Emotional Intimacy and Power in Queer Romantic Relationships: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract

Queer couples navigate complex intersections of intimacy, power, and sociocultural context, yet systemic models in marriage and family therapy have historically reflected heteronormative assumptions. This study addressed the need for culturally attuned frameworks that honor relational diversity by exploring how queer couples define and experience emotional intimacy and power. Guided by socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT), this phenomenological study examined how twelve queer couples in relationships of three years or longer constructed equity, connection, and relational responsibility within broader social contexts. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, with trustworthiness supported through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking. Findings revealed three dimensions of queer relational experience: *sharedness* and *turning inward and toward*, reflecting intimacy through patience, curiosity, and self-awareness; *mutual trust* and *(re)defining power dynamics*, illustrating power as fluid and collaborative; and *acknowledge, accept, and accommodate*, describing how partners navigated contextual influences, including finances, health, and neurodivergence, to sustain equity. These results support SCAFT's focus on relational ethics and contextual awareness, suggesting that equity and attunement are co-created through shared vulnerability, repair, and responsiveness. Therapists are encouraged to adopt socioculturally attuned and neuroaffirming practices that strengthen emotional safety, relational flexibility, and shared influence. Future research should expand to include more racially and geographically diverse samples, explore nonverbal communication, and examine the impact of a lack of relational scripts. This study contributes to advancing culturally responsive and relationally just frameworks in marriage and family therapy theory, research, and practice that reflect queer couples' relational experiences.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The marriage and family therapy (MFT) field seeks to understand the couple life cycle and a system's ability to adapt to change throughout it. A couple's ability to withstand stress, respond to change, and enhance health and well-being depends on having a power balance (Knudson-Martin, 2020). When power is unequal, the emotional connection is compromised, and the couple may struggle to respond positively to conflict, life stresses, and changes (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). Couples who engage in reflection on gender roles, power, and privilege can enhance their relational awareness through recognizing how societal and cultural norms shape their behaviors, expectations, and communication patterns. By critically examining these dynamics, couples are better equipped to identify and challenge imbalances, foster mutual understanding, and co-create more intentional and equitable relational practices. Such reflection can deepen emotional intimacy, promote collaborative decision-making, and strengthen overall relationship satisfaction (Platt & Bolland, 2018). Contextual and societal processes surrounding the couple influence areas of privilege, marginalization, and inequities (Arıcı-Şahi & Knudson-Martin, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to understand both the relational and broader processes when conceptualizing second- and third-order change in therapy.

Oppression and discrimination can strain relationships and limit coping strategies (McDowell et al., 2022). For example, a person with less power can have difficulty being vulnerable or responsive and instead react during conflict (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Emotional separation and disengagement during conflict can also lead to distress (Callaci et al., 2021), thus decreasing emotional intimacy and making it challenging to respond with attunement. Emotional intimacy and attunement issues can perpetuate individual emotional

health issues (McDowell et al., 2022) and lower a sense of individual empowerment (Jenks et al., 2024).

On the other hand, relational discourses that emphasize emotional support, care, and responsiveness can increase emotional intimacy (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Mutually supportive and emotionally attuned relationships increase oxytocin and one's ability to respond reflectively to stressful situations (McDowell et al., 2022). Emotional support can be fostered through collective resistance to societal stressors (Coppola et al., 2021) and cultivating a sense of "*we-ness*" to promote relational resilience (Salo et al., 2022).

Socioculturally attuned family therapy applies an intersectional lens to understand how diverse identities across race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, age, and abilities intersect within systems of power, privilege, and oppression and influence relational experiences (Almeida & Tubbs, 2020). Therapy that is sensitive to the impact of marginalized identities should be a top priority for family therapy to be effective (Piercy, 2020) since we cannot be neutral when working with the "relational consequences of inequity" (Piercy, 2020, p. 756). Even though there is greater societal visibility of queer couples, much of the current research using socioculturally attuned practices to understand power dynamics has focused on the impact of gender in heterosexual couples (e.g., Knudson-Martin, 2023).

Researchers have acknowledged the need to investigate the role of intimacy within queer romantic relationships, rather than solely heterosexual relationships (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017; Šević et al., 2016). There has been a drive in the social sciences to gather dyadic research with sexually diverse couples, particularly recommending a holistic perspective on queer relationships to recognize and value emotional intimacy (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Hartwell et al., 2017). Therefore, researchers advise a shift to a dyadic framework when inquiring about the

interpersonal, institutional, and cultural sources of stress that affect queer relationships, to create effective interventions that promote relational well-being (e.g., Rostosky & Riggle, 2017). Continued research that strives to understand the associations between emotional intimacy and power dynamics in queer couples is key to expanding the theoretical frameworks in MFT for treating diverse couples (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021).

The term queer is used as an inclusive umbrella term to describe a broad spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities that go beyond mainstream norms (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). It is now recognized as a respectful way to capture diverse gender and sexual identities (La Trobe University, 2023). It is inclusive of individuals who do not identify as exclusively straight or who have gender-expansive identities as opposed to traditional categories (National Institute of Health, 2024). The term *queer* has been reclaimed by many in the LGBTQIA+ community and has become a common way to represent the full range of identities within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum since the early 2000s (La Trobe University, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was relational power imbalances in queer couples, particularly how power dynamics intersect with emotional intimacy within romantic relationships. Power inequities can create and intensify relational strain by limiting coping strategies and constraining one partner's ability to influence relational decisions (McDowell et al., 2022). When one partner holds greater relational power, their interests and experiences may disproportionately shape the relationship, while the less powerful partner may accommodate their partner's needs and receive less emotional support (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023; Jenks et al., 2024). Over time, these patterns can undermine mutuality and emotional intimacy, reducing emotional safety and connection. Such dynamics not only affect couples' lived experiences but

also pose challenges for clinicians, who may inadvertently overlook or reinforce power imbalances without a framework attuned to queer relationships.

Although research suggests that mutuality is associated with greater relationship satisfaction, therapists may unintentionally miss or reinforce power inequities when working without empirically grounded models for addressing relational power in queer couples (Leonhardt et al., 2020). In the absence of such models, clinicians may rely on dominant cultural discourse that obscures systemic influences on power, increasing the risk of bias and limiting treatment effectiveness (Pentel et al., 2021; Scheinkman, 2019). Without an affirming and socioculturally responsive framework, therapeutic interventions may fail to address how marginalization, oppression, and inequities shape relational processes. Integrating third-order thinking allows clinicians to connect societal contexts to couple dynamics and identify pathways for relational change (Arıcı-Şahi & Knudson-Martin, 2024; McDowell et al., 2022).

Despite growing attention to relational power, researchers have not sufficiently examined the mechanisms linking power, emotional intimacy, and sexual minority identity or how power operates across gendered and cultural contexts in diverse couples (Frost & Meyer, 2023; McDowell et al., 2022). Addressing these gaps can deepen understanding of queer couples' relational experiences and inform clinical practices that promote power sharing, emotional safety, and secure attachment bonds (Jenks et al., 2024; Knudson-Martin et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand experiences around relational power dynamics and emotional intimacy in queer couples. The study sought to incorporate dyadic research to capture couples' experiences of power dynamics and emotional

intimacy factors, including attunement, support, engagement, responsiveness, and emotional expression.

I recruited 12 queer couples in committed romantic relationships of three years or more through counseling sites, queer-friendly community spaces, social media sites, and online boards. The recruitment sites were intentionally chosen to recruit a diverse sample, encompassing various racial, ethnic, religious, health, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. Dyadic interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, with both partners at the same time. The interviews focused on how couples defined and perceived emotional intimacy-related factors, such as support, engagement, responsiveness, expression, and closeness in their romantic relationships (Hudson & Fraley, 2017). The research inquired into how queer couples perceive, respond to, and experience relational power to understand how power and emotional intimacy are connected.

Through sampling queer couples and utilizing interviews, I explored the sociocultural context and lived experiences of diverse couples. This research intended to inform MFT theories and treatment models by broadening the scope of knowledge about stressors and strengths in queer couples and their interpersonal dynamics – with an emphasis on power (McDowell et al., 2022). Thematic analysis allowed me to interpret the data and expand on socioculturally attuned family therapy in diverse relationships.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

I utilized socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT; Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). SCAFT emphasizes equity and social justice as the core of clinical practice by recognizing how power can impact emotional safety and engagement in romantic relationships (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). This theory focuses on the positive impact of meeting your partner's emotional

needs, upholding relational values and commitments, and engaging in power-sharing within the relationship to transform and strengthen emotional bonds (McDowell et al., 2022).

Knudson-Martin et al. (2019) emphasize that SCAFT can be integrated into other theoretical frameworks and models to enhance the sociocultural lens of clients and research participants. SCAFT is an interdisciplinary, transtheoretical framework that incorporates the impact of societal systems and power dynamics into family therapy (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). SCAFT incorporates several systemic and critical theoretical frameworks, including attachment theory (Bowlby, 1952), Bateson's learning levels (Bateson, 1972), feminist theory (Hare-Mustin, 1978), critical social theory (McDowell, 2015), and polyvagal theory (Porges, 2009). Critical therapy models, such as the Cultural Context model, Socio-Emotional Relational Therapy, and Just Therapy, already align with SCAFT's theoretical assumptions and concepts (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021).

SCAFT also focuses on the intersections of societal context, culture, and power and how responsiveness to these factors can transform the ways we relate to each other and the larger society (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019), leading to third-order change. SCAFT takes a critical stance regarding cultural context, specifically in relation to power, safety, social interactions, and access to meeting basic needs. It emphasizes the need to name these factors so marginalized individuals, such as queer couples, can negotiate their needs and pursue life changes. Thus, the study integrated a research question specific to the influence of the couple's cultural context.

The guidelines underlying SCAFT informed the research study through an emphasis on attuning to context and power, naming injustice, self-reflexivity, holding a meta-perspective of self-within-society to understand the impact of social locations and experiences on our views of the world, and interrupting inequitable power processes (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019). Since

power inequities can impact emotional safety through reactivity rather than emotional attunement, SCAFT aims to develop relational connections that foster equitable support in couples in the face of life's stressors so that couples can engage in transformative action (McDowell et al., 2022).

Researchers continue to emphasize the need to investigate factors influencing power dynamics in diverse couples to better understand sociocultural experiences (D'Arrigo-Patrick et al., 2020; Jenks et al., 2024). Through utilizing SCAFT's framework, I sought to understand how societal systems and power dynamics can create both barriers to intimacy, such as stress and emotional reactivity, and foster emotional intimacy, including relational responsibility, engagement, responsiveness, and vulnerability, in queer couples.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

I utilized a qualitative study to explore queer couples' experiences and responses to power dynamics and emotional intimacy. The research design employed a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the contextualized complexity of lived experiences and relationship experiences through the participants' worldviews (Willis, 2012). A criterion-based purposive selection process was used to recruit queer couples. The inclusion criteria were couples in queer relationships who were over 18 years old and considered themselves committed for at least 3 years (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). My target sample size was 12 couples using an average of suggested sample sizes (Copolla et al., 2021; Mertens, 2020). Additional couples would have been recruited if necessary, but saturation was reached with 12 couples (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Glaser et al., 2017).

For initial recruitment, flyers were posted at counseling sites, queer-friendly community spaces, social media sites, and online boards representing Black, Latinx, Asian, and American

Indian Pride communities to intentionally recruit a diverse sample. Initial participants were asked to refer other couples using snowball sampling (Mertens, 2020). All couples received a $20 gift card ($10 for each participant) as an incentive for their participation.

The study used a semi-structured dyadic interview for data collection (Keller et al., 2014). Rostosky and Riggle (2017) emphasized the need for a dyadic framework to explore the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural factors affecting queer couples, aiming to create effective interventions that promote their well-being. I interviewed partners together to observe how they responded to and created meaning with each other (Knudson-Martin, 2009; Reynolds & Knudson-Martin, 2015). This allowed me to capture more couple experiences with fewer interviews. Interviews were completed and recorded on Zoom. I took notes during interviews (McCoy, 2017) and completed a research journal entry with descriptive and reflective information after each interview. The 60-minute semi-structured interview followed an interview guide that included relevant questions from the Contemporary Couples Study Interview Guide, which was used in research for SCAFT (Knudson-Martin, 2009).

I reviewed interviews and research journal entries to identify initial themes, using thematic analysis to code, categorize, and interpret the interview transcripts and research journal entries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; S. P. M. Miller, 2023). This process guided my member checking of email intended for clarification, feedback on initial themes and interpretations, and verification of data saturation (Barbour, 2014). I then continued the analysis process, utilizing the participants' feedback to find patterns of meaning within the larger dataset until final themes and subthemes were identified.

Research Questions

RQ1

How do queer couples define and perceive emotional intimacy factors in their romantic relationship?

RQ2

How do queer couples perceive, respond to, and experience power in their romantic relationship?

RQ3

How do queer couples perceive the influence of contextual and societal processes on power dynamics in their romantic relationship?

Significance of the Study

The study contributed to MFT theories and treatment models by considering power dynamics and intimacy-related factors in queer couples. This topic is important to explore to effectively understand and treat diverse couples (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021) and increase therapists' ability to work through a culturally sensitive and competent lens (Scheinkman, 2019). Research can uncover how queer couples identify mutual support through shared relational responsibility and influence, mutual vulnerability and attunement, and shared influence (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). Researchers can then understand the influences of interpersonal and institutional power dynamics in the couple to understand the influence of power in and out of therapy. With this knowledge, therapists will be better equipped in their assessment and intervention regarding relational dynamics (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Increased therapist competence and confidence lead to more trusting and confident clients entering couples therapy (Pentel et al., 2021).

Definitions of Key Terms

Emotion

Emotion is the bridge between the societal and individual body. It is a window into sociocultural emotion and felt identities (Knudson-Martin, 2023). The ability to be attuned to your partner's emotional experience is an indicator of the balance of power (Knudson-Martin, 2024).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to how multiple, overlapping identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, interact with systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Galupo et al., 2015; Grzanka et al., 2017). It provides a social justice framework for understanding how these intersections shape individual and relational experiences across personal, institutional, and societal levels.

Intimacy

Emotional intimacy is the experience of connection, closeness, and belonging that emerges through shared activities, values, and relational processes. It involves feeling known, accepted, and supported, and can be shaped by cultural context and communication patterns (Kamali et al., 2020; Scheinkman, 2019). Emotional intimacy is closely linked to relationship satisfaction, stability, and overall relational health (Haas & Lannutti, 2022).

Power

Power is relational and flows between people. It is often experienced as being known, feeling felt, and being viewed as credible (Knudson-Martin, 2023). Those with power can influence their world and contribute to shared meaning.

Summary

The study examined relational power imbalances and emotional intimacy in queer couples. Rooted in the marriage and family therapy (MFT) field and guided by the

socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT) framework, the study acknowledges the role of societal systems, cultural norms, and intersectional identities in shaping relational experiences. Power imbalances can undermine emotional safety, disrupt conflict resolution, and limit emotional connection, particularly within marginalized relationships. Addressing a gap in dyadic research on queer couples, this qualitative phenomenological study explored how partners define and experience emotional intimacy, negotiate relational power, and navigate contextual stressors. Using dyadic interviews with queer couples in committed relationships of three years or more, the study deepened understanding of how partners co-create connection and influence within broader sociocultural contexts. Research journal entries and member checking increased confirmability and assisted with the thematic analysis process.

Findings from this study have implications for culturally responsive therapeutic models that promote equity, mutual responsiveness, and relational resilience in queer relationships. To situate the study within existing scholarship, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on emotional intimacy, relational power, and sociocultural context in couple relationships, with particular attention to systemic, attachment-based, and justice-oriented frameworks relevant to queer couples.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study examined the intersection of power dynamics and emotional intimacy within queer romantic relationships. The following chapter introduces Socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT; McDowell et al., 2022) as the guiding theoretical framework. A review of current literature on emotional intimacy will follow, including key influencing factors such as attachment, differentiation of self, gender socialization, and neurobiology. The concept of power is explored in depth throughout the literature review, along with the role of power in relationships and the variables that shape the expression of power in relationships. Relational ethics is then discussed in connection with SCAFT, providing a lens through which power and intimacy are understood. Additionally, literature is presented that captures the role of power and emotional intimacy specifically within queer relationships. The chapter concludes by examining existing research on queer relationships, ultimately identifying gaps in the literature and areas for further inquiry.

