and left me feeling flawed and lonely.

It was around this time that I lost interest in many of the activities that I previously enjoyed, and began to avoid social interaction whenever possible. My self-esteem diminished and I started experiencing feelings of shame, grief and hopelessness.

My propensity to numb my shame and fear by withdrawing from my sexual attractions and potential intimate relationships did not allow me to even acknowledge the feelings I was experiencing, let alone explore them with others.

Although I am aware that the stigmatization of sexual orientations outside of the heterosexual norm still occurs, coming out to my friends allowed me to begin the process of integrating my sexual orientation into my identity in a meaningful way. This process is ongoing in nature and one that I continue to consider and adapt to as I encounter new situations and develop new relationships.

As Setterson (2015) poignantly highlights, “All of human nature’s deepest principles have social roots: Longing and belonging. Appreciation. Compassion. Mattering. Purpose. These and other central needs involve or are met by other people” (p. 223). Before I met other people with sexual orientations outside of the heterosexual norm, and experienced acceptance from loved ones, I was unable to fathom the possibility of fulfilling these needs as an openly gay female.

Here-and-now

In my relationships with persons I have found that it does not help, in the long run, to act as though I were something that I am not

(Rogers, 1961, p. 16).

Inner exploration. Throughout the past year I have ventured on a journey of self-reflection and inner exploration. Although inner work is no longer a new concept for me, it continues to involve a great deal of dedication and increased awareness. My practice with meditation, mindfulness, experiential writing and contemplation have all contributed to a deeper understanding of my experiences and a more fluid and flexible way of being

with others. As Cohen (2009) highlights, through the experience of inner work “Social reality becomes a construction rather than a fixed reality” (p. 182). I am able to reflect on and accept my experiences without them becoming fastened to my identity or the identity of others. This opens up the space for new possibilities and ways of understanding, which I believe is crucial in forming fruitful and fulfilling relationships.

Part of my inner work has been identifying what Cohen (2009) describes as one’s *inner opposition*, which is embedded within an individual and works to block the deeper needs and desires within them (p. 182). I have come to realize that I downplay both my commitment to others and my fear of being hurt by maintaining distance and withholding emotion. For instance, I know that deep down I have yearned to both fully know, and be fully known by my romantic partners. However, my tendency to withdraw or remain reserved and practical during highly emotional conversations has at times hindered our ability to connect on a deeper level. Alonzo (2005) explains that GLBT youth often learn to distrust their feelings and impulses, especially with respect to members of the same sex. This hesitance and relational uncertainty may then be carried into their adult relationships (p. 373).

I recognize that these reactions are deeply rooted mechanisms that have become part of my *character armor*⁹. Although these were once adaptive coping mechanisms, which allowed me to safely explore my sexuality and identity, they are no longer compatible with my current relational desire and longing for connection. Magid (2012) illustrates this state of protection and withdrawal in a striking manner:

⁹ The term character armor – coined by Wilhelm Reich – was described as “the defenses of the uptight against their feelings” (Reich, 2002, para 2)

We try to put up a shield between ourselves and life, thinking to protect ourselves from suffering. And these shields do work in their way, and perhaps at vulnerable time in our lives, we've felt we couldn't live without them. But ultimately they turn from being walls that protect to walls that imprison. One day we wake up and realize we've crawled into a glass bottle to hide and now we don't know how to get out (p. 45).

The more awareness I bring to this deeply entrenched pattern, the easier it becomes to recognize and adapt to it from one moment to the next.

Relationship exploration. Although I have been thoughtfully exploring and reflecting on the dynamics of my relationships intermittently since my early twenties, I believe I now have a greater understanding regarding the amount of dedication and work it takes to create new ways of interacting. This exploration is ongoing, and as I reflected in my journal, "...the thought that there is no end to the possibilities for growth is exciting and somehow reassuring. The potential for ongoing development through relationship and connection gives me hope and inspiration in both personal and professional realms" (Kleinfelder, reflection journal, October 4, 2016). I will be discussing some of my recent experiences with my partner to provide further insight into my interaction patterns and insecurities.

Over a period of approximately 6 months, my ex-partner and I were attending couple therapy with the aim of breaking through some of our dysfunctional patterns and further communication barriers. My preoccupation with our deep-rooted cycle prevented me from seeing the rupture that existed. It subsequently obstructed my recognition of how my reactions fueled the maladaptive cycle. Our therapist helped us take a step back

in order to create the space needed for us to see the patterns that we continued to play out. She also assisted us in externalizing our problem interactions, which allowed me to step outside of our usual circle of blame and into more of a united stance against these patterns.

My tendency to withdraw from and block conflict or emotionally fuelled expressions often gave my partner the message that I was indifferent about the issue, and ultimate progression of our relationship. However, this tendency was in fact much more complex. In recognizing this, and exploring the potential roots of my reactions, I was able to acknowledge the fear I had of not being loved and accepted for who I am, which stems from my early life experience with my identity formation and has become engrained in my personal pattern of responding to others.

I believe I have a greater understanding of some of my unconscious reactions and I am learning how to identify the ways that they work to perpetuate a separation from my core feelings. According to Goldman and Greenberg (as cited in Gurman, 2010), "...core maladaptive emotion schemes are at the center of the emotional wounds that are expressed in the problematic interactional cycles that couples present..." (p. 256). I am learning to accept and fulfill my needs in my relationships with others by first acknowledging the needs within me. With this awareness, I am better positioned to shift between perspectives and subsequently meet the needs of the other.

Chapter Four:

Shame – Grief – Depression

“These Days a Gap”

These days I contemplate a gap
a space where something used to be
but isn't anymore

These days I cry sometimes
when the rain whirls itself into my face

These days my mind is a feather
flirts with the softness of light
taunts the allure of a beckoning shade
and refuses to alight anywhere

These days I pray for a storm
that would outlast five storms
then blow itself into a clearing

These days I navigate a theory of self
in territories of intimate manoeuvres
careful to avoid crash-landings
unlit slippery alleys
mid-heart collisions
and slamming into mountains

These days whenever I fall
I just lie there

earth breath into me

the wind smiling

(Allen, 1999, p. 91).

This poem, and the poet's use of the term *gap*, resonates with much of my experiences and struggles with my mental health. A gap existed within me and it was often filled with sadness, shame, grief and depression (and out of it, sadness, shame, grief and depression manifested). This gap however was not in fact filled at all, but rather provided with the potential for growth. Ironically, the more this gap inside of me grew, the harder it was to recognize.

In this chapter I will discuss my earlier experiences related to my mental health as I struggled to understand and incorporate my identity in a heteronormative world. I will focus on three areas that I believe to be significant factors in my personal growth: shame, grief, and depression.

I will begin by exploring *shame*, and the effects this deep-seeded feeling had on my development and identity formation. Next I will consider *grief* – as a complex and uniquely personal process – and the ways in which it has existed and transformed over an extended period of my life, first as anticipatory grief and then as disenfranchised, nonfinite loss. With respect to my grieving process, I will be applying the theoretical foundations of grief and loss to my personal experience of 'coming out' to my family. Finally, I will examine my experience with *depression* and the ways in which it has manifested in my life.

Shame: The Soul Eating Emotion¹⁰

¹⁰ Jung (2009) was the first to refer to shame as a *soul eating emotion*.

According to Budden (2009) shame is “the quintessential social emotion underlying social threat, comprising a family of negative feelings ranging from mild embarrassment to severe humiliation. It is the painful self-consciousness of, or anxiety about, negative judgment, unwanted exposure, inferiority, failure, and defeat” (p. 1033). As previously mentioned, Graham (2016) emphasizes the profound impact shame can have on an individual’s sense of self and although shame is “somewhat inevitable in the human condition,” it can become toxic and quite literally cause the shutting-down of the nervous system; “numbing out, collapsing, ‘hiding’” (p. 14). For me, the shame I felt about the gender that I was attracted to overshadowed my ability for authenticity and eventually led to a complete incognizance of my needs, desires, and *felt sense*.