Literature Search Process

The following search terms were utilized independently as well as in combination with one another for the search on relevant literature: *same sex, same gender, qualitative analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, thematic analysis, qualitative, LGBTQ, gay, lesbian, queer, sexual minority, attachment, relationships, couples, power, intimacy, emotional intimacy, closeness, security, support, attunement, socioculturally attuned family therapy, Socioemotional Relationship Therapy, minority stress, relational power, relational ethics, and relational empowerment*. I changed *power* to *relational power* due to continuing to find a focus on power analysis and power in other science fields. I utilized Research Gate, ProQuest Central, EBSCOhost, EBSCO Theses and Dissertations, and PubMed. The literature review is focused on

research published between January 2019 and March 2025. It will also review primary literature on the development of this study's underlying theoretical framework, socioculturally attuned family therapy (McDowell et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT) as the theoretical framework (McDowell, 2015). SCAFT was well-suited for a study on power and emotional intimacy in queer relationships because it centers the impact of structural inequalities on relational processes and encourages a nuanced exploration of how individuals negotiate closeness, vulnerability, and agency within their social contexts. This framework is particularly well-suited to queer couples, as it fosters a deeper understanding of how the intersectionality of identities and social inequalities shapes their experiences of closeness, vulnerability, and agency, key elements that influence the dynamics of emotional intimacy. SCAFT can specifically provide a rich lens for analyzing how power and emotional connection are co-constructed in marginalized relational spaces by emphasizing both systemic and interpersonal dynamics. For queer individuals, power within relationships may be experienced and understood in unique ways due to their position within a marginalized community.

Minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995) was considered for this study's theoretical framework. This theory conceptualizes minority stress to surpass typical levels in a community due to one or more marginalized social identities (Coppola et al., 2021). Ethnic minorities are more likely to be impacted by racism and economic disadvantages due to systemic and institutional oppression, and exposure to violence, leading to minority stress (Baucom et al., 2019). While research has focused on how couples have coped with minority stress, the theory primarily focuses on individual-level psychological outcomes. Minority stress theory is limited

in its intersectional framework. It tends to see marginalized identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, as discrete variables rather than considering how these identities interact to compound stress experiences. SCAFT, on the other hand, emphasizes understanding how societal power structures like race, gender, class, and sexual orientation impact relationship interactions and dynamics using a systemic lens. SCAFT is a dynamic, critical approach that draws from feminist and critical multicultural perspectives (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). It applies an intersectional lens that recognizes how multiple identities interact within systems of power, privilege, social hierarchies, and oppression to influence personal and relational experiences. Queer identities in therapeutic contexts benefit from a critical feminist approach because it challenges traditional, heteronormative frameworks and creates space for understanding how gender, sexuality, and power dynamics intersect within personal and relational experiences. SCAFT is grounded in this approach and encourages therapists to explore the complexities of queer identities through an intersectional lens. SCAFT is also able to address the need for therapists to actively consider and incorporate the broader social and cultural contexts of their clients' lives, particularly regarding power dynamics and systemic inequalities (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019). The theoretical framework aims to promote more equitable and socially responsible therapeutic practices by going beyond cultural sensitivity.

Sociocultural Attunement

Sociocultural attunement is a central principle of socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT; McDowell et al., 2022). Sociocultural attunement emerged in response to the limitations of traditional cultural competence models, shifting the therapeutic focus from acquiring knowledge about differences and instead toward relational engagement with clients' lived experiences within systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Knudson-Martin et al.,

2020). The principle of sociocultural attunement emphasizes the therapist's active engagement with the cultural, historical, and social contexts that shape clients' experiences. Attunement involves being with clients while emotionally connecting with their lived experiences (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019) and being responsive to unique experiences with openness and sensitivity (Boe & Baldwin, 2023). Sociocultural refers to the interconnections of societal systems, culture, and power. Sociocultural attunement requires the therapist to understand the client's connection to larger systems within which clients are embedded (Bermudez et al., 2024). Sociocultural attunement is conceptualized as an ongoing, relational process in which therapists attend to how cultural context, societal power, and relational dynamics are interconnected, rather than treating culture as a static attribute or checklist of competencies (Knudson-Martin et al., 2020).

SCAFT instead developed guidelines for support in delivering socioculturally attuned family therapy. The guidelines are outlined using the acronym ANVIET:(1) Attune to context and power; (2) Name injustice; (3) Value what is minimized; (4) Intervene in power dynamics; (5) Envision just alternatives; and (6) Transform to make the imagined a reality (McDowell et al., 2017). These serve as mechanisms for systemic therapists to disrupt social inequities, open possibilities, and promote third-order change. Sociocultural attunement may be integrated into family and couples therapy, specifically with queer couples, by instilling social context and power disparities into existing family and couple interventions and strategies (McDowell et al., 2017). This approach to therapist attunement is designed to model mutual attunement within the couple system, a concept that will be further explored in the context of emotional intimacy and mutuality.

Transtheoretical Guidelines

The six transtheoretical guidelines reflect an ethical commitment to equity, asserting that therapists are responsible for recognizing how dominant cultural norms are embedded within clinical models and for actively intervening in relational power processes that reproduce societal inequities (Knudson-Martin et al., 2020). These guidelines serve as a foundation for fostering equity, relational healing, and systemic change within therapeutic practice (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019). According to the transtheoretical guidelines, to attune to context and power, therapists can explore the shifting power dynamics in clients' lives, recognizing how these dynamics fluctuate across relational, cultural, and institutional settings. In doing so, they can support clients in identifying and naming unjust experiences that are often overlooked, normalized, or minimized in daily life. Furthermore, therapists are encouraged to affirm skills and practices outside dominant cultural norms to guide clients towards reclaiming self-worth in the face of societal oppression. SCAFT emphasizes addressing power imbalances, including gender dynamics and romantic relationships, to disrupt societal power patterns, ensure interventions do not reinforce inequities, and help clients envision alternatives (McDowell et al., 2017). By addressing power imbalances, naming injustices, and valuing non-dominant practices, therapists can help queer couples reclaim agency and transform their relational dynamics in ways that foster greater equity and resilience. Queer couples can move towards more equitable and just ways of navigating relationships and societal structures, fostering empowerment and social change that therapists can affirm and expand.

Since the six guidelines do not explicitly consider trauma inherent in navigating oppression, Lee et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of addressing the impacts of trauma in minority experiences. The authors add to SCAFT by emphasizing the importance of cultural competence, critical self-reflection, and a focus on understanding the long-term impact of race-

based traumatic experiences. The sociopolitical inequities and cultural histories of marginalized individuals were essential factors in the study. This is especially relevant as queer BIPOC individuals often face compounded trauma from both racial and sexual oppression, which profoundly impacts their relational dynamics and emotional health (Lee et al., 2023).

Third-Order Thinking and Change

A key aspect inherent in the six guidelines is third-order thinking. Third-order thinking extends the ideas of second-order change (Bateson, 1972) by requiring therapists to adopt a meta-perspective. Third-order thinking expands systemic practice by situating couple and family dynamics within larger sociopolitical systems, allowing relational patterns to be understood as embedded within interlocking structures of power rather than as individual or dyadic failures (Knudson-Martin et al., 2020). This involves examining the larger systems that shape and sustain individuals' lives and relational practices, including societal context and power dynamics (Boe & Baldwin, 2023). Since third-order thinking offers the additional perspective of understanding the relationship within systems of systems, it expands the range of choices in how relationships and their organizing narratives are understood (Bermudez et al., 2024).

Third-order change invites therapists to engage with the broader societal influences on relationships, integrating these dynamics into therapeutic work (Boe & Baldwin, 2023). It involves connecting families' personal experiences with larger systemic issues, aiming for broader, socially transformative change (McDowell et al., 2017). Boe and Baldwin (2023) demonstrate third-order change through the lens of SCAFT for transgender and gender diverse families. When envisioning just alternatives, therapists can help couples create relationships based on equity rather than cisnormativity and patriarchal ideals. This process allows couples to

imagine and work towards relationships that are more aligned with their authentic identities, free from oppressive societal expectations.

When therapists are able to understand and then intervene in power imbalances, they can then support their clients through the fifth principle of ANVIET: transforming the imagined into reality. This principle encourages couples to recognize these power dynamics, such as when one partner takes on more responsibility to support the other. Then, the couple actively works toward shifting the power dynamics to create a more balanced and empowering dynamic aligned with their envisioned relationship. The therapist could encourage clients to take intentional actions to create their envisioned relationship, such as connecting with supportive communities to challenge societal power structures. This helps queer clients learn new ways to resist oppression, both individually and relationally, fostering change in their dynamics and broader societal systems (Boe & Baldwin, 2023).

To further build on third-order change, third-order ethics asks that the therapist be critically aware of their biases and how they might influence their interactions with and attunement to clients (McDowell et al., 2022). It involves family therapists reflecting on their worldviews and biases (first-order thinking), placing therapeutic systems in cultural and societal contexts (second-order thinking), and addressing systemic inequities that perpetuate relational and mental health issues (third-order thinking). This ethical approach emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, critical social awareness, and understanding societal power dynamics. Therapists must engage in ongoing self-reflection to be aware of their own social locations, privileges, and biases, ensuring they respect clients' cultural contexts while challenging systems of power and inequality. Taking a broad meta-view of these systems helps therapists respect clients' beliefs

while remaining true to their values and fostering cultural democracy in therapy while working across diverse cultural groups (McDowell et al., 2022).

The conceptualization of third-order thinking is particularly relevant for queer couples, whose relationships are often influenced by heteronormative norms, structural marginalization, and limited access to culturally affirming relational scripts. Power is not merely an interpersonal phenomenon but is embedded within broader social hierarchies that shape whose needs are prioritized, whose emotions are validated, and whose voices carry authority. Attending to third-order influences allows for a more nuanced understanding of how intimacy and power are co-constructed within sociocultural constraints (Knudson-Martin et al., 2020). The sociocultural attunement literature further suggests that therapists, like all members of society, may internalize dominant cultural assumptions that subtly shape clinical perceptions and interventions. Engaging in ongoing reflexivity and critical self-examination is therefore essential for supporting relational equity and creating therapeutic environments that affirm the lived experiences of queer clients.

Relational Ethics

Third-order thinking and relational ethics intersect in meaningful ways, especially in contexts like couple and family therapy, where reflection and mutual accountability are central. Relational ethics is a concept that stems from Contextual Family Therapy (McDowell et al., 2022). Contextual Family therapy emphasized autonomy as inherently relational, with genuine autonomy tied to relationship accountability (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). Relational ethics is grounded in an innate sense of fairness, which demands a balance between what one receives and gives in a relationship. Over time, this balance builds trust, as each partner gives and receives without manipulation or threats (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). Fairness, responsibility, and mutual obligation are key to maintaining equality and trust in horizontal relationships, such as a

romantic partnership. Relational ethics also holds that individuals need a connection to experience emotions and thoughts and build self-understanding (Hargrave et al., 1991). Couple relational ethics, influenced by virtue ethics, care ethics, contextual therapies, and feminist family theory, focuses on how partners affect each other's identity and well-being through interactions (Fishbane, 2023).

Cultural values shape relational ethics, and "individuals are shaped by their context" (Fishbane, 2023, p. 448). The dominant Western culture emphasizes individualism, competition, and personal happiness, while collectivist cultures prioritize community and relationship goals. Western societal values increasingly influence global cultures. Alongside the cultural norms of Western values, the development of queer relationships is also shaped by the intersection of personal identity and broader social structures—including gender, sexuality, race, mononormativity, and heteronormativity (Kean, 2017). Through utilizing SCAFT, which emphasizes the need for sociocultural attunement in understanding relational ethics, the study incorporated questions regarding the influence of cultural values.

Clinical Practice with Socioculturally-Attuned Family Therapy

At first, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1952) was considered a theoretical framework for this study. However, there were a few limitations to consider as it applied to the intended sample and research questions. Attachment Theory is grounded in Western cultural norms, including individualism, and may not apply to diverse individuals and relationships (Hudson & Fraley, 2017). This theory also does not capture intersectional perspectives or the impact of trauma, oppression, and discrimination, which are more relevant to the historical experiences of queer couples.

Since SCAFT acts as a critical framework in practice, therapists can conceptualize and apply their chosen theoretical model within the SCAFT framework to mitigate the limitations of MFT models. For example, Boe and Baldwin (2023) found it to be beneficial to specifically integrate emotionally-focused couples therapy with SCAFT. A socioculturally-attuned attachment-based therapist would consider the sociocultural processes that inhibit attachment or build safety in the relationship. It integrates principles from both attachment theory and sociocultural attunement to provide a nuanced therapeutic approach that considers both the emotional bonds in relationships and the broader social and cultural contexts in which those relationships are situated. The socioculturally-attuned attachment-based therapists would focus on developing relational connections, fostering equitable support in facing stressors, and engaging in transformative action and emotional attunement (McDowell et al., 2022). This integration of attachment theory with sociocultural awareness, particularly in how it shapes relational dynamics, will be explored in further detail later in this review as it relates to emotional intimacy. Ultimately, SCAFT serves as a philosophical foundation that can complement any systemic approach.

Knudson-Martin (2015) articulated a set of seven clinical competencies for addressing gender and power in couple therapy, laying the groundwork for later developments in socioculturally attuned and socio-emotionally informed approaches. These competencies emphasize identifying enactments of cultural discourse, attuning to sociocultural emotion, naming relational power processes, facilitating relational safety, fostering mutual attunement, creating models of equality, and supporting shared relational responsibility. Although originally illustrated primarily through heterosexual couples, the authors explicitly noted that these power processes operate across relationship types. This competency-based framework advanced the

understanding of power as relational, contextual, and emotionally embedded, and it directly informs contemporary applications of SCAFT and the development of Socio-Emotional Relationship Therapy (SERT; Knudson-Martin, 2023).

SERT focuses on responsive social engagement, relational power sharing in a socio-emotional environment, understanding social discourses and identities, and creating equitable patterns of interaction that create a care circle (Knudson-Martin, 2023). The study's interview guide utilized SERT's concept of the *circle of care*. The *circle of care* focuses on mutuality of couples in response to influence, responsibility, attunement, and vulnerability through a socio-emotional lens. There is a step-by-step guide for couples therapists (Knudson-Martin, 2023) and a workbook for couples (Knudson-Martin, 2024) that builds on the original work. Together, the resources focus on building a circle of care through mutual attunement, undoing gendered power, holding socio-emotional awareness, understanding care work, being open to influence, and maintaining a relationship-direct, egalitarian orientation (Knudson-Martin, 2024).

SERT also examines how cultural and social factors shape the ways individuals express vulnerability, especially in the context of trauma, marginalization, and gender norms (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). This therapeutic model identifies four distinct patterns of unbalanced vulnerability that diverge from the ideal of shared vulnerability, where both partners connect emotionally and respond without defensiveness, allowing for deeper relationship intimacy (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Among these, socialized vulnerability and invulnerability are salient within the framework of attachment theory. Socialized vulnerability aligns with anxious attachment tendencies, wherein individuals are quick to express emotions and assume responsibility in relationships as a means of securing closeness and affirmation. Conversely, socialized invulnerability parallels avoidant attachment strategies, characterized by emotional

distancing and suppression, shaped by gendered expectations that discourage emotional expression (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Avoidant and anxious attachment has tended to be gendered, placing avoidance on men and anxiety on women (e.g., Callaci et al., 2021). However, these socially constructed expressions of attachment-related behaviors can hinder the development of secure emotional bonds, limiting opportunities for reciprocal vulnerability and intimacy within romantic relationships. Thus, the intersection of cultural norms and attachment dynamics is critical to understanding relational power and emotional connection across diverse couple contexts.