As a result of this, I spent most of my childhood and adolescence suppressing any thoughts, feelings, or desires related to sex and sexuality, and ultimately disconnecting from myself and others. Unfortunately, by doing so, the shame I experienced with respect to my sexual identity and attractions were merely cast down. As a result, these feelings of shame were left to grow and amplify under the surface, until I could no longer hold them inside anymore. However, before I was ready to truly acknowledge and explore my shame, it manifested in other ways, such as frustration, anger, sadness, and depression.

In a discussion about the potential toxicity that shame can have on one’s well-being and sense of self, Graham (2016) emphasizes the importance of human connection and modeling: “Human beings, especially young developing human beings, need other human beings for safety and protection, comfort and soothing, regulation and mirroring, and validation and valuing. Perceiving one’s self as disconnected, cut off, or exiled from the tribe triggers...threat...and withdrawal” (pp. 13-14). Though I was provided with

love and acceptance from my family and friends, it was my belief that this was contingent on my identification with their *tribe* – with respect to sexual orientation – as self-identified heterosexuals.

During my first year of university – when I was first exposed to people whose self-identifications were outside of the heterosexual norm – I was slowly able to consider the possibility of exploring some of the deep-rooted beliefs that I held about my attractions to the same sex and the shame it engendered. In order to elaborate on this experience and underline its complexity, it is important to discuss the grieving process that took place and highlight the degree to which it transformed the view I had of myself, as well as the way I situated myself in the world.

Grief: The Loss of an Idealized Self

Grief, as cited by Ferszt and Leveillee (2009), “...is a normal human experience, often with intense emotional pain, that commonly follows a significant loss...” (p. 12). The grieving process itself may involve a great deal of pain and heartache, however the unfolding of the process is complex and experienced differently from one person to the next.

Similar to the experience of grief, the events that precipitate grief and the way in which it manifests are complex and multifaceted. Although grief is commonly thought to follow a loss, the grieving process can also occur in anticipation of a future loss, which may or may not be recognized or acknowledged by society. In these circumstances, the grief may be termed *anticipatory* and/or *disenfranchised grief*. In order to provide a greater understanding of the meaning of these terms I will reflect upon my personal experiences with grief as it applies to the formation and acceptance of my sexual identity.

The potential loss of relationship with my family and friends, as well as the life I had once envisioned for myself is a form of anticipated loss. My tendency to suppress my thoughts and feelings regarding my same-sex attractions prevented me from acknowledging the anticipatory grief I was likely experiencing for a very long time. As Neimeyer et al. (2011) indicate, "...avoidant coping blocks any sharing of anticipatory grief..." (p. 292). When I made the decision to come out to my parents I did not think about what I wanted them to know about my experience thus far, such as my fears about the future and my sadness over the loss of how I pictured my life to be.

Anticipatory grief occurs in anticipation of a loss or expected loss and includes many of the same symptoms of grief that follows a loss (M. Stella, personal communication, July 2016). Although I experienced a much higher prevalence of anticipatory grief before 'coming out,' it continues to manifest periodically, especially during transitional periods of my life, such as moving to another city, meeting new people, entering new relationships and considering getting married and having children.

The type of grief that I experienced when coming out, as well as currently to some extent, may be best described as disenfranchised grief and nonfinite loss. According to Harris and Winokuer (2016), disenfranchised grief is often not socially accepted: "...an individual may have a significant reaction to a loss, but the loss and the grief are not validated socially" (p. 49). As a result of the loss going unrecognized or unsupported, it often becomes a nonfinite loss "...usually precipitated by a negative life event or episode that retains a physical and/or psychological presence (Bruce & Schultz, 2002, p. 9). The feelings of sadness that I continue to experience, often within relationships in my life, are nonfinite in nature, and may be more prevalent as a result of not coming to terms with

some aspects of my anticipated losses as well as the heterosexism that still exists within our society.