As researchers consider the impact of trauma and systemic marginalization in queer couples, reactive vulnerability and invulnerability may be common relational patterns stemming from negative experiences beyond the impact of gender norms (Wells et al., 2017). Reactive responses to vulnerability, associated with trauma and/or societal marginalization, can further exacerbate power disparities. Participants in this proposed study may have experienced trauma resulting from the intersection of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and other marginalized identities with societal systems that oppress or stigmatize them. This trauma may, in turn, trigger reactive responses to opportunities for vulnerability. Participants who respond with reactive invulnerability may either appear powerful to hide powerlessness or resist emotional engagement to protect themselves from perceived threats. Those who respond with reactive vulnerability may be triggered by fear of losing the relationship and assume blame to preserve the bond (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, much of the grounded theory research regarding expressions of vulnerability is with heterosexual couples, highlighting the need to better understand queer couples (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Wells et al. (2017) found that women who responded

with reactive power had a more challenging time connecting to themes of vulnerability, such as openness, authenticity, and transparency of emotions, with partners who would support a sense of connection, trust, and intimacy. In Knudson-Martin et al. (2021), the researchers recruited heterosexual couples in which one or both partners experienced childhood abuse. They found that the female participants often emphasized preserving the relationship by diminishing their own worth, through reactive power. At the same time, the men frequently adopted self-protective stances that hindered their awareness of and accountability for their impact on their partners, a behavior termed disentitled power. Queer individuals may also have a fear of being vulnerable.

SCAFT as a Guide in Research

SCAFT has been used as a guiding framework in empirical studies to explore how relational power and emotional connection intersect with race, gender, and sexuality (e.g., ChenFeng et al., 2017; Knudson-Martin, 2023). Other qualitative studies have applied SCAFT in their design and analysis, including grounded theory, to understand relational dynamics in diverse sociocultural contexts (e.g., D'Arrigo-Patrick et al., 2020). Wells et al. (2017) utilized SCAFT to examine how couples across diverse backgrounds negotiate relational equality. There are several unique considerations when using SCAFT as a guiding framework in research. SCAFT supports the intentional inclusion of diverse identities and relational experiences in participant selection. When designing interview protocols, SCAFT encourages questions that explore mutual influence, emotional attunement, and power dynamics. It also emphasizes the importance of reflexivity throughout the research process by urging researchers to consider how their own social location and biases may influence the research process.

In analysis, SCAFT helps researchers attend to how broader social structures, such as marginalization, privilege, and systemic inequities, are represented within couple interactions.

The socioculturally attuned coding system (SACS) is a structured analytic framework that can be applied to interviews and therapy sessions (Knudson-Martin et al., 2015b). It focuses on how sociocultural factors like gender, race, class, and sexuality shape relational processes. Grounded in SCAFT's principles, SACS highlights mutuality, emotional attunement, and power negotiation, guiding researchers to identify how privilege and marginalization are enacted in relationships and to explore pathways toward relational equity.

Summary of SCAFT

The study sought to address the intersection of power dynamics and emotional intimacy in queer romantic relationships and how these dynamics are shaped by societal power structures. It was important to utilize a framework that understands the negative impact of relational power imbalances. SCAFT provides a comprehensive and critical framework for understanding and addressing relational dynamics, particularly in marginalized communities. Its emphasis on both systemic and interpersonal factors allows for a nuanced exploration of how marginalized individuals, particularly those in queer relationships, navigate power and emotional connection. Through an intersectional lens, SCAFT supported this research in exploring how societal forces intricately influence vulnerability and emotional intimacy.

The study addressed relational power imbalances in queer couples, particularly how power dynamics intersect with emotional intimacy. Power inequities can strain relationships, limit mutual responsiveness, and reduce emotional safety when one partner has less influence (Jenks et al., 2024; Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). Although mutuality leads to more satisfying relationships, there is no established model to address these dynamics in queer couples (Leonhardt et al., 2020). Therapists may unintentionally reinforce dominant cultural power

structures without a culturally sensitive lens (Arıcı-Şahi & Knudson-Martin, 2024; Pentel et al., 2021).

SCAFT offers a framework that links societal inequities to relational processes, emphasizing third-order thinking to address power within emotional bonds. While research has yet to fully explore how power and emotional intimacy function within queer relationships, SCAFT highlights the need to recognize marginalization and foster power sharing to transform connection and promote secure attachment (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022). The study contributed to this gap by using SCAFT to understand how queer couples experience and navigate emotional intimacy and power.

SCAFT can provide this nuanced approach while maintaining an intersectional lens to consider underlying factors. In return, the study can expand the application of SCAFT to more diverse relational contexts. By doing so, SCAFT can provide new perspectives about how queer couples navigate power and intimacy in their romantic relationships. As we turn to the concept of emotional intimacy, it is crucial to explore what else can influence the ways couples form deep, trusting connections with their partners, as emphasized in SCAFT.

Emotional Intimacy

Intimacy has been defined as a range of experiences that create a sense of connection, feeling known, sharing, togetherness, acceptance, closeness, and belonging (Scheinkman, 2019**).** It can be experienced during activities, relational processes, shared values, and daily couple life (Scheinkman, 2019). Intimacy is related to relationship satisfaction, quality, stability, and functioning (Kamali et al., 2020). Emotional intimacy is recognized as a fundamental component of romantic relationships (Fishbane, 2023) and a key contributor to relationship satisfaction among queer couples (Trombetta et al., 2025). The core attributes of emotional

intimacy commonly include connection, communication, commitment, cooperation, mutual acceptance, sharing, understanding, and care (Garfield, 2010; Štulhofer et al., 2020). Couples also name trust, mutual self-disclosure, understanding, and support when discussing emotional intimacy (Šević et al., 2016), and emotional intimacy can develop when one partner discloses personal information, and the other is responsive (Mazur, 2025). Self-disclosure and responsiveness are interrelated elements of an interaction that foster emotional intimacy for the couple (Poucher et al., 2022). The partner disclosing will also have a boost in well-being by feeling appreciated and understood, leading to further desire to connect.

Research on queer couples highlights how connection is cultivated through open communication and shared resilience. One research study indicated that gay men emphasize the importance of honestly expressing needs and fostering emotional connection to build a strong relational foundation (Cryder, 2018). Another research study considered how lesbian couples defined emotional intimacy through love, trust, and commitment, often strengthening their bond to navigate societal stressors, such as homophobia, together (Guschlbauer et al., 2019). Relational intimacy, which encompasses emotional intimacy, is rooted in engagement, feeling connected, and having open exchanges of communication (Constant et al., 2021). In alignment with these insights, open dialogue, defined as turning towards the other and validating their stories through active listening (Fishbane, 2023), is a key element of intimacy. These findings underscore how emotional intimacy is both a relational process and a protective factor in the face of societal challenges. Since strong communication is a predictor of relationship satisfaction and stability in queer couples, this study's interview guide explored couples' experiences of dialogue as a means of fostering emotional closeness and connection. Recent work on long-term relational resilience further underscores the centrality of emotional connection. Heim and Heim (2023)

conducted a cross-generational qualitative study and found that emotional responsiveness, mutual care, and sustained intimacy were foundational components of relationship longevity across diverse couples.

Emotional intimacy has been found to improve physical health, well-being, and relationship satisfaction in queer couples (Šević et al., 2016). Emotional intimacy levels had historically been found to be either similar across sexual orientations (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007) or higher in queer couples (Balsam et al., 2008). More recently, Šević et al. (2016) found that gay and bisexual men in relationships reported higher levels of emotional intimacy than heterosexual men in relationships. For gay men, emotional intimacy was more closely related to relationship satisfaction than verbal and physical intimacy. At the same time, for lesbian women, emotional intimacy within relationship contexts was noted as more significant than intellectual, recreational, sexual, and social intimacy (Guschlbauer et al., 2019). Though it is distinct from sexual intimacy (Yoo et al., 2014), emotional intimacy can play a part in sexual motivation (Šević et al., 2016). Understanding the central role of emotional intimacy also requires acknowledging the external pressures queer couples face, which can both hinder and shape how intimacy is formed and sustained.

Queer couples can face added relationship stressors, such as family disapproval, societal stigma, and unclear relationship scripts, which can complicate milestones such as introducing a partner to family or deciding to live together (Macapagal et al., 2015). As a result, they may experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, contributing to lower life satisfaction and increased health challenges (Feinstein & Dyar, 2018). External stressors can strain communication and reduce relationship quality (Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Despite these challenges, many queer couples demonstrate resilience through emotional intimacy, mutual

respect, egalitarianism, commitment, and effective communication (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017). Queer couples may also build intimacy and resilience by drawing on early influences, through family attitudes, sexual education, culture, religious beliefs, and media portrayals, to shape how they understand and experience closeness over time (Xu et al., 2017).

While these studies deepen understanding of emotional intimacy in queer partnerships, most existing research has focused predominantly on gay and lesbian couples, leaving bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, and asexual partners significantly underrepresented. Recent research has begun to expand beyond gay and lesbian couples to include transgender and nonbinary relational experiences. Scott et al. (2025) found that partner affirmation of gender identity functioned as a key mechanism for relationship satisfaction among transgender and nonbinary adults. Pepping et al. (2024) likewise reported that romantic relationships buffered minority stress, reducing depressive symptoms and suicidality by providing affirmation and relational safety. Additional work by Perez and Pepping (2024) highlighted how transgender and nonbinary partners navigate unique relational processes related to dating goals, relationship structures, sexualization, and stigma. In broader examinations, Closson et al. (2024) found that queer, trans, and non-monogamous young adults without established relational role models actively co-constructed gender-equitable relational norms. Extending this, Murchison et al. (2024) identified how material-need insecurity and cissexism-related beliefs shaped relational control dynamics among transgender and nonbinary young adults. Together, this emerging scholarship underscores the importance of examining emotional intimacy, power, and relational dynamics across a broader spectrum of queer identities.

Factors that Impact Emotional Intimacy

Emotional intimacy is cultivated through various relational processes that foster closeness, trust, and mutual understanding. The first factor is a sense of sharedness. A sense of sharedness can create an emotional bond that builds trust and safety through attuning to each other's emotional needs (Coppola et al., 2021). Couples with shared quality time, such as engaging in activities together, build togetherness (Kamali et al., 2020). Couples with shared routines can give a couple a sense of familiarity and belonging in the relationship (Scheinkman, 2019). A preference for shared coping may show a sense of *we-ness* and promote relational resilience (Salo et al., 2022). Partners experienced in coping with stress can advise and teach their partner about their learned coping skills (Haas & Lannutti, 2022), and the couple can cope together to buffer the effects of societal stressors (Salo et al., 2022).

A couple can strengthen their emotional bond through shared openness and joining with their partner through sharing their goals, needs, and desires (Haas & Lannutti, 2022). Attunement can include mutual care, consideration, and accountability. SCAFT defines attunement as the willingness to pay close attention to each other's experiences, not only understanding but responding in ways that prioritize connection (McDowell et al., 2022).

Relationship-oriented communication patterns are defined as listening, cooperation, empathy during disagreements (Haas & Lannutti, 2022), and clear, honest, and frequent communication (Coppola et al., 2021). A mutually supportive flow of communication, care, and attention is then possible because both partners can share feelings, concerns, and experiences without defensiveness (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Words of affirmation, communicating about personal and relationship issues, and affirming their relationship commitment can serve as forms of intimacy that establish commitment (Labor & Latosa, 2022). Perales and Baxter (2018) tied the concepts of relationship investment and emotional intimacy for queer couples. They

suggested that queer couples often show greater relational investment due to the unique challenges they may face, such as societal stigma, discrimination, and lack of institutional support (e.g., limited legal recognition or protections). These external pressures can lead queer partners to place a stronger emphasis on elements of perceived safety within the relationships, such as emotional connection, communication, and mutual support, as their relationships often lack validation from broader social systems.

Gender Socialization

Gender socialization can impact dyadic emotional experiences (Jenks et al., 2024). For example, in Western cultures, women are traditionally socialized to express warmth, compassion, and contentment, reinforcing relational responsibility (Jenks et al., 2024). Dominant Western cultural norms of masculinity emphasize emotional restraint, withholding, self-sufficiency, achievement, control, competition, and autonomy (Garfield, 2010). While men are often socialized away from the skill of empathy, in Western cultures, those who are motivated can learn to be more empathic (Fishbane, 2011). Other intersectional aspects of identity, such as race and culture, can influence gendered emotional expression and connection norms. Socialization can also impact an individual’s ability to acknowledge, accept, and share emotions (Johnson, 2019), their beliefs about relationships, and their expectations of themselves in queer relationships.

Recent studies further highlight how masculine identity expectations continue to shape emotional and relational experiences for queer men. Lamarche et al. (2025) demonstrated that both gay and heterosexual men may experience masculinity threats related to social role incongruity, and that social connection can serve as an important protective factor. Similarly, Brand and O’Dea (2022) found that masculine honor beliefs influenced perceptions of queer

identity within families, revealing how rigid gender norms continue to affect expectations around emotional openness, relational credibility, and belonging. These traditional gendered views can provide a complex background for queer couples navigating expectations in their relationships.

Race and culture can significantly shape gendered norms of emotional expression and connection, influencing how individuals navigate intimacy and relational dynamics. Cultural frameworks often dictate acceptable emotional behaviors, with variations observed across different racial and ethnic groups. For instance, Black Americans have been found to engage more frequently in expressive suppression to regulate emotions and avoid conflict (Zhou et al., 2024). This pattern of suppression is linked to increased cardiovascular disease risk and highlights how racialized emotion regulation contributes to broader health disparities. Similarly, Asian, Black, and Hispanic individuals in the United States report a higher use of expressive suppression compared to White individuals, reflecting collectivist values that emphasize group harmony over individual expression (Chen et al., 2022). In East Asian contexts such as Japan, emotion suppression during couple disagreements is more prevalent, aligning with interdependent cultural models that prioritize relational harmony over emotional disclosure (Matsumoto et al., 2020). These cultural norms shape both individual emotional behaviors and romantic relationship dynamics, influencing communication styles, conflict resolution, and emotional intimacy. Recognizing these intersecting cultural and racial influences is essential for developing inclusive, culturally sensitive interventions that promote emotional well-being and relational equity for all cultures, communities, sexual orientations, and gender identities.

Sadeghi et al. (2020) studied differentiation of self, resilience, and hope and compared females and males aged 13-19 years old. The authors inferred that females tend to be more emotionally close to others since they had learned to value intimacy. In contrast, males were

raised to believe that independence and autonomy were more important. In another study, similar to heterosexual men, bisexual men faced pressure to suppress emotions, avoid vulnerability, and assert dominance in relationships due to hegemonic masculinity (Baierl-Kwok & Rostosky, 2023). Although bisexual men expressed a strong desire for emotional connection with their partners, they often perceived their same-gender relationships as less emotionally expressive than those with women. This dynamic can be better understood through Elder et al.'s (2015) findings, which highlight a common internal conflict among men between the yearning for emotional closeness and the societal pressure to avoid vulnerability. Compounding these relational challenges, in another study, bisexual individuals experienced significantly poorer mental health, lower life satisfaction, and greater economic disparities compared to both heterosexual and gay/lesbian individuals because they often experience unique forms of marginalization, including biphobia, invisibility, and exclusion from both heterosexual and queer communities (Perales & Baxter, 2018).

Sexual and gender minorities often encounter discrimination and exclusion (Park & Chung, 2023), making supportive relationships essential for a felt sense of belonging and resilience. Such relationships not only provide social support (Pentel et al., 2021) but also create space for individuals to explore and express their identities (Gunby & Butler, 2023). For gay men, these dynamics are particularly significant, as challenges in developing secure attachment often stem from limited parental and peer support alongside experiences of minority stress (Fuller & Rutter, 2018). These early experiences can shape later romantic outcomes, underscoring the importance of open and effective communication within relationships (Coppola et al., 2021). When couples engage in this openness, they foster both individual and relational

growth (Gunby & Butler, 2023), which in turn enhances satisfaction and closeness (Chester et al., 2017).

Internalized homonegativity, defined as the absorption of negative societal attitudes toward one's own sexual orientation, has been shown to significantly disrupt emotional intimacy and relational power dynamics within queer romantic relationships (Guzmán-González et al., 2023). This internalized stigma often manifests as emotional withdrawal, discomfort with disclosing one's sexual identity, and disengagement from the queer community, all of which contribute to diminished self-esteem and psychological well-being. Empirical evidence indicates that elevated levels of internalized homonegativity impair emotional expression and the capacity to sustain intimate bonds (Trombetta et al., 2025). One study noted these effects are particularly pronounced among women in queer relationships, where they are associated with reduced relationship commitment, lower perceived support, and increased instability (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017).

Recent research has examined how internalized homonegativity intersects with attachment avoidance to influence emotional intimacy in queer relationships. In a study of 138 same-sex male couples, internalized homonegativity was found to moderate the link between attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy, such that participants with high attachment avoidance and elevated internalized stigma reported the lowest levels of closeness (Guzmán-González et al., 2023). These findings highlight how sociocultural stigma and individual psychological factors jointly shape relational dynamics. Individuals may misinterpret their relationships as more conflict-laden or dysfunctional due to negative self-perceptions shaped by stigma. Earlier research found that internalized homonegativity was associated with lower relationship satisfaction across all couples (Šević et al., 2016). The differences between these

studies likely reflect both methodological variations—broader sampling versus same-sex male couples—and cultural shifts, such as increased LGBTQ+ visibility, that may influence participants' experiences. Internalized stigma is also linked to intimacy avoidance and challenges in maintaining long-term relationships, particularly when compounded by parental rejection, which can undermine relational security and the development of equitable, emotionally fulfilling partnerships (Fuller & Rutter, 2018).

While existing research on masculine gender role socialization has predominantly focused on heterosexual men, these norms can similarly impact gay men, particularly through the discouragement of emotional vulnerability. Masculinity is shaped by social, cultural, and contextual norms, with factors like race, sexual orientation, and religion playing key roles in how boys and men develop their identities (Lindner & Vargas, 2024). The impact of power, privilege, and sexism also influences their socialization and relationships. Masculinities are not fixed but are fluid, shaped by various intersecting elements of identity and societal expectations (Lindner & Vargas, 2024). For gay men, the internalization of hegemonic masculine ideals may contribute to emotional distress and ineffective coping mechanisms, which, in turn, negatively influence relationship satisfaction and stability (Elder et al., 2015).

Elder and colleagues (2015) further examined the influence of sexual schemas among gay men, finding that some may engage in casual sexual encounters as a means of accessing physical intimacy without the associated perceived risks of emotional exposure – for example, appearing less masculine. In this context, sex may function as a mechanism to establish trust and security, thereby facilitating subsequent emotional openness. These relational processes can be further complicated for gay men of color, who often navigate additional layers of marginalization due to racialized stereotypes and exclusionary dynamics within predominantly White gay communities

(Elder et al., 2015). Such intersectional experiences may exacerbate negative self-perceptions and undermine both emotional well-being and relational equity, reinforcing barriers to intimacy and mutual support.

Neurobiology

In addition to sociocultural and relational frameworks, neurobiology may offer an important layer in understanding the underlying mechanisms of emotional intimacy and highlighting the interplay between brain systems, hormonal processes, and attachment behaviors. In the modern world, the MFT field supports that neurobiology is becoming a necessary area of understanding regarding emotional competence and regulation in romantic relationships (Fishbane, 2023). While research specifically examining the neurobiology of queer couples is still developing, existing studies provide insights into how neurobiological factors may influence relationship dynamics within queer partnerships.

While this study's methodology did not directly capture this data, it was important to consider the current research as it connects to the concepts of emotional intimacy and queer relationship dynamics. Emotional intimacy is rooted in biological systems that govern emotional regulation, bonding, and stress responses (Fishbane, 2023). For example, mentalizing refers to the ability to reflect on one's and others' internal states, emotions, beliefs, and motivations, recognizing that people perceive and feel things differently. The person's experience of feeling understood and respected, and that they are present in another person's mind, is the essential condition signaling that it is safe to trust, listen to, and learn from another (Fishbane, 2023). Bleiberg and Safier (2019) explained mentalizing as a person's experience of feeling understood and respected by being present in their partner's mind, which signals safety and trust to listen to and learn from one another.

Respect has been connected to feelings of regard, admiration, and appreciation, and worthiness to foster security (Young & Zeigler-Hill, 2024). Respect particularly plays a central role in relationship functioning and is characterized by valuing a partner's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and being open to their influence (Vrabel et al., 2021). Respect is associated with marital quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, love styles, and prosocial behaviors directed toward one's partner (Vrabel et al., 2021). More recently, Young and Zeigler-Hill (2024) identified two forms of respect that shape relational outcomes: status-based respect, which reflects feeling admired and esteemed by one's partner, and inclusion-based respect, which involves feeling accepted and liked by one's partner. The authors found that both forms are positively related to satisfaction, investment, and commitment, while also being linked to lower perceptions of possible alternative partners. Taken together, these findings suggest that respect may be an even stronger predictor of relational satisfaction and commitment than other factors such as love, liking, or investment, underscoring its significance for relational well-being.

Queer individuals may experience chronic stress due to societal stigma, which can dysregulate the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis and elevate cortisol levels (Cao et al., 2021). However, the authors found that supportive relationships may buffer these effects and promote emotional resilience (Perales & Baxter, 2018). This buffering effect is understood through a bonding process influenced by neurochemicals like oxytocin and vasopressin, which foster trust and attachment, for queer couples, similar to heterosexual couples. Queer individuals may also demonstrate heightened empathy and social cognition (Macapagal et al., 2015). This could potentially strengthen emotional intimacy in relationships and is a key question for the proposed research.

Attachment and Emotional Intimacy

John Bowlby initially developed attachment theory to understand the bonds between infants and their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1952). It has since been extended to adult relationships, particularly romantic partnerships and emotional intimacy (Johnson, 2019). It provides a framework for understanding how attachment experiences shape individuals' emotional needs, behaviors, and patterns of interaction within intimate relationships. This next section will explore the application of attachment theory to romantic relationships, focusing on how attachment styles manifest in adult romantic bonds. By examining how these attachment styles influence relationship dynamics, communication patterns, and emotional regulation within couples, I can provide a deeper understanding of the role attachment plays in intimacy and power dynamics.

Most research about attachment has focused on comparing men and women and included heterosexual individuals. Since romantic attachment processes for gay men have been found to be similar to heterosexual men (Trachtenberg-Ray & Modesto, 2021), it is worth noting the research on the impact of heterosexual men's attachment on romantic relationships. In heterosexual relationships, men with higher attachment avoidance report more romantic disengagement (Callaci et al., 2021). Individuals experiencing attachment avoidance tend to be uncomfortable with closeness, fear intimacy, and therefore, deactivate the attachment system to emotionally distance from the partner (Trombetta et al., 2025).

Research tends to look at the correlation between attachment and relationship satisfaction when understanding other relationship constructs. For example, attachment anxiety and avoidance are linked to relationship satisfaction through the path linking trust with intimacy as a double mediator (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). Women with lower relationship satisfaction

and higher levels of anxious attachment reported higher disengagement scores over fifteen weeks of couples therapy, particularly when the man was avoidant, and the woman was anxious (Callaci et al., 2021). Anxiously attached individuals actively participate in relationships, whereas avoidantly attached individuals may emotionally disengage (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The authors found that while attachment insecurity led to similar negative outcomes in both women and men, the effects appeared to be more pronounced in male couples. Men, especially in societies with traditional views on masculinity, may be less encouraged to express vulnerability or engage in emotionally intimate behaviors, leading to attachment issues. This suggests that attachment dynamics are not only influenced by individual attachment styles but also by gendered cultural norms and societal expectations, which may manifest differently across genders in queer relationships.

Responsiveness can create a sense of belonging, acceptance, and worthiness, thus contributing to a secure attachment, relational resiliency, and positive relational quality outcomes, such as commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality, and closeness (Haas & Lannutti, 2022). In addition to responsiveness, one's attachment style can impact how individuals perceive intimacy. Hudson and Fraley (2017) defined intimacy as the amount of time, affect, and self-disclosure. The authors found that participants with higher anxiety need more time, affection, and disclosure to define a relationship as close. Conversely, those experiencing avoidant attachment required less intimacy to feel close, but were sensitive to its presence. Attachment-related avoidant behaviors typically arose as an aversion to closeness and intimacy, leading to disengagement and increased self-reliance (Callaci et al., 2021). These insecure attachment patterns highlight the importance of considering attachment dynamics, particularly in

dyads with mixed attachment orientations, when exploring how intimacy is navigated and understood within relationships.

Attachment can impact emotional intimacy factors (Mazur, 2025). For example, securely attached individuals use positive communication, like self-disclosure and constructive conflict resolution, to promote closeness and support. Insecure attachment can lead to negative communication patterns when sharing, such as aggression, withdrawal, and defensiveness, leading to lower relational satisfaction (Mazur, 2025). Preoccupied individuals report lower intimacy levels than securely attached individuals, likely due to relationship anxiety (Du Rocher Schudlich et al., 2013). Similarly, dismissive individuals have lower intimacy, as their attachment style involves avoiding closeness. Over time, the inability to rely on a partner for comfort may erode emotional connection.

Individuals with insecure attachment may perceive less responsiveness, interrupting the investment in the relationship (Segal & Fraley, 2016). Responsiveness can be defined as attending to and showing care to a partner when sharing about themselves (Rice et al., 2020). Research shows that responsiveness increases satisfaction and investment in relationships, while also reducing attachment anxiety and avoidance by fostering belonging, acceptance, and worthiness (Rice et al., 2020; Segal & Fraley, 2016). In this way, responsiveness functions as a protective mechanism against the insecurities that can undermine relational closeness.

However, when responsiveness is absent, the opposite effect may occur. Fuller and Rutter (2018) discuss how perceived rejection contributes to emotional guardedness and hypervigilance, making it harder to trust others and often leading to misinterpretations of partner behavior as rejecting. This can create a cycle of withdrawal and feelings of unworthiness, especially for individuals with histories of feeling unloved by attachment figures. In contrast, perceiving

acceptance from caregivers contributes to the development of secure attachments, which in turn helps individuals manage relational stress more effectively.

Attachment behaviors can impact a person's comfort with closeness, their emotional regulation strategies, such as the ability to control negative emotions. For example, patterns such as stonewalling, demand-withdraw dynamics, or maladaptive protective responses are often linked to difficulties with attachment security (Wiebe et al., 2017). Conversely, emotional accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement are connected to secure attachment in adult relationships (Novak et al., 2018). Brandão et al. (2019) found that relationship security and individual well-being can be positively affected when couples communicate attachment concerns openly and respond to their partner's emotions. This reinforces mutual trust.

Attachment security also has broader implications for overall well-being and relational satisfaction. Trachtenberg-Ray and Modesto (2021) demonstrated that securely attached men reported higher well-being and relationship satisfaction, whereas those with anxious or avoidant attachment styles experienced lower levels of both. Notably, well-being partly mediated the relationship between attachment style and satisfaction, suggesting that secure attachment fosters resilience and relational health through its positive impact on emotional functioning.

Ultimately, intimacy is an ongoing, evolving process that deepens as relational security strengthens over time. Secure relationships allow partners to engage in closeness and mutual support without fear, while maintaining a healthy balance between autonomy and connection (Arriaga & Kumashiro, 2019). Secure attachment enables couples to tolerate the anxiety that comes with individuality while cultivating shared vulnerability as a key piece of intimacy. Boe and Baldwin's (2023) integration of the socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT) model

with emotionally focused couple therapy (EFCT) underscores how secure attachment serves as the foundation for mutual vulnerability, emotional accessibility, and enduring intimacy.

When individuals feel their needs are met, they experience greater relationship satisfaction and commitment, which can strengthen romantic attachment (Segal & Fraley, 2016). In one study, attachment patterns did not significantly differ between lesbian couples and heterosexual women; however, lesbian couples tended to use more emotionally expressive communication with their partners (Jonathan, 2009). It is of note that gay men may face anxiety about emotional closeness, limiting intimacy (Jonathan, 2009), a finding replicated across time (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This could be further understood by Sommantico et al. (2021) finding that lesbian participants reported lower anxious attachment behaviors and higher levels of relationship satisfaction compared to gay men. Continued research was needed to better understand how these concepts vary across different types of queer relationships.

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is a key factor in developing intimacy and mutuality within close relationships and is tied to attachment (Sommantico et al., 2021). The authors found that insecure attachment was linked to lower relationship satisfaction and greater self-differentiation was linked to higher satisfaction across both gay and lesbian groups. Differentiation of self refers to the ability to maintain a balance between closeness and autonomy in relationships (Bowen, 1978). This balance is evident in how individuals manage their emotional and intellectual responses, such as through emotional reactivity, distancing, or fusion when interacting with their partner. There are four components of the construct differentiation of self: emotional cutoff, emotional reactivity, fusion with others, and the ability to take an "I-position" (Drake et al., 2015). Emotional reactivity is emotional dysregulation in response to others' expressions of

emotions (Norona & Welsh, 2016). Emotional cutoff is distancing from others to appear independent. I-position is when an individual can maintain their identity and sense of self separate from others. Fusion with others is high interdependence with others due to a desire for acceptance (Norona & Welsh, 2016).

Research supports an important relationship between *attachment* and *differentiation of self* in adult romantic relationships (e.g., Dell'Isola et al., 2019; Sommantico et al., 2021). Lesbians and gay men with insecure attachment patterns show lower levels of differentiation of self (Sommantico et al., 2021). This research indicated that differentiation of self was a mediator between attachment avoidance and anxiety and relationship satisfaction for lesbians and gay men (Sommantico et al., 2021). To understand this relationship, it seems that both adult attachment and differentiation of self highlight the balance between intimacy and autonomy and acknowledge the key role emotions play in close relationships. Differentiation of self and attachment security may each allow partners to offer each other a secure base within which to be both intimate and individuated (Hardy & Fisher, 2018).

Differentiation of self is also key to having the power to relate to your partner with generosity and respect (Fishbane, 2023). Differentiation balances attachment and autonomy, promoting healthy self-regulation and positive development. Partners with high fusion rely on each other for acceptance, increasing emotional gridlock in conflict (Schnarch, 2009). Individuals with lower differentiation of self also tend to take responsibility for their partner's emotions, creating the feeling of failure and leading a negative cycle when their partner is unsatisfied (Sawyer, 2021).

Attachment and differentiation of self tend to be the focus of emotional regulation and competence in couples. Emotional reactivity occurs when there is a lack of differentiation of self

and therefore less regulation and flexibility. For example, higher I-position and lower emotional reactivity are associated with lower anxious attachment, leading to greater relationship efficacy and lower conflict hostility (Dell'Isola et al., 2019). Individuals who are less self-differentiated may use emotional cut-off in order to avoid and manage negative emotions coming from intimate relationships and are therefore less likely to experience intimacy or emotional contact with their romantic partner (Scigala et al., 2021). Constant et al. (2021) found that while insecure attachment negatively impacts couple relationships, the ability to manage one's own emotions serves as a protective factor for relational intimacy.

Power

Power plays a critical role in how relationships function, especially when it comes to emotional intimacy. Social power is reflected in who feels valued, whose experiences are acknowledged, and who holds influence within relationships (Falicov, 2014). In Western cultures, where autonomy and self-determination are emphasized, power dynamics often focus on individual agency, sometimes overlooking the broader sociocultural and political contexts that shape clients' experiences. In contrast, collectivist cultures emphasize interdependence, shared responsibility, and respect for hierarchy, shaping how power and equity are navigated in relationships.

Different cultures can also define intimacy differently. For example, in Asian cultures, intimacy is conceived through a collectivistic filter of anticipating other people’s needs, inclusion, generosity, respect, and belonging rather than direct communication about one’s feelings and wants (Scheinkman, 2019). Therefore, it is important to qualitatively understand queer couples’ perceptions and experiences with emotional intimacy, particularly when considering intersecting identities. These cultural differences highlight the importance of

understanding relational power dynamics, which are shaped through interactions that create and reinforce social inequities (Bermudez et al., 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to view clients within their sociocultural context, recognizing how intersecting factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity influence their experiences with social justice and cultural diversity.

Influence of Power

Power dynamics play a significant role in shaping interactions, perceptions, and emotions (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Power is generally understood as the ability to influence or resist influence (Simpson et al., 2019), control or alter another's physical or psychological state (Fishbane, 2011), and shape patterns of influence (B. Young & Seedall, 2024). It can be explicit through dominance, lack of engagement, resistance to influence, or implicit through cultural processes (B. Young & Seedall, 2024).