Due to the complexities involved when considering multiple forms of grief that coincide with one another, I will present two grief theories that I feel best support my experience. These include the dual process model and Neimeyer's constructivist framework, which focuses on meaning reconstruction and growth.

Dual-process model. The dual process model, proposed by Stroebe and Schut, describes the grief experience as an oscillation between "...active grief over the loss and its implications (loss orientation), and...everyday life and returning to the world of the living that distracts them from their grief (restoration orientation)" (Harris & Winokuer, 2016, p. 29). The dynamic and unstructured nature of this model not only fits well with my 'coming out' experience and my current grief experience in regards to my sexual orientation, it is also compatible with my earlier experiences of anticipatory grief and the overall development of my sexual identity.

I trained myself from a young age to suppress my thoughts and feelings regarding my same sex attractions and I became fixed in the restoration-orientation process. According to Harris and Winokuer (2016), "Individuals who display avoidant attachment patterns will tend to focus more on restoration orientation and will restrict their expressions of distress and avoid seeking support" (p. 29). My propensity to numb my shame and fear by withdrawing from my sexual attractions did not allow me to even acknowledge the grief I was experiencing, let alone work with it.

When I reflect on my experience of coming out to my parents, of who were and still are two of the most important people in my life, the dual process model resonates

with this experience for a number of reasons. First, it acknowledges the role of attachment in the grieving process not only specific to the death of a loved one but also less tangible, nonfinite losses as well (Neimeyer et al., 2011, p. 241). My attachment was multifaceted and encompassed both my attachment to the relationship I had with my parents as well as my attachment to the life I imagined to have as a heterosexual female.

Moreover, the dual process model appreciates the diverse and dynamic nature of grief as well as the unique individual responses to a loss. Coming out as an openly gay female, especially to my parents, provided me with some relief in that I was no longer having to hold on to this ‘secret’ and was able to embrace, to some extent, my authentic self moving forward. I believe this, along with the relationships I had formed with other sexual minority individuals, allowed me to move more fully into loss-orientation, as I was no longer denying this part of myself. I continue to oscillate between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation as I navigate through my life however I am no longer unconscious of this process and I rarely become frozen in one orientation for prolonged periods of time.

Constructivist framework. The meaning reconstruction approach encourages grieving individuals to find meaning in their lives following a loss and emphasizes “...the need to construct a reasonably coherent life story that renders troubling events comprehensible” (Neimeyer et al., 2011, p. 143). Similar to the dual process model, this approach allows for a great deal of flexibility and diversity in regards to how an individual chooses to approach their grief experience. As I reflect on my personal experience, I believe my tendency to suppress any feelings related to my sexual self

prevented me from even considering a sexual orientation outside of the heterosexual norm let alone integrating it into my self-narrative.

This approach also acknowledges the social constructs that influence the grieving process. As Burke, Neimeyer & McDevitt-Murphy (as cited in Neimeyer et al., 2011) state:

The constructivist model...takes into consideration the possibility that difficulties beyond the grieving individual can aggravate this process, as when the social world of the mourner is populated by critical, blaming, or intrusive other from whom the bereaved retreats in self protection (p. 144).

These are crucial aspects of disenfranchised grief in that the social reactions and potential stigmas associated with a loss can further complicate an individual's grieving process.

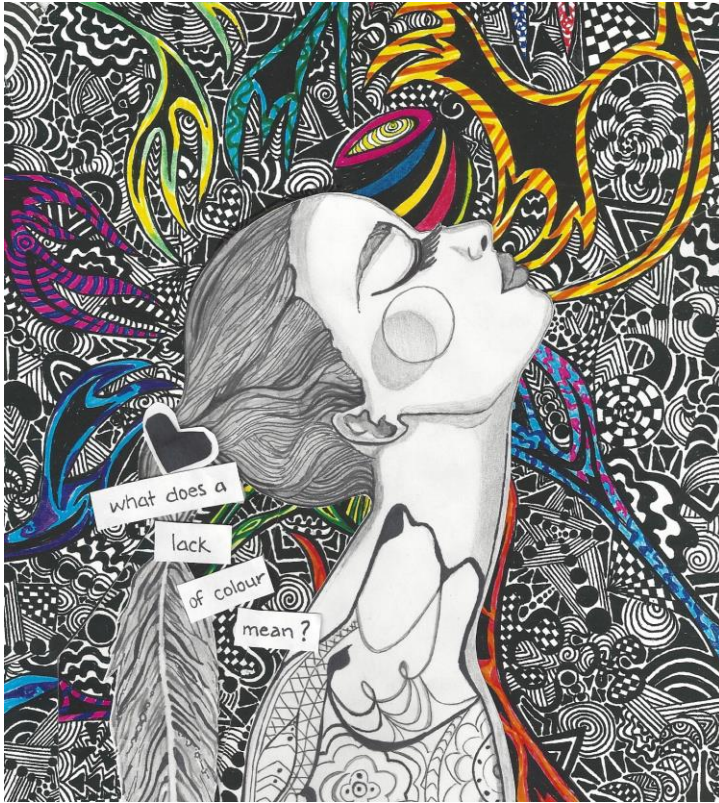
Although I am aware that the stigmatization of sexual orientations outside of the heterosexual norm still occurs, coming out to my family and friends allowed me to begin the process of integrating my sexual orientation into my identity in a meaningful way.

This process is ongoing in nature and one in which I continue to explore and adapt to as I encounter new situations and circumstances.

Depression: A Lack of Colour

Figure 1. Drawing as a creative outlet for the expression of emotion (Kleinfelder, 2017)¹¹.

¹¹ Since a young age drawing and art has been a creative outlet that has allowed me to express myself, and my feelings without having a full understanding of what they meant. It allowed for the purging and processing of emotions, feelings, and thoughts without the pressure or expectation of them.



According to Marshal et al. (2013), “Unipolar depression is the most prevalent mental health problem worldwide, the third leading contributor to global disease burden, and is responsible for 10 million ‘disability-adjusted life years’ lost annually in the United States and other high-income countries (p. 1243). It is essential that more research be done to distinguish which individuals and populations are at greatest risk for depression, especially considering the tremendous burden it has on public health.

Although there are a number of vulnerable populations that are deemed to be at an increased risk for depression, for the purposes of this paper, sexual minority individuals alone will be considered.

In an article discussing the prevalence of mental health problems in sexual minority youth, Russell and Fish (2016) emphasize the elevated rates of depression among LGB persons specifically, as compared to the general population: nearly 18% of

lesbian and gay youth met criteria for major depression, with 8.2% as the national rate for youth (p. 469). Similarly, Marshal et al. (2013) assert that the homophobic biases and prejudices – “harbored by the dominant heterosexual culture” – that sexual minority individuals are exposed to heighten the risk of “...multiple stress-related conditions and behaviors, including mental health problems such as depression and suicidality” (p. 1244). Such findings draw attention to the need for further awareness and advocacy on behalf of sexual minority populations, especially during childhood and adolescence when many of these identity related questions are being considered and explored.

I recall my childhood fondly, filled with happiness and joy. Despite some academic and speech related challenges at school, I was an active child with many good friends. It was not until I entered middle school at 14 or 15 years of age that I began experiencing a great deal of sadness, loss and hopelessness in my life. I became quite depressed and shortly after my long-time family doctor insisted, without a referral to a psychiatrist, that I had Major Depressive Disorder and prescribed antidepressant medication for me. Although this seemed to help initially, the negative side effects and stigma attached to taking antidepressants resulted in my desire to discontinue this medication. From what I recall, my doctor advised against this decision but informed me to gradually discontinue. Within two weeks of no medication I returned to a state of despondence and overwhelming unhappiness as well as a multitude of other symptoms. I went back to see my doctor at which time he re-prescribed me with a different antidepressant.