Capturing these dynamics in a study is important because power directly influences the quality and depth of emotional intimacy in relationships. Specifically, power can affect how partners validate each other's worth and determine the emotional safety and stability of the relationship (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Mutual affirmation and validation contribute to stronger relational bonds, supporting each partner's identity and emotional well-being. On the other hand, unequal power can undermine these processes, reinforcing only the dominant partner's emotions and identity (Knudson-Martin, 2013). By exploring these dynamics, this study provided valuable insights into how power and validation contributed to or hindered relationship intimacy and growth, offering opportunities for therapeutic interventions to foster healthier, more balanced relationships.

Shared power can reduce attachment anxiety and avoidance, enhancing interpersonal security (Leonhardt et al., 2020). Secure attachment can promote behaviors that "give up" power,

such as vulnerability, self-disclosure, and risk-taking, fostering a more balanced and intimate connection. Perceptions of relational power dynamics can influence how couples report on marital quality and attachment security. Securely attached individuals typically balance intimacy and autonomy, fostering equitable power distribution and healthy emotional connections (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Those with avoidant attachment may instead distance themselves emotionally, striving for autonomy and control, which can also disrupt relational power dynamics.

Trust has been connected to a sign of shared power (Leonhardt et al., 2020), intimacy, and connection (B. Young & Seedall, 2024). Shared power is also associated with greater trust, happiness, commitment, security, and willingness to share vulnerabilities (Leonhardt et al., 2020) and behaviors that support intimacy and connection and reduce *power over* traits, such as surrendering, self-disclosing, sharing vulnerably, and risk-taking (B. Young & Seedall, 2024). Relational empowerment involves using empathy, respect, and generosity to share power and support each other's well-being (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Fishbane (2011) used the terms *power to* and *power with*. *Power to* is the ability to exercise flexibility, self-regulation, thoughtfulness, responsiveness, and accountability in interactions. *Power with* emphasizes mutual empathy and generosity, where both partners share responsibility for nurturing the relationship, creating a sense of unity and shared responsibility. This mutual care fosters security, validation, and connection, allowing for the ability to repair, care for, and apologize when necessary.

On the other hand, *power over* is often experienced as a disregarding voice, a felt sense of exclusion (Glaser et al., 2017), or imposing their agenda at the expense of the other (Fishbane, 2023), leading to disempowerment and imbalance in the relationship. Power imbalances can arise from membership in dominant social groups, including race, gender, class, or sexual

identity, and can lead to unequal access to resources such as income, status, or support (B. Young & Seedall, 2023). Each of these dynamics plays a critical role in how partners engage, communicate, and support one another.

Factors that Influence Power in Relationships

Haas and Lannutti (2022) found that queer people who had shared responsibilities with their partner had higher levels of control mutuality, which refers to satisfaction with the much influence each partner has in the decision-making process within the relationship (Haas & Lannutti, 2022). This mutuality of control is influenced by factors such as equality in task-sharing and participation in decisions, which in turn promote a sense of sharedness. This sense of sharedness was already recognized as an important factor in fostering emotional intimacy (e.g., Coppola et al., 2021).

The legal recognition of queer relationships has impacted power dynamics within queer couples. Massachusetts was the first state to recognize same-sex marriages in 2003 (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017). Between 2003 and 2013, queer couples had limited opportunities to marry, as most U.S. states did not recognize or allow such unions. This patchwork of state-level policies created ongoing ambiguity, limiting queer couples' access to the legal, financial, and social protections that heterosexual couples often take for granted. Prior to nationwide marriage equality, partners frequently relied on informal arrangements, such as powers of attorney, medical directives, or ad hoc financial agreements, that could inadvertently produce power imbalances, particularly during medical emergencies, financial decisions, or conflicts with unsupportive families of origin.

The 2015 Supreme Court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, offering queer couples more consistent access to marital rights, such as joint

adoption, inheritance protections, tax benefits, and hospital visitation. Even with this ruling, however, legal recognition does not fully erase structural inequities. Queer couples continue to navigate evolving legal and social debates that shape relational power, including ongoing disputes over parental rights, donor-conceived family structures, and the differential treatment of non-biological parents (Horne et al., 2022). Additionally, variations in state-level religious exemption laws, shifting political climates, and threats to LGBTQ+ civil rights can generate chronic uncertainty, placing relational strain on couples and influencing how power, decision-making, and emotional labor are distributed within the relationship.

As a result, legal recognition functions not merely as a bureaucratic matter but as a sociocultural force that directly intersects with power, autonomy, and relational security. Couples may experience increased stability and a more equitable distribution of responsibilities post-recognition, while others remain vigilant about potential losses of rights, which may shape how they negotiate roles, parenthood, financial planning, and future-oriented decisions.

Research continues to highlight these complex dynamics between biological and non-biological motherhood roles in lesbian couples. For example, non-birth mothers can face unique challenges regarding parental legitimacy, including a lack of legal or biological ties. Research has begun to understand how couples respond to parental roles that are frequently socially defined as unequal. Some lesbian couples who are parents take legal steps to address the imbalance, such as pursuing second-parent adoption, drafting wills, or adjusting roles when planning for additional children (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006).

Malmquist (2015) identified three common responses among lesbian couples in Sweden regarding power dynamics between biological and non-biological parents. The first involves an effortless sense of equality that arises naturally. The second acknowledges an initial imbalance

but works to actively overcome it. The third accepts a fundamental difference in roles, viewing the biological connection as a basis for unequal parenting roles. Each of these approaches can impact the couple's power dynamics differently.

Options for legal recognition remain limited across the world. Non-birth parents can feel invisible, powerless, and frustrated when others hold the power to recognize their parenthood. Horne et al. (2022) also note that unequal legal status in LGBTQ couples can create power imbalances, feelings of exclusion, and minority stress, especially when joint adoption is not possible. This can negatively impact relationship satisfaction, which is linked to increased parental stress. It can also create anxiety within the relationship since their role as a parent hinges on the stability of their partnership (Horne et al., 2022).

Though both partners experience the transition to motherhood in their relationship, one partner may be experiencing the biological processes of childbirth. Children may show an initial preference for the birth mother (McInerney et al., 2021). This preference tends to diminish over time as the distinction between birth and non-birth parents emphasized during pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding diminishes, the roles become less differentiated, and the relationship with the non-birth parents becomes closer beyond infancy. Despite these shifts, the non-birth parent may still experience rejection, jealousy, insecurity, and role confusion (McInerney et al., 2021). Equality in roles and responsibilities for queer couples is not always the goal or outcome, and division of labor can reflect personal preference, rather than traditional gender roles, or be based on the perceived meaning of domestic work among women in diverse ethnic and class contexts (McInerney et al., 2021). However, it is noteworthy that queer couples have consistently been found to share childcare and housework more equally than heterosexual couples in studies over the past two decades (e.g., Goldberg, 2023; Perales & Baxter, 2018). This pattern may reflect the

reduced influence of traditional gender-based role expectations within queer relationships (Perales & Baxter, 2018).

It is important to consider the context and time frame of studies with queer couples as researchers consider relational roles and dynamics relating to these factors that impact power dynamics. This is particularly salient as laws and social perceptions continue to shift. For example, earlier studies may have collected data during a time when queer couples were not legally allowed to marry, which could have influenced both individual experiences and relationship dynamics. Alongside legal recognition, the current societal views can impact queer couples' visibility. Therefore, it is important to conduct ongoing research that accounts for generational context by recruiting couples of varied ages to better understand emotional intimacy and power dynamics in romantic relationships

To take it a step further, the degree to which individuals openly disclose their sexual orientation, known as *outnes*s, can significantly impact power dynamics within relationships (Xu et al., 2017). Greater *outness* was associated with increased relationship satisfaction and reduced internalized stigma, thus balancing power dynamics between partners. Xu et al. (2017) also found that individuals who are more out to friends and colleagues tend to experience lower levels of internalized homophobia, which positively influences their sense of empowerment and agency within relationships. This increased self-acceptance fosters healthier and more balanced relational dynamics, as both partners are more likely to engage authentically and openly. When individuals are out, it can also reduce power imbalances by eliminating secrecy and minimizing the potential for emotional manipulation. Additionally, being open about one's identity can prevent exploitation, create a sense of equality, and provide access to supportive social networks, which further strengthens the relationship. As such, outness tends to contribute to more

collaborative and equitable dynamics, where both partners are empowered to share their needs and desires freely (Xu et al., 2017).

Age may be an important factor to consider in this proposed study. Vale and colleagues (2019) found that older participants reported higher levels of outness and lower levels of internalized homophobia, resulting in less overall minority stress. Individuals with high levels of internalized homophobia and low levels of outness reported greater severity of conflict and poorer relationship quality on days with higher stress (Totenhagen et al., 2018). Hu and Denier (2023) found that sexual identity mobility was more common among younger individuals, suggesting that generational shifts in societal attitudes contribute to increased openness and acceptance of diverse sexual identities. This emphasizes the fluidity of sexual orientation and the influence of relational contexts on identity formation, particularly among younger generations.

Individuals transitioning between sexual identities, such as moving from heterosexual to queer relationships, often experience changes in both emotional intimacy and power dynamics within their relationships (Hu & Denier, 2023; Krueger et al., 2023). These shifts can lead to a redefinition of relationship roles as individuals navigate the complexities of evolving sexual identities while managing the associated relational power. Particularly for women, the transition from being attracted to one gender to being attracted to more than one gender can heighten psychological distress and lead to power struggles within relationships (Krueger et al., 2023). Men in their study who experienced any change in their sexual identity tended to struggle more with substance use. These findings highlight the emotional challenges associated with navigating shifts in sexual identity and the importance of supportive environments during such transitions.

Models for Assessing Power

The LGBT Power and Control Wheel illustrates the unique dynamics of power and control in LGBTQ+ relationships, highlighting how societal biases, such as homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, are used by abusers to exert control (Loveisrespect, n.d.). Key tactics include emotional abuse, isolation, and economic control, often exacerbated by the partner's marginalized identity. Abusers may manipulate their partner's sense of self-worth, limit access to supportive communities, or threaten legal or social consequences, such as "outing" a partner or using children as leverage. These dynamics underscore the relational power imbalances inherent in LGBTQ+ relationships, where external social pressures and internalized stigma are leveraged to maintain control, thereby contributing to a broader context of minority stress and diminished relationship satisfaction (Loveisrespect, n.d.).

The Intersectionality Wheel of Privilege and Oppression is another model for understanding how power operates across multiple, intersecting social identities such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and class (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.). Rooted in Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, the wheel demonstrates that power is not evenly distributed; instead, individuals experience varying degrees of privilege or marginalization depending on the configuration of their identities. In relational contexts, especially within queer partnerships, these intersecting identities shape power dynamics by influencing who holds social, legal, or economic authority. For example, a White, cisgender, able-bodied partner may experience greater societal validation and access to resources than a racialized, transgender, or undocumented partner, creating imbalances that extend into the intimate sphere. These layered systems of power not only affect relationship roles and decision-making but also determine whose experiences are centered and whose are marginalized (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality is about understanding race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, and other areas of social identities and social inequalities (Crenshaw, 2018). Intersectionality assumes that a person is influenced by their intersecting social and cultural identities and their romantic partners' (Baierl-Kwok & Rostosky, 2023). This perspective views marginalized and privileged identities as the result of interconnected systems of power that shape experiences (Baierl-Kwok & Rostosky, 2023). Queer individuals face oppression not only due to their queer identity but also because of their sexual, racial, and gender expressions. Intersectionality recognizes that both personal and partner identities influence their lived experiences. Clients imbibe the cultural values of their society. Therefore, a research methodology that accounts for intersectionality allows for a "systematic examination of power dynamics" (Karimi, 2020). This allows researchers to capture the interaction between individuals and social locations, as well as the power relations among various social locations (Ummak et al., 2024), thereby enhancing therapeutic practice, expanding theory, and deepening teaching practices to best serve all individuals (Grzanka et al., 2017).

Recent research has highlighted the role of partner affirmation in shaping relational power and satisfaction within transgender and non-binary partnerships (Scott et al., 2025). The authors found that relationship satisfaction among transgender and nonbinary adults was indirectly influenced by partner gender through perceived partner affirmation, underscoring how power operates through validation, recognition, and emotional safety rather than dominance. These findings align with socioculturally attuned perspectives that conceptualize relational power as shared influence that supports emotional attunement, equity, and relational well-being.

Summary

The literature on emotional intimacy, power dynamics, sociocultural attuned practices, attachment, gender socialization, and intersectionality reveals complex interconnections that shape how individuals experience and express vulnerability in romantic relationships. Emotional intimacy is influenced by both relational and sociocultural factors, including gendered expectations and intersectional identities (e.g., sexual orientation, race, and gender). Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of secure emotional bonds for relationship satisfaction, yet research shows that attachment patterns vary across gender and sexual orientation, with individuals in queer relationships often facing unique challenges (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Gender socialization, particularly through norms of vulnerability and emotional expression, plays a pivotal role in shaping relational dynamics. Men, particularly in heteronormative contexts, may suppress vulnerability, while women are often socialized to be more emotionally open (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). These dynamics intersect with broader cultural and racial identities, where marginalized groups may experience compounded barriers to emotional intimacy due to stigma, discrimination, or cultural norms around emotional expression (Elder et al., 2015).

Despite significant progress in understanding the role of attachment, gender, and cultural norms in emotional intimacy, gaps remain in exploring how intersectional identities—particularly in queer relationships—impact intimacy and power dynamics. Much of the literature has focused on heterosexual and cisgender couples, leaving a notable gap in research that integrates multiple identities, such as race, sexual orientation, and gender, within the context of emotional intimacy. Furthermore, the neurobiological aspects of emotional intimacy, which can deepen our understanding of how attachment and power dynamics manifest biologically, remain underexplored. The need for socioculturally attuned practices is underscored, especially for

practitioners working with diverse populations whose relational dynamics are shaped by varying experiences of marginalization and privilege. This gap in the literature indicates a clear need for a phenomenological qualitative study that explores how intersectional identities influence emotional intimacy, power dynamics, and attachment processes, particularly within marginalized communities.

Most existing research tends to focus on gay and lesbian couples, with limited representation of bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, and asexual individuals. This created a gap in understanding the unique relational experiences and challenges across the full spectrum of queer identities. There is a lack of exploration into how race, ethnicity, culture, religion, socioeconomic status, and disability intersect with queer identity to influence relationship dynamics, power, emotional intimacy, and resilience. While there's increasing interest in emotional intimacy, attachment, and differentiation of self in queer couples, these constructs are often measured using tools normed on heterosexual populations. This may overlook the specific ways queer couples express emotional intimacy or negotiate relational boundaries. A qualitative design allows the couples to voice their experiences without the confines of a quantitative instrument.

Building on the reviewed literature, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach used to explore how queer couples experience emotional intimacy and relational power within sociocultural contexts. Given the gaps identified in dyadic, qualitative research on queer relationships, particularly how power and intimacy are co-constructed, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological design guided by socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT). The following chapter details the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, analytic strategy, and ethical considerations that supported an in-depth examination of couples' lived experiences and ensured trustworthiness throughout the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was relational power imbalances in queer couples, particularly regarding how power dynamics and emotional intimacy may intersect and influence romantic relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand experiences of relational power dynamics and emotional intimacy in queer couples. Through sampling queer couples and utilizing semi-structured interviews, I sought to understand the sociocultural context and lived experiences of diverse couples through the participants' worldviews using a transformative paradigm. I incorporated dyadic research to capture experiences and perceptions of emotional intimacy-related factors, such as support, engagement, responsiveness, expression, and closeness, and how they perceive, respond to, and experience relational power. Thematic analysis allowed me to interpret the data and expand on SCAFT in diverse relationships.

Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

This qualitative study sought to understand emotional intimacy and power dynamics in queer couples. A qualitative design empowered the participants to share and interpret their experiences to develop a contextualized and subjective picture. The design choice allowed for exploratory-based research questions without the required hypotheses and pre-determined variables of a quantitative design (Sheperis et al., 2023). This study aligned with the axiology of a transformative paradigm because it was rooted in the belief that scientific investigation aims to foster social change (Mertens, 2020). This social change effort was supported through representing the diversity within communities, unmasking oppressive power structures, and working toward improved social justice (Mertens, 2020).