This cycle continued for many years before I was able to educate myself regarding the risks of antidepressant discontinuation syndrome as well as its resemblance

to an impending shift back into depression. As it turns out, my feelings of loss, sadness and disconnect at that time in my life were more realistically a normal response to the internal struggle that was occurring for me as I developed an acceptance of myself as a sexual minority individual within a heteronormative society.

The struggles I have encountered with my mental health have contributed to my desire to reach a greater understanding of how we, as counsellors, therapists, and mental health practitioners alike, can best work with sexual minority individuals and those struggling with the formation of their sexuality and gender identity.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

My purpose for writing an autoethnography was not only to gain insight into the ways in which my experiences have shaped my worldview, but also to increase my understanding and compassion for the experiences and struggles of others. I am confident that my self-exploration and reflection will contribute to my personal growth, strengthen my process ethics and expand my abilities as a future professional in the field of counselling.

Counselling Implications

As counsellors it is our ethical duty to promote social justice and the well-being of the community. In order to do so, we must first and foremost have an understanding of our biases and preconceived notions, especially with respect to the struggles of individuals and groups of people that have been and continue to be discriminated against and marginalized in society. In order to do so, a certain level of inner work and self-reflexivity is essential as we continue to navigate the therapeutic work we are doing with others.

Self-reflexivity. Our beliefs and past experiences shape the way we approach, interact with, and regard one another, whether we are conscious of this or not. It may be argued that the deep-rooted beliefs we hold, or automatic thoughts we have about certain populations or groups of people can be consciously 'hidden' and therefore not manifested outwardly as long as one is aware of these beliefs. I would reason however that a mere awareness of such beliefs, rooted in inequality, is not enough to prevent biased expression towards them. To go further, I would suggest that even the individual most

diligent in concealing such views would, in the very least, be received as unauthentic or insincere. What is required is a willingness to explore the roots of these beliefs, examine them critically, and imagine what it would be like to live a life in another's shoes.

I do not intend to suggest that we need to prevent ourselves from having judgments, but rather encourage an exploration of our judgments to ensure they do not inhibit us from working with the client in an open and compassionate manner. Cohen and Bai (2008) highlight the importance of personal reflection and inner work in awakening our ability for compassion:

It is too easily assumed that counsellors just have it, which of course, is not the case. True: we all have the *capacity* for compassion. But the actual *ability* to generously practice or exercise compassion is underdeveloped and limited in most of us, notwithstanding the training that professional counsellors receive. We take the position that these human qualities cannot be trained for, unless we include inner work...that facilitates the emergence of the wholeness of the person (p. 50).

This process is dynamic and ongoing. The ways in which we view and perceive the outside world and the people we interact with are constantly changing and evolving from one context to the next. It is our ethical duty to become informed of the struggles and misconceptions experienced by minority groups and the impacts that discrimination may have on their lives. This is important in order to establish a therapeutic alliance and begin to uncover and transform the fictions and myths held either by the individual themselves and/or the larger society.

Building a safe haven. It is important to remember that all individuals are unique, and to merely define them by the labels they identify with would be detrimental

to their growth and the therapeutic alliance itself. Arthur and Collins (2010) stress that, “There is no lockstep pattern of identity development, nor is there a clear final destination that applies equally well to all” (p. 387). It is nonetheless essential for counsellors to have an awareness of some basic principles related to sexual-minority individuals. As a result of the research I have done along with my personal experiences with the formation of my sexual identity, there are certain factors that I believe to be essential in the development of a gay-affirmative working alliance.