Phenomenology was the most appropriate qualitative design for this research study. It incorporated contextual factors without the need to adopt a narrative design centered on life histories. While ethnography would have allowed me to learn the patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of the queer community (Mertens, 2020), it was not in line with my research questions and would be a better fit for a future study. I contributed to the theoretical framework of SCAFT without relying on a grounded theory design. While a grounded theory approach would have allowed me to capture participants' lived experiences, due to the in-depth inductive approach, it was less practical for the scope of this dissertation (Charmaz, 2014).

Data was collected through dyadic semi-structured interviews, meaning the couples were interviewed together in one setting. A phenomenological dyadic interview captured similar dynamics to a group interview or focus group, where participants familiar with each other prompted one another to provide additional details in their responses (Blake et al., 2021). This process allowed for the collection of rich data through corroboration, elaboration, and disagreement. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to make meaning out of their experiences and opportunities for elaboration and clarification beyond the limitations of an open-ended questionnaire. Creative forms of data collection, such as photovoice (Hahn, 2021), were ruled out for this research proposal due to feasibility related to data collection and analyses procedures after consultation with my dissertation committee.

Literature indicates that neither individual nor joint interviews with couples are clearly superior, as each method has its own strengths and weaknesses (e.g., Braybrook et al., 2017). However, dyadic interview data collection and analysis is congruent with the epistemology and axiology of the marriage and family therapy field. Clinical training for MFTs emphasizes

understanding and treating relational processes through involving the system in therapy (Wittenborn et al., 2013).

By engaging with both partners together for the interview, the dyadic interviews explored the couples' lived experiences through a phenomenological lens, using shared conversations to o bserve and examine the dynamics and qualities of their relationship. Bjornholt and Farstad's (2014) dyadic pilot interviews emphasized the importance of situating experiences in the context of the couple relationship. I got a sense of the couple relationship through observing their interactions and how they support one another (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014). I considered how partners responded to and created meaning with each other (Knudson-Martin, 2009; Reynolds & Knudson-Martin, 2015). Rostosky and Riggle (2017) emphasized the need to shift to a dyadic framework when inquiring about the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural sources of minority stress that affect romantic relationships. Through recruiting and involving both members of the couple, I captured multiple viewpoints of the relational concepts, power, and intimacy to best inform clinical practice.

Other studies have demonstrated additional strengths of dyadic interviews. For example, joint interviews can encourage male partners to participate (Braybrook et al., 2017). Couples jointly interviewed demonstrated a higher level of commitment and lower levels of attachment insecurity (Barton et al., 2020) and viewed it as a positive shared experience (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014). Joint interviews can be shorter, while allowing me to capture more couple experiences with fewer interviews (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014). While dyadic interviews can capture co-constructed narratives, the presence of a partner may lead to self-censorship, especially when discussing uncomfortable topics that could threaten the relationship, evoke conflict, or challenge personal boundaries (Kamali et al., 2020). The proposed study's factors,

such as power imbalances, communication patterns, and relational history, may influence each partner's willingness to share candidly in a joint setting. Given the joint interview format, I attended to communication patterns and used intentional probes from my interview guide that promote equitable dialogue. I monitored dynamics in real time, and gently intervened to ensure both partners had space to speak. Drawing on SCAFT (Knudson-Martin et al., 2015a), I fostered a collaborative, nonjudgmental environment that encouraged mutual reflection and supported each partner's voice.

The data consists of the semi-structured interviews and behavioral observations and reflections documented in the research journal. Interviews were audio and video recorded on Zoom. I took notes during all dyadic interviews (McCoy, 2017) to observe how the participants respond to and create meaning with each other (Reynolds & Knudson-Martin, 2015). Blake et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of observational notetaking to record non-verbal communication, such as "sighs, murmurs, hunched shoulders, darting eyes" that could indicate "contrasting or shifting perspectives" between members of each couple (p. 6). The research journal had space for reflective information after each interview to continue bracketing experiences, write questions for analysis, or inform the follow-up interview.

After the data collection, I transcribed the initial interviews and reviewed research journal entries. Thematic analysis was used to code, categorize, and interpret the interview transcripts and research journal entries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; S. P. M. Miller, 2023). This process guided my email to each couple seeking clarification, member checking initial themes and interpretations, and checking for data saturation (Barbour, 2014). I then continued the analysis process, utilizing the participants' feedback to inform my emerging themes.

Population and Sample

The inclusion criteria was couples in queer relationships who consider themselves to be in a committed relationship for at least three years (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). Couples dating three or more years show similar trends to couples in their first two years of marriage, and can be used to understand satisfaction, commitment, and romantic relationship quality (Freeman et al., 2023). The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences (n.d.) also shared that from 18 to 36 months, couples settle into their relationship, learning to communicate, address issues, work toward shared goals, develop coping strategies for stress, manage finances, show affection, and build emotional control. They create both short- and long-term goals for personal and relationship growth. Through recruiting queer couples who have been dating three or more years, this study could capture more robust relationship information and understand daily patterns and connection.

I recognized that long-distance relationships may be more common in some communities, including queer communities, and sought to balance inclusivity with consistency in the interview process. Couples who did not live together were therefore eligible to participate, provided they were physically together during the interview. Although this criterion was clearly communicated during recruitment, all couples in the final sample were cohabitating at the time of participation.

My initial target sample size was twelve couples. Research indicates that saturation is typically achieved with ten interviews (Coppolla et al., 2021; Mertens, 2020). Additional couples would have been recruited if necessary, but saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Glaser et al., 2017). A criterion-based purposive selection process was used with the intent to recruit a diverse queer couples sample regarding identities, such as ethnicity, age, relationship orientation, gender identity, and sexual orientation. SCAFT focuses on *how* voices are included rather than

who is included (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019); therefore, the sampling focused on the inclusiveness of diversity in race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, health, and gender identity (e.g., Coppola et al., 2021; Haas & Lannutti, 2022; Park & Chung, 2023).

I wanted to choose cases that provided new insights and perspectives for information-rich data (Gentles et al., 2015). Therefore, I specifically chose community organizations, social media, and networks that cater to BIPOC and queer groups to promote recruitment of diverse voices. I did not limit my sample to a specific demographic, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, religion, or location. For initial recruitment, flyers were posted at counseling sites, distributed through professional listservs, queer-friendly community spaces, libraries, coffee shops, and social media sites. Initial participants were asked to refer other couples using snowball sampling (Mertens, 2020). In the event that more than 12 couples met the eligibility criteria, I created a plan. I asked all respondents to complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix A), and I prioritized selection based on representative demographic factors, including age, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, gender, relationship length, religion, income, language, and health status. I would have placed couples not initially selected on a waitlist. Fortunately, that was not the case, and all interested and eligible participants completed the study.

Materials

Eligibility was verified when interested parties filled out the Jotform eligibility questions. Couples could then view the informed consent and complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). The demographic questionnaire included time age, gender, pronouns, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, relationship length, religion, income, health status, socioeconomic status, and location. I then emailed them a link to schedule the interview using Calendly.

The semi-structured interview was conducted using an interview guide (Appendix B). The interview length balanced the need for in-depth information with participant comfort, interest, and attention (Mwita, 2022). Participant interviews lasted between 46 and 74 minutes. The guide captured questions aligned with the research purpose and questions. The interview questions focused on exploring emotional intimacy and power within the current relationship, the couples' history of experiences of power and emotional intimacy in romantic relationships, their perception of gender socialization and cultural influences on these areas. The study utilized questions from the Contemporary Couples Study Interview Guide used in grounded theory research for SCAFT (Knudson-Martin, 2009). The open-ended questions were also informed by the Relational Ethics Scale (Hargrave et al., 1991), The Intimate Justice Scale (Jory, 2004), Brief Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Engagement Scale (Sandberg et al., 2024), and the Circle of Care from Socioemotional Relationship Therapy (Knudson-Martin, 2023). After transcription and initial analysis, I emailed each participant a transcript of the first interview along with a summary of initial themes. Participants were given the opportunity to review, clarify, or elaborate on any initial themes or the transcript.

Study Procedures

I compiled all recruitment, informed consent, and application materials for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through National University. During this process, I obtained permission to recruit at all private spaces. After IRB approval, I began recruiting study participants through the approved counseling sites, queer-friendly community spaces, social media sites, and online boards. Eligibility was verified when interested parties filled out the Jotform eligibility questions. Couples could then view the informed consent and complete the

demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). I then emailed them a link to schedule a first interview using Calendly.

Next, the dyadic semi-structured interview was completed on Zoom. It was audio and video-recorded, transcribed for analysis, and stored securely. Couples were asked to be in the same physical space when they participated in the interview for continuity across interviews. I received verbal confirmation that they each had a chance to review the informed consent at the beginning of the interview before starting to record and collect data. The length of the interviews spanned 46 to 74 minutes. Each interview question includes probes tied to research interests, and there was room to clarify and explore questions based on participant responses. The interview questions were emailed ahead of time to participants. I took notes during and after the interview (McCoy, 2017) and completed an entry in a research journal with descriptive and reflective information after each interview. At the end of the first interview, I informed them that they would receive a follow-up member checking email. The email focused on member checking initial themes and interpretations. Member checking helps ensure my interpretations are correct and builds continued trust with participants. Participants could also email with any questions or information they wanted to add after the first interview. I continued the analysis process utilizing the participants' feedback.

Methodological issues were addressed throughout the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I reflected on all decisions to ensure they were "ethical, rigorous, and paradigmatically aligned" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 245). I used interpersonal reflexivity to consider power differentials between participants and me during recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I consulted peers and my dissertation committee, who were experienced with working with a minority population regarding issues of

cultural sensitivity, along with engaging in my own critical reflexivity and monitoring (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

The socioculturally attuned coding system (SACS) is a structured qualitative analytic framework rooted in the principles of SCAFT. However, SACS requires training to be used effectively to ensure that the coding is both accurate and aligned with the values of cultural responsiveness and relational equity embedded in SACS. The training includes reviewing the coding manual, practicing with transcripts, and establishing inter-rater reliability calibrations within a team. Therefore, this coding system was not feasible for this dissertation. Instead, interpretative phenomenological thematic analysis was used to code, categorize, and interpret the transcribed interview transcripts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After transcribing the interviews, I close-read each transcript to become familiar with the content and take notes for initial, manual coding. This phase allowed me to engage directly with the data and identify emerging patterns. Once the initial review was complete, I used NVivo (Lumivero, 2023), a qualitative data analysis software available to National University students, to support the main coding process. NVivo assisted in organizing, managing, and refining codes across the dataset. While I was responsible for developing the themes based on the coded data, NVivo was instrumental during the results write-up phase. When necessary, I could efficiently retrieve, and present illustrative quotes linked to my specific codes and themes.

I noted relevant data from the interview and created initial codes and categories to answer my research questions. Consistent with Clarke and Braune's (2013) reflexive thematic analysis, initial codes were generated to capture all relevant data while remaining closely attuned to participants' meanings. Codes were developed at a comparable level of abstraction and applied

in a mutually exclusive manner, such that each segment of data was coded into a single category to support analytic clarity. I moved back and forth between the data and the themes using inductive and deductive reasoning and interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking was incorporated into the analysis process to refine themes (Aronson, 1995).

I committed to awareness of bias since the data selections, coding, and themes are defined subjectively by the researcher (S. P. M. Miller, 2023). Reflexivity is one method for maintaining awareness using a set of continuous and collaborative practices to critique, appraise, and evaluate how my subjectivity and context influence the research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I bracketed my pre-understanding of the topic to create transparency and increased trustworthiness of the analysis and interpretation of data (Moustakas, 2011). Reflexive journaling allowed me to identify biases and values associated with intimacy and power that may have impacted my data collection and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I disclosed how my experiences, knowledge, training, and emotions influenced the research and was explicit about my role and my relationships in the write-up (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study's results must be consistent with the data collected to increase the trustworthiness in the inferences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, I used several methods to increase trustworthiness and confirmability through the design. My note-taking explained how I arrived at my conclusions and discussed my decision-making for the study (Darawsheh, 2014). During analysis, I focused on thick descriptions (Mertens, 2020) and looked for outliers and unexpected findings that contrast or disconfirm findings in the recent literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I remained transparent to build confidence in my results. By utilizing transparency, I ensured accuracy in my data collection and results. Due to the nature of qualitative research, there were no *facts* in my interpretations. Therefore, I included direct quotes

in my results section, and provided recruitment procedures, interview questions, analysis process, and accurate information about participant dropout in my dissertation. I used member checking and interview recordings to compare and confirm findings. Since the study's focus was on transferability rather than external validity (Willis, 2012), maximum variation in my sample through a focus on recruiting diverse participants provided increased transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation also increased trustworthiness (Dixon et al., 2016). My dissertation chair and subject matter expert had access to my data as a source of audit trail and served as triangulation during analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interview served as a prolonged engagement to get a deeper sense of the participants' daily lives. The email allowed participants to provide feedback on the initial analysis and increase trustworthiness in the data analysis and interpretation.

Assumptions

This study included several assumptions. The first assumption was that all participants were open and honest in their responses to the interview questions. Since this is a self-selection study using convenience sampling, there was an assumption that couples were already open to discussing the topics of power and emotional intimacy. Due to the design of dyadic interviews, though, the partners may have influenced each other's answers. There are other assumptions based on previous research that are important to acknowledge in both the data collection process and analysis. For example, couples with power imbalances may have a different interview process than those with shared power in their relationship. Power inequities can impact emotional safety due to reactivity rather than emotional attunement (Leonhardt et al., 2020), and participants may hesitate to share vulnerably (B. Young & Seedall, 2024). Couples with a sense

of shared power may demonstrate mutual empathy that creates security, validation, and connection in the interviews (Fishbane, 2023). Couples who value intimacy and closeness may notice more effective emotional communication and expressive skills in their relationships and remain aware of issues regarding power and equality (Jonathan, 2009). This may allow them to mitigate any impact of power on their intimacy.

I must also consider my own assumptions from a third-order perspective (McDowell et al., 2023). My awareness of societal context and power dynamics is a foundational and integrated part of professional knowledge across all cultural contexts. I approach therapy from a systems perspective, recognizing and attuning to the impact of power, privilege, and societal structures. Self-reflection is central to my clinical practice as a couples and family therapist. I regularly examine my own biases and privileges to ensure I am culturally responsive and aware of power dynamics in sessions. I must consider assumptions about relational processes that stem from my gender socialization as a woman, grounded in a heteronormative, Westernized view of the Millennial generation as I move through this study. I strive to create an open, collaborative space where difficult topics, such as intimacy and power, can be discussed in my clinical practice, and I hope to bring this approach to the dyadic interviews.

Limitations

There were a few limitations considered with this study. The first challenge was recruiting a diverse sample, which involved including various identities and cultural contexts. I built relationships with other researchers, organizations, and clinicians who provided ideas and support for recruitment. When I did connect with prospective participants, I used socially-just disclosure regarding the purpose of the study, what would happen with the data collected, and

how the research plans to utilize what it finds to benefit its community (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013).

Another limitation lay within the qualitative methodology. Since the study relied on self-reporting through interviews, there was the chance that participants provided socially desirable answers or were influenced by their perceptions of what is *normal* or expected as answers to the interview questions. Due to the smaller sample size for qualitative methodology, the results may only transfer to a similar sample and context (Mertens, 2020). Queer relationships can differ significantly depending on the cultural context and societal attitudes toward queer individuals, so the results may not apply across all cultural groups and geographic locations.

Lastly, couples who self-select and agree to participate in dyadic interviews might have more openness and awareness when it comes to discussing issues of power in the relationship. I may not have recruited as many couples who experience greater imbalances within the relationship since the imbalance of power might make them less comfortable to participate in a dyadic interview. Participation bias may be present in two-partner studies since dyadic studies tend to include a higher proportion of high-functioning couples and individuals who are more satisfied with their relationships (Hoff & Beougher, 2010). The authors also noted that couples involved in dyadic data collection may vary in both relationship and demographic factors, such as being more established individually (e.g., older, higher income) and as a couple (e.g., longer relationship duration, more children, greater commitment, and higher satisfaction). In addition to recruitment, the interview process may have been impacted by the couple's power dynamics. For example, couples who exhibit confidence in their mutually supportive relationships feel more comfortable questioning or cueing each other during joint interviews (Blake et al., 2021).