First, it is important that an inclusive environment is established in which sexual-minorities are both “visible and affirmed” (Arthur & Collins, 2010, p. 387). This can be done in the physical space itself with gay-affirmative images and referral information and in the use of inclusive language when working with clients. In addition to being cognizant to not use language that affirms heterosexist norms, it is important to take an active stance in countering oppression as well as allowing each individual to self-identify in any way that they choose. As Binik and Hall (2014) stress, “our current constructs must be thought of as working models, not ‘reality’” (p. 314). In other words, do not make the assumption that an individual’s sexual or gender identity is fixed or that we can fully understand the meaning one derives from it.

Although it is essential to support individuals in their coming-out process – whether this is to themselves or others – it must be done at their own pace. We must also not assume, as counsellors, that we know what is in the best interest of the client. As Arthur and Collins (2010) highlight, “In a world where there are real risks to disclosure, personal identity integration may occur without coming out in all areas of one’s life” (p.

388). Our role is not to make these decisions for the clients but rather help them explore their options and develop effective ways of coping with the choices they make.

Similarly, it is important to remember that not all sexual minority clients have experienced struggles related to the formation of their identity. Although it is crucial that we, as a society, recognize and name the marginalization, oppression, and additional stressors that sexual minority individuals often face, it cannot be assumed that all persons have experienced, or are impacted by, psychological or emotional distress as a result. With this in mind, client themselves can be encouraged to take the lead (Neimeyer, 2011, p. 257) on the issues or concerns they believe to be relevant to their experience.

Finally, it is vital that counsellors take action to separate the individual and their identity from the stereotypes that exist. In order to do so, we must first identify and challenge the often “negative and dehumanizing” myths and stereotypes about sexual minority people (Neimeyer, 2011, p. 257) and foster a safe place for individuals to begin, and/or continue developing self-acceptance and empowerment. Arthur and Collins (2010) speak to the importance of highlighting the strengths and resiliencies inherent in sexual minority populations:

The experience of confronting homophobia and actively defining one’s sexuality often leads to the development of many strengths that can be capitalized on to face the other life challenges: self-awareness, personal insight, strong sense of personal identity, authenticity, empowerment, resiliency, resourcefulness, and so on (p. 383).

Regardless of the way in which an individual identifies, they will bring a variety of strengths, resources and needs to the counselling process, making each therapeutic encounter unique and meaningful in and of itself.

“Outing” my Approach

Speech may be free but the means of making one’s self heard and having one’s position given credence are not equally available to all

(Coates & Wade, 2007, p. 511).

Given the myriad of theories and perspectives that exist in therapy, and the dynamic nature of one’s emerging personal approach, it is difficult to provide an all-encompassing illustration of what has been most inspirational for me thus far. However, for the purposes of this paper I will discuss the aspects of both narrative therapy and queer theory with respect to the significance I believe they hold in working with sexual minority individuals and groups.

Narrative therapy. I am drawn to narrative therapy for a number of its core assumptions that resonate with my personal experiences and inform the way I hope to position myself as a future therapist. Narrative therapy incorporates collaboration, reflection, and both/and conversations, which I believe are crucial aspects of personal growth.

The focus and attention that Narrative therapy places on the power of language is also significant considering the impacts that language and various forms of labeling can have on marginalized populations. As Rosen and Lang (2005) contend, “The meaning of a word does not exist in the word itself, but in the relationship between the word and the context of its location” (p. 161). As previously cited, *The Dictionary of Homophobia: A*

Global History of Gay and Lesbian Experience (Tin, 2008) illustrates that sexual minority individuals have been regarded in such language as *pigs and dogs, gravediggers of humanity*, and homosexuality pronounced a *perversion*.

Individuals exposed to such language will use these descriptions to understand their experiences and often internalize the dysfunction that these labels impart: “They will tend to select out experiences in their lives that fit into this constructed story of dysfunction” (Rosen & Lang, 2005, p. 161). On a personal level, my increased understanding of language use and increased ability to externalize has been integral to my identity formation and growth, especially as a sexual minority struggling with internalized homophobia. Narrative therapy incorporates an awareness and sensitivity to the idea that, “Language has the power to either liberate or marginalize” (p. 161).