Delimitations

Sampling and the interview guide were the focus for delimitations. The sample was limited to queer couples in a relationship for three or more years within which both members identify as queer. Couples in this range show similar patterns to newlywed couples, offering insights into satisfaction, commitment, and relationship quality (Freeman et al., 2023). They have settled into their relationship and have improved communication, conflict resolution, and emotional control (Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, n.d.).

The interview questions were based on answering the research questions. Questions about sexual intimacy were directly excluded because communication about sexual intimacy differs (Mazur, 2025). Emotional and sexual intimacy are distinct and can exist separately in a relationship (Mazur, 2025). Yoo et al. (2014) found a moderate correlation between emotional and sexual intimacy. The authors found that sexual satisfaction predicted emotional intimacy, and emotional intimacy did not predict sexual satisfaction. Interview questions will discuss conflict in the context of power and intimacy, but not explicitly seek to understand intimate partner violence. Even though sexual intimacy and intimate partner violence are not explicitly asked about, couples could and did discuss them briefly in the interviews.

Ethical Assurances

IRB approval from National University was obtained before recruitment and data collection began. All materials, including the interview questions, eligibility requirements, recruitment material, and informed consent, were provided for IRB approval. The IRB assessed the study's feasibility and reviewed all ethical issues related to human subjects research and approved any changes throughout the study. I completed the Institutional Training Initiative

(CITI) training course called Social & Behavioral Education (SBE) regarding ethical research with human subjects every three years (IRB, 2023).

The informed consent illustrated that voluntary participation meant that participants could revoke their consent at any point in the study. The research used the AAMFT Code of Ethics Standard V as a guide (AAMFT, 2015) when creating informed consent to outline the methods, the participants' commitment, the risks and benefits, the right to decline or withdraw participation, and data confidentiality. The purpose section outlined the benefits to the participants and their community and the emotional risks. The emotional risks were related to interview questions on personal topics. Participants knew they could skip any questions that created discomfort or voluntarily revoke their consent at any point in the study. Participants could choose to stop the interview at any time or choose not to participate in the second interview. I included resources related to individual therapy, support groups, and crisis lines in case there was a risk of imminent danger to self, others, or property, disclosure of intimate partner violence, or concerns about mental health. The limits of confidentiality were clearly outlined to ensure transparency about my role as a mandated reporter. Participants were informed that while their privacy and confidentiality would be protected throughout the study, there were some legal exceptions. This included disclosing an intent to harm oneself or others, reports of abuse or neglect involving minors, elders, or dependent adults, or if data is subpoenaed by a court.

The steps for confidentiality were explained in the informed consent for participants. All notes, consent forms, and audio and video recordings were securely stored. Identifying information was kept separately from the raw data and research journal to ensure confidentiality. All electronic information will be password-protected through Dropbox in accordance with IRB

requirements. Only the research team had access to the identifiable data, and no published information is identifiable. Direct quotes have pseudonyms (IRB, 2023). I destroyed all the recordings after the transcription and member checks.

There were potential ethical issues related to recruiting dyads. Each participant had access to the written informed consent to review prior to scheduling an interview. I reviewed the key points of the informed consent, asked if they had each reviewed the informed consent, and obtained verbal consent from each participant before beginning. If it appeared that a participant felt coerced by their partner or did not consent to the study, the dyad would not have been part of the study. I considered the compensation for dyads in relation to recruitment and voluntary participation. Compensation can promote participation in research studies. However, it must be appropriate and not induce coercion to participate. Wittenborn et al. (2013) recommended that both members of the dyad individually be compensated so that each is assured to receive the benefits of compensation and an acknowledgement of their individual contributions. All participants individually received a ten dollar gift card as an incentive for participation. The compensation was sent through an online gift card to their email. Therefore, each couple received twenty dollars in gift cards.

Summary

The study explored the intersection of emotional intimacy and relational power dynamics within queer couples. Specifically, it gathered insights about how couples define, experience, and negotiate intimacy and power in their relationships. The research used a qualitative phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of queer couples. Data collection involved a recorded dyadic semi-structured interview and research journal entries. Thematic analysis was used to analyze interview data and identify themes related to emotional intimacy

and relational power. Member checking was used to refine themes and ensure trustworthiness of the interpretations (Creswell & D. L. Miller, 2000). Reflexive journaling and triangulation helped maintain trustworthiness and credibility throughout the study. I engaged in self-reflection throughout the study to account for personal biases and values, ensuring transparency in data interpretation as an ethical standard.

The study followed additional ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality. The study was limited by the qualitative methodology, such as the sampling size and eligibility requirements. The study focused specifically on emotional intimacy, excluding questions related to sexual intimacy and intimate partner violence. Through the use of credible research methods, the study contributed to the understanding of emotional intimacy and relational power in queer couples, informing therapeutic practices and promoting social justice in relationship counseling.

Chapter 3 described the qualitative phenomenological methodology, including the research design, participant recruitment, data collection procedures, and analytic approach used to examine emotional intimacy and relational power in queer couples through a socioculturally attuned lens. With the methodological framework established, Chapter 4 presents the findings derived from the dyadic interviews. This chapter outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged through reflexive thematic analysis, illustrating how queer couples described and made sense of emotional intimacy, power dynamics, and contextual influences within their romantic relationships.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this study was relational power imbalances in queer couples, particularly how power dynamics and emotional intimacy intersected and influenced romantic relationships. These inequities can create relationship strain, limit coping strategies, and lead one partner's interests and experiences to shape relational patterns (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023; McDowell et al., 2022). Such imbalances are harmful because the less powerful partner frequently accommodates the other's needs and receives less support, limiting intimacy (Jenks et al., 2024). Therapists risk reinforcing or overlooking these dynamics without a framework tailored to queer couples, as no empirically tested model for addressing relational power in these contexts yet exists (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Pentel et al., 2021). This study explored the gap in present research by exploring how power, intimacy, and sexual minority identity intersect to inform culturally attuned clinical practices.

Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand experiences around relational power dynamics and emotional intimacy in queer couples. The study incorporated dyadic research to capture couples' experiences of power dynamics and emotional intimacy factors such as attunement, support, engagement, responsiveness, and emotional expression. I will outline the data's trustworthiness by addressing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. The chapter will introduce the participants by presenting their demographic information. Then I will provide the results and answer the three research questions. Lastly, I will evaluate the findings in light of the existing research and theoretical framework, SCAFT.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness is the foundation for demonstrating rigor and integrity in qualitative inquiry, providing a framework through which researchers can evaluate the quality of their data and interpretations, and readers can have confidence in a qualitative study's methods, data, analysis, and findings (Stahl & King, 2020). To establish trustworthiness, qualitative researchers must ensure their findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. Credibility is confidence in the accuracy of the findings. Dependability demonstrates consistency in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, thus illustrating that another researcher would arrive at the same themes. Confirmability is the extent to which the results are consistent and free from researcher bias. Lastly, the extent to which the findings apply to other contexts and settings reflects their transferability (Stahl & King, 2020).

Credibility

In alignment with Ahmed (2024), credibility was strengthened through triangulation, which enhanced rigor by comparing results across member checking, reflexivity, and peer debriefing. Member checking increased the accuracy, credibility, and confirmability of the methods and findings (Johnson et al., 2020). A transcript of their interview was sent to each participant to verify that the transcription accurately reflected their experience. Peer debriefing with my dissertation chair and colleagues allowed me to capture reactions to initial research procedures and, subsequently, to findings and emerging themes.

Reflexivity was also central to building credibility. Throughout data collection and analysis, I critically examined my positionality, attending to how my internal responses and assumptions could shape the research process, particularly during the interview process and thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I monitored how I asked follow-up questions and

reflected on my learning about queerness in relationships. Peer debriefing with my dissertation chair and colleagues provided an additional external check, ensuring that findings were not interpreted solely through my individual perspective but were examined and challenged in dialogue with others. These steps built trust that each theme came directly from the clients. However, bracketing through reflexive journaling was another piece of building trustworthiness.

Transferability

Transferability was enhanced through the use of thick, detailed contextual descriptions of setting, procedures, participants, and results (Ahmed, 2024). The descriptions support the readers' ability to determine whether findings can hold in comparable relational and sociocultural environments. The study's transferability was also supported by using purposive sampling to select a specific group knowledgeable about the topic and who could best answer the research questions (Sheperis et al., 2023). I captured multiple sexual identities within the queer community, which included gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, demisexual, pansexual, heteroflexible, and queer individuals. I did not have individuals in my study who stated they identified as asexual. The participant demographics are included in the results section, allowing readers and researchers to understand to whom the findings are most transferable.

The semi-structured interview guide allowed for rich data gathering, thus enabling thick descriptions to support interpretations of the data (Stahl & King, 2020). The guide was based on questions from the Relational Ethics Scale, Intimate Justice Scale, Socio-Emotional Relationship Therapy model, and the Brief Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Engagement Scale and is included in the appendices, thus allowing other researchers to follow the same guide.

Dependability

Dependability was strengthened through clear methodological documentation and a maintained audit trail. I provided an in-depth description of the research design, methodology, and procedures. Each stage of the research process, including participant recruitment, data collection, and transcription to coding and thematic analysis, was carefully documented to establish an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This detailed process increased transparency and allowed others to trace analytic decisions and replicate the study's procedures (Ahmed, 2024). Consistent data collection procedures at each of those stages further supported dependability. I adhered to a semi-structured interview protocol while employing reflection and summarization during the interviews to confirm accuracy in capturing participants' perspectives. I followed the interview guide while allowing flexibility for participants' unique narratives to emerge. I was reflexive in the moment and was careful about how I responded and asked questions. I used reflection and summarizing to ensure I heard the clients correctly. At the end of each session, I summarized the themes from the interview and provided an opportunity to clarify and elaborate. This served as a form of member checking. These steps ensured the data collection process was systematic and responsive to participants' lived experiences (Creswell & D. L. Miller, 2000).

Confirmability

Confirmability was strengthened through peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling. These practices help ensure findings reflect participants' experiences rather than researcher bias and support greater analytic transparency (Ahmed, 2024). To address confirmability, I needed to first consider what assumptions I was bringing into this research. My professional identity as a couples therapist and my prior work with socioculturally attuned models could have influenced how I interpreted participants' narratives. Thus, I documented my

assumptions in a reflexive journal and discussed them with my dissertation chair and peers. I wrote about my expectations regarding emotional intimacy, attachment, and power in queer relationships, my theoretical orientation toward socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT), and my beliefs about equity and mutuality in couple dynamics. Consistent with Stahl and King's (2020) discussion of bracketing, I intentionally separated descriptive observations from interpretive reflections to distinguish participants' experiences from my analytical lens. I maintained my reflexive journal through the data collection and analysis processes, documenting decisions, and revisiting initial assumptions to ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' words. This reflexive stance increased confidence that themes emerged from participants' narratives rather than preconceived theoretical frameworks. Throughout the process, rigorous data collection techniques and documentation were used to assure dependability and confirmability of the final data set.

Confirmability was also attended to by implementing strategies to ensure findings were grounded in the participants' perspectives rather than researcher bias (Sheperis et al., 2023). Throughout data collection and analysis, data were revisited and cross-checked to maintain accuracy and reduce the influence of personal assumptions. An explicit coding schema was developed to document how codes and themes were identified, allowing for transparency and potential replication by other researchers (Allan & Eatough, 2016). Additionally, an audit trail of analytic decisions was maintained, including notes on how codes were refined and patterns emerged on an Excel sheet. This sheet was submitted and reviewed weekly to my dissertation chair. As the researcher, I acknowledged my professional background as a couples therapist and my familiarity with SERT, attachment theory, and differentiation of self, which could shape how I interpreted participants' narratives. To minimize this bias, I continually engaged in reflexive

questioning, asking myself whether I was truly hearing and representing the themes articulated by participants rather than imposing theoretical frameworks onto their experiences.

Results

This section begins with an overview of the final sample, followed by a presentation of findings organized around the three research questions. Data were collected through dyadic interviews and analyzed using Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. The results are presented through the major themes and subthemes from this process, capturing participants' shared meanings and distinct perspectives.

Participants

The study included 24 participants, making up 12 couples. Participants were recruited until saturation was reached. Each couple is presented along with their demographics. Their relationships spanned from 3 years and 10 months to 26 years (M= 9.61). Their ages spanned from 26 to 69 years old (M = 38.04). Ten individuals identified as ciswomen, seven as cismen, and seven as gender fluid or non-binary. The sexual orientation of individual participants was dispersed and included lesbian (n = 5), gay (n = 5), queer (n = 5), bisexual (n= *4*), pansexual (n = 3), heteroflexible (n = 1), and straight (n = 1). Most of them lived in Oregon (7 couples). The other couples lived in Washington (1 couple), Texas (2 couples), New York (1 couple), and Arizona (1 couple). The majority of participants did not identify a religious or spiritual orientation (n = 13). Some couples identified together: Episcopalian (1 couple), spiritual with no organized religion (1 couple), and Ex-Catholic with currently no affiliation (1 couple). On the other hand, some participants identified with an orientation when their partner did not, including Jewish, Pagan, believing in reincarnation, somewhat spiritual, and Apatheism. The majority of participants were White (n= 17). Other participants identified as Black (n = 2), Caucasian and

Korean (*n* = 1), White and ethnically Mexican (*n* = 1), White Serbian (*n* = 1), and White/Hispanic (*n* = 1). Other participants identified as a Latin/Puerto Rican (*n* = 1) and. Each couple filled out a demographic questionnaire. The following section introduces each couple, using pseudonyms for all participants, and summarizes their responses.

Mary and Sara. Mary and Sara have been together for 3 years and 10 months. They are both in their mid-20s. They both identify as White cisgender women (she/her) and lesbians. Both describe themselves as able-bodied. Mary lives with chronic back pain, PTSD, and OCD that she manages with medication and therapy. Sara has PTSD and anxiety that she manages with therapy. Mary is a full-time graduate student in a counseling program, and Sara is a full-time park ranger. They both have bachelor's degrees and identify as middle-class. Both noted no religious or spiritual orientation. Both moved to Oregon three years ago from other states.

Ally and Charlie. Ally and Charlie have been together for 11 years and are married. Ally is in her early 30's. She is genderfluid, non-binary (they/she/he), and identifies as pansexual and queer. They come from a White, non-Hispanic background and describe their health as poor due to multiple chronic conditions that limit mobility and employment. However, their mental health has improved significantly in recent years. They have a master's degree and are currently unemployed due to their disabilities. Charlie is in his mid-30s. He is a man (he/him) who identifies as heteroflexible. He is Caucasian and Korean and describes his health as good. He has a bachelor's degree and works remotely full-time in the tech industry with an income that supports them both. He noted their financial situation is "very good" as evidenced by his salary, their retirement savings, and owning a home. Charlie noted apatheism, and Ally reported no religious or spiritual orientation. They live in Texas, and are moving to Europe next month due to concerns about the current political climate.

Samantha and Katie. Samantha and Katie have been together for 7 years and are both in their mid-30s. Samantha is a White cisgender woman (she/her) who identifies as gay. She manages chronic health conditions while experiencing improved mental health following past post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She has a bachelor's degree and works as a nurse manager. Her religion/spiritual orientation is ex-Catholic. Katie is a White woman (she/her) who identifies as gay/pansexual but dislikes labels. She is White and Mexican. She manages a chronic health condition with medication and diet, and attends therapy for her mental health needs. She works full-time, seven days per week. They have owned a home for a few years. Katie was raised Catholic and baptized, but had a Jewish mom. She now identifies as an atheist. They live together in Oregon.

Victoria and Laura. Victoria and Laura have been together for 26 years and married for 9 years. Victoria and Laura are both White, lesbian, women (she/her) in their late 60's. They both view their physical and mental health as good and their financial health as comfortable. Victoria completed two years of college and is a comedian. Her religion/spiritual orientation is spiritual. Neither are affiliated with an organized religion. Laura is a retired police officer. Victoria has three adult children in their 30s and 40s. Laura has no biological children. Together, they have seven grandchildren. They live together in Texas.

Lily and Zara. Lily and Zara have been together for 12.5 years and married for five years. They are both in their early 30s. Lily is a bisexual woman (she/they). They come from a White and Hispanic background. She is neurodivergent and "mentally healthy lately." She has a bachelor's degree and is currently unemployed. Her religion/spiritual orientation is nontheistic and somewhat spiritual. Zara is a White transgender lesbian woman (she/her). She describes her health as good and is not spiritual or religious. She has a doctorate and is employed full-time.