Another fundamental aspect of narrative therapy is its attention to and concern for sociopolitical context. Dickerson and Crocket emphasize the importance of “understanding that problems are produced through clients’ positioning in wider cultural stories or discourses” (as cited in Gurman, 2010, p. 155). The consideration of language is central to this stance and therapists need to be cognizant of the words they use to ensure they are not replicating the oppressive conditions that the clients may already be encountering outside of therapy. As Rosen and Lang (2005) highlight, “narrative therapists believe that as the social (and dialogic) landscapes shift, alternative understandings, perceptions, and ways of relating become possible” (p. 162). Once a therapist has an understanding of the meaning individuals have attached to their experiences, he or she can use words thoughtfully in order to help clients’ explore alternative and more fluid meanings and stories.

This is not to take away from the inherent wisdom and agency that is found in an individual's story and the meanings they already possess. The exploration of one's personal narrative allows for the opening of possibilities – moving beyond our potentially limited views and finding new ways of understanding.

Queer theory. There are many assumptions of Queer theory that I find extremely powerful, and relevant to my ethical stance and way of thinking, especially considering my lived experiences. Similar to the assumptions found in Narrative therapy, Queer theory also highlights the social construction of language and the influence it has on what society deems to be *normal*. Rudy (2000) posits that, “Being queer is not a matter of being gay, then, but rather of being committed to challenging that which is perceived as normal” (p. 197). For me, the intention behind this stance is not one of a limiting nature but rather a recognition of the impact that language and societal norms can have on our understanding of the world and our experiences within it.

It is extremely important that we do not generalize the experiences of an individual based on a single facet of their sexuality or gender identity, however there are certain overarching premises that should be held when working with sexual minority individuals within a heteronormative society. For instance, specific to sex and gender variance, “gender atypical people...consider themselves in need of civil rights, not mental health interventions,” and “...LGBTQ people do not suffer psychological distress because they are variant but rather because society can't handle their variance” (Nichols, 2014, p. 314).

Queer Theory “...invites fluidity, which is movement from the fixed and certain to the confused and unstable, a privileging of flow and mutability, a refusal to be stable or

static, and an ability to morph” (Reynolds, 2014b, p. 136). These underlying premises highlight the importance of remaining open and adaptable with respect to the beliefs we have and hold to be true. It is inevitable and even beneficial to familiarize oneself with the generalities of certain groups and cultures, but it is also crucial to remain receptive to the individuality and uniqueness of each person we encounter. This concept encompasses a large realm of my ethical stance in and of itself.

From Stigma to Esteem

Self-awareness may cause some temporary discomfort, or even pain, but it is only when you become fully aware of yourself that you can also become aware of the powerful forces of self-regulation operating within you (Bankart, 2007).

My personal experiences and struggles have fostered my belief in the positive aspects of change and given me a greater understanding of individual struggles and the social inequalities that exist in our society. The formation of my identity and my ethical stance have been shaped by these experiences and have contributed to a desire to help change the actual conditions of people’s lives (Reynolds, 2014a) as opposed to merely helping them adapt to the oppression and discrimination that exists. My increased ability to begin recognizing and working with my own inner states and sub-identities will essentially allow me help others do the same.

I believe that a commitment to inner work and personal growth allows us to encounter and collaborate with others without preconceived notions or judgments, and thus open up the space that is required for love, understanding and compassion. This

stance will inform both personal and professional relationships, and hopefully act as a model for others to strengthen their connections to both self and others.

As Foulkes (as cited in Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), a British pioneer therapist highlights, we are all here together facing the problems and realities of human existence: “I am one of you, not more and not less” (p. 217). As therapists we can open up the space for sexual-minority individuals to begin a journey of self-exploration and integration, as they feel comfortable and safe to do so.

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