Together, the couple identifies as a single-income, working-class household. They recently moved from Arizona and live together in Oregon.

Jason and David. Jason and David have been together for 3.5 years and married for a year. Jason is in his early 30's and David is in his late 20's. Both of them are White gay men (he/him/his). They both identify with having below-average health. Jason is in treatment for anxiety. David has ADHD and noted cultural norms that do not encourage therapy. David moved from Serbia with a student visa. He has a high school education and recently started massage therapy school, while working part-time. He feels less financially comfortable. Jason has a bachelor's degree and works at an accounting firm. Jason paid the down payment for their home and his name is on the loan. They live together in Oregon.

Peyton and Kevin. Peyton and Kevin have been together for 8 years. Peyton is a White bisexual woman (she/her/hers) in her mid-30s. She manages ADHD and chronic pain issues with medication. Kevin is a White straight man in his mid-50s. He describes his health as "tired but functional." Peyton is an electrician with a bachelor's degree. Kevin is a business owner and electrician. He has two adult children in their 20s. They live together in his home, and she rents out her home. Peyton noted no religious or spiritual orientation. Kevin believes in reincarnation and the philosophy of religion. They live together in Washington.

John and Todd. John and Todd have been together for 9.5 years. John is in his early 40's. He describes himself as on the edge of genderqueer and a "weird cis man" (him/they). He is White and lives with chronic illnesses, such as GI issues, dyslexia, and ADHD. Todd is a trans queer man (he/him) in his mid-40s. He comes from a Latino/Puerto Rican background and describes his health as impacted by chronic medical illnesses, including fibromyalgia, IBS, and anxiety. Todd is a behavior analyst and small business owner. John works as a therapist at

Todd's practice. They both reported no religious or spiritual orientation. They have two adopted teenagers and a one-year-old daughter through what they called *altruistic surrogacy.* They live together in Oregon.

Josh and Sam. Josh and Sam have been together for five years. Josh is a Black bisexual male (he/him) in his late 20's. Sam is a Black queer and bisexual woman (she/her/they) in her late 20's. They both describe their physical and mental health as "good." They both have bachelor's degrees and work full-time, noting financial stress. They both reported no religious or spiritual orientation, although they were culturally connected to their families. They live together in New York State.

Jack and Emma. Jack and Emma have been together for 8 years. Jack is in their mid-30's. They are a White non-binary trans masculine person (they/them) who identifies as queer. They describe their health as able-bodied, athletic, and neurodivergent with ADHD. Emma is in their early 40's. She is a White demi-woman (she/they) who identifies as pansexual. She describes her health as able-bodied and manages ADHD. They both have master's degrees and work in private practice as licensed therapists. They are financially comfortable with spending freedom. Jack is Pagan, and Emma reports no religious or spiritual orientation. They live together in Oregon.

Steve and Chris. Steve and Chris have been together for 10 years. Steve is in his mid-40s and Chris is in his early 50s. They are both White gay men (he/him). They are both Episcopalian and describe their physical and mental health as great. They work together as self-employed realtors. They each have a child from a previous marriage who are similar in age. They live together in Arizona.

Sabrina and Brianna. Sabrina and Brianna have been together for 12 years. Sabrina is in her early 40's and Brianna is in her late 30's. They are both White queer ciswomen (she/her). Sabrina describes her physical and mental health as good. Brianna describes her physical health as good and notes being in long-term therapy for her mental health. Brianna has a master's degree in counseling and is a psychotherapist. Sabrina has a master's degree in education and is a middle school teacher. They identify as lower middle class and "struggling to get by" financially. They live together in Oregon.

Adherence to Research Methods and Design

I maintained fidelity to the chosen qualitative phenomenological methodology and design and remained consistent with the procedures outlined in Chapter 3. Data collection was aligned with the theoretical foundation of socioculturally attuned family therapy (SCAFT). Each phase of the study was conducted systematically to ensure rigor and transparency as I explored participants' lived experiences of emotional intimacy and relational power within their sociocultural contexts.

The anticipated population and sample remained consistent with the proposed design. During recruitment and eligibility screening, some individuals expressed interest in participating but were not eligible for inclusion in the study due to living outside of the United States, being in a relationship for less than three years, or both partners identifying as heterosexual. In addition, the Qualtrics survey platform identified and excluded bot responses during the screening process. All participants who met eligibility criteria and scheduled an interview completed their interview; there were no eligible participants who failed to follow through with scheduling or attendance. All interested and eligible couples were able to participate. Once data saturation was met, recruitment was closed.

The final sample was 12 queer couples in committed relationships of three years or more. Beginning at nine interviews, fewer new themes were arising, and no new themes occurred between the eleventh and twelfth interviews. Therefore, I achieved data saturation as anticipated. The final sample included various identities across ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds, consistent with SCAFT's emphasis on inclusivity (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019). One couple consisted of a bisexual woman and a heterosexual man. They were intentionally retained for comparative insight, which did not alter the design or analytic procedures.

All materials and instruments were implemented as planned. The 60-minute semi-structured interview guide incorporated items adapted from the Relational Ethics Scale (Hargrave et al., 1991), the Intimate Justice Scale (Jory, 2004), and the Circle of Care from Socioemotional Relationship Therapy (Knudson-Martin, 2023). These guided open-ended questions exploring emotional intimacy, power, and sociocultural influences, supporting thick description and alignment with the research purpose (Barbour, 2014).

Procedures adhered to IRB approval. Recruitment occurred through counseling sites, queer-friendly community organizations, and social media. Interested participants completed eligibility screening via Jotform, provided informed consent, and scheduled interviews through Calendly. Dyadic interviews were conducted on Zoom, recorded, transcribed, and securely stored. Interviews ranged from 46 to 74 minutes. Reflexive journaling was maintained to document analytic decisions, monitor positionality, and bracket assumptions (Darawsheh, 2014; Moustakas, 2011). Member checking and peer debriefing further ensured accuracy and credibility (Aronson, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data collection and analysis plan remained consistent with chapter three. Thematic analysis guided the process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting interview transcripts

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). NVivo, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft Word were used in the analytic process. Reflexive journaling, peer consultation, and member feedback enhanced dependability and confirmability throughout the analytic process, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than researcher assumptions (Stahl & King, 2020).

NVivo served as the primary program for organizing and managing the qualitative data. All interview transcripts and analytic materials were imported into NVivo to support the retrieval of data segments. Microsoft Word was used to generate the verbatim transcripts and maintain reflexive materials, including research journal entries and memos written immediately after each interview. Excel was used to develop codes and compare patterns across couples to support theme development. Together, these tools functioned as an integrated workflow. Word housed the raw text and reflexive documentation, NVivo provided a structured space for organizing the data, and Excel enabled cross-case comparison and refinement of emerging themes throughout the reflexive thematic analysis process.

Data analysis followed a six-step process of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization through reading transcripts and journal notes; (2) generating initial codes; (3) grouping codes into categories; (4) identifying and refining themes; (5) verifying interpretations through member checking; and (6) defining and reporting final themes supported by thick description (cite). These systematic steps ensured analytic rigor and transparency. Overall, rigorous data collection procedures, reflexive documentation, and iterative analysis demonstrated adherence to the research design. These practices ensured dependability, confirmability, and credibility, aligning with the phenomenological orientation and SCAFT framework guiding this study.

Analysis Process

Thematic analysis was conducted using both inductive and deductive approaches. I began with inductive analysis and coding to avoid imposing pre-identified codes, followed by deductive analysis to refine and connect the findings. This process was guided by Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-step framework. During the research process, I wrote notes throughout the interviews, marking ideas I had heard in other interviews, connected to SCAFT, or other recent literature. In addition, I maintained a Word document for reflexivity, documenting my internal process and creating lists of initial themes to share with participants for member checking. I then transferred these notes into an Excel sheet, which allowed me to reorganize the data, begin categorizing and condensing themes, and group couples who emphasized similar points. I randomly selected interviews to rewatch and edited the automatic transcriptions generated by Microsoft Word to further refine the data. This first pass ensured transcript accuracy and organized the dialogue by participant. This step also helped me capture details I may have missed during the live interviews, incorporate insights that arose in later sessions, and extract specific quotes for analysis.

Second, I generated initial codes by applying codes to each data segment and highlighting key quotes. Third, I searched for themes by sorting codes into categories, and in the fourth step, I reviewed these themes to identify relationships across codes and other data sources. Fifth, I defined and named the themes, assessing whether they addressed the research questions and selecting exemplars from the interviews to illustrate them. Lastly, I produced a report that integrates these themes into the broader findings of the study.

Emerging Themes

The following section details the findings from the analysis process, organized by the three research questions (Table 1). The participant quotes are utilized to support each research

question and its themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes emerged from the thematic analysis of dyadic interview data and highlights how participants described the processes that foster relational intimacy and equity. The flow chart depicts the interrelated nature of these factors, beginning with building intimacy and culminating in creating a sense of *we-ness.* It demonstrates the participant's experience of how communication practices contribute to trust, mutual understanding, and shared power within relationships.

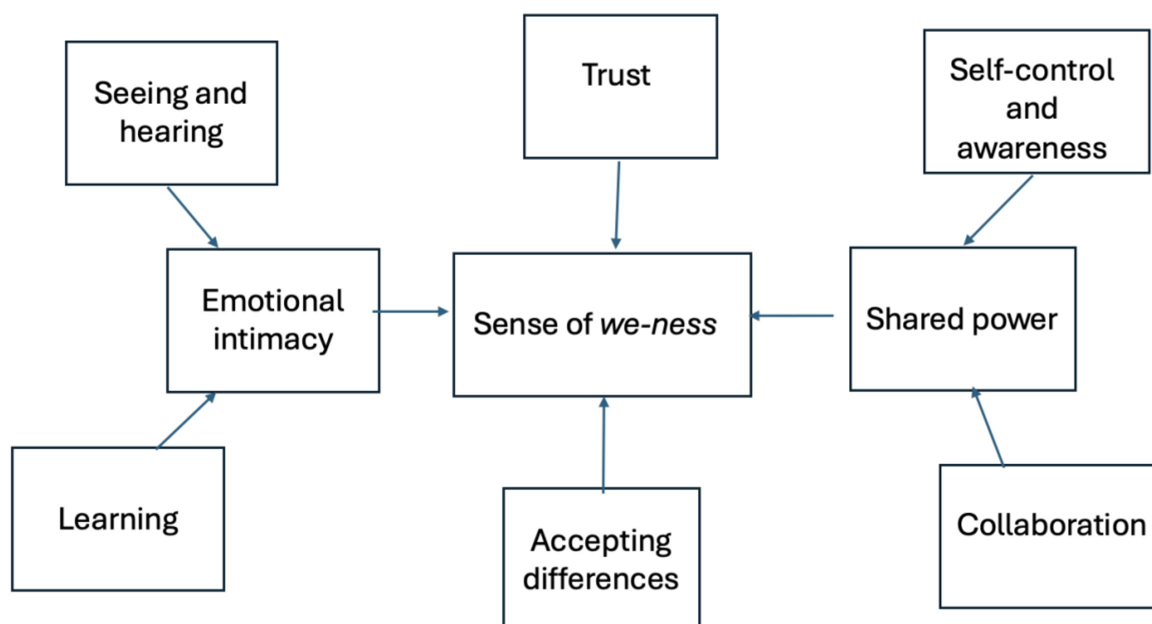
Figure 1 is a flow chart providing a visual depiction of the overarching progression of shared communication factors identified within queer couple dynamics. The figure illustrates the interrelated processes that contribute to communication and connection within queer couple relationships. The flow begins with building intimacy, which involves learning about each other and understanding needs, fostering a sense of being seen and heard. From this foundation, honesty and trust emerge as central components that deepen relational safety. As partners engage in sharing power, they can navigate conflict, supported by self-awareness and self-control. These processes create space for discussing differences and ultimately creating a sense of *we-ness*, reflecting the couples' shared commitment, collaboration, and mutual attunement.

Table 1
Emerging Themes and Participant Contributions

Research Question	Themes	Subthemes	Contribution Frequency
RQ1: How do queer couples define and perceive emotional intimacy factors in their romantic relationship?	1. Sharedness	1.1 Sharing experiences	12
		1.2 Connecting through shared values	12
		1.3 Sense of togetherness that builds trust	12
	2. Turning inward and towards	2.1 Patience and understanding	12
		2.2 Self-awareness, self-control, and growth	12
		2.3 Learning individually and dyadically	12
		2.4 Respecting	12
		2.5 Attraction and affection	12
RQ2: How do queer couples perceive, respond to, and experience power in their romantic relationship?	1. Mutual trust	1.1 Mutual trust in decision-making	12
		1.2 Creating a team	12
	2. (Re)define Power Dynamics	2.1 Adjust based on strengths, preferences, and abilities	12
		2.2 Collaborative decision-making	12
		2.3 Allowing each person to be powerful	10
RQ3: How do queer couples perceive the influence of contextual and societal processes on power dynamics in their romantic relationship?	1. Acknowledge, accept, and accommodate	1.1 Acknowledge the influence of social identity and context	12
		1.2 Accept differences that create imbalance	12
		1.3 Adjust the relationship to accommodate	12

Note. Themes and subthemes were developed through inductive thematic analysis of dyadic interview data.

Figure 1
Shared communication factors in queer couple dynamics.



Note. Adapted from interview coding structure.

Research Question 1: How do queer couples define and perceive emotional intimacy factors in their romantic relationship?

The first research question explored how queer couples define and perceive emotional intimacy factors in their romantic relationships. The themes *sharedness* and *turning inward and towards* captured how partners cultivate closeness, trust, and mutual understanding. Table 2 presents the related subthemes, including (1.1) *sharing experiences*, (1.2) *connecting through shared values*, (1.3) *balancing togetherness and autonomy*, (1.4) *a sense of togetherness that builds trust*, (2.1) *patience and understanding*, (2.2) *self-awareness, self-control, and growth*, (2.3) *learning individually and dyadically*, (2.4) *respecting*, and (2.5) *attraction and affection*. Together, these themes reflected participants' lived experiences of emotional intimacy, such as

cultivating mutual trust, balancing individuality and togetherness, and deepening connection through shared meaning.

Table 2
RQ1. Themes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Sharedness	1.1 Sharing experiences
	1.2 Connecting through shared values
	1.3 Balancing togetherness and autonomy
	1.4 Sense of togetherness that builds trust
2. Turning inward and towards	2.1 Patience and understanding
	2.2 Self-awareness, self-control, and growth
	2.3 Learning individually and dyadically
	2.4 Respecting
	2.5 Attraction and affection

Note. Themes reflect participants' conceptualizations of emotional intimacy as mutual engagement, balance, and growth within the relationship.

Theme 1. Sharedness.

A sense of sharedness was heard throughout the interviews and was depicted through shared experiences, shared values, balancing togetherness and autonomy, and a sense of togetherness that builds trust.

Theme 1.1 Shared Experiences.

As couples discussed sharedness, there was an emphasis on shared interests and experiences. One aspect of sharedness was shared experiences. Participants reflected on shared experiences within their current relationships and individual histories, including coming out, family contexts, hometown influences, and educational experiences. John and Todd described growing up in areas that were dangerous for queer individuals, stating they "bonded over"

sharing about their childhood as the other person “got it” [their experience]. When describing the beginning of their relationship, John and Todd described their relationship as built on “fun and felt exciting.” They later emphasized the tie to their motivation to maintain weekly dates.

Similarly, Jason and David seconded having sharedness in childhood experiences supported their connection, stating, “But I think there's some connection of a childhood for sure. Then we can relate to each other early, especially with our parents as well too.” David felt closer to Jason when he traveled to Europe to meet his family, since Jason could understand more about him.

Many couples discussed finding at least one activity they could enjoy and emphasized having fun together as another form of sharedness. For example, Jack and Emma shared that a favorite memory was dancing with their full attention on each other. It allowed Jack to see Emma confident, stating:

> I think I actually have like a specific moment where I feel like I fell in love with Emma. And it was um, we went out for my birthday when we first started dating and it was the first time we ever danced together and it was magical and um yeah, I just felt like I finally had her full attention in a way that I'd never had it before. And she was a really great dancer and yeah, so that was one of my favorites.

Other couples also specified shared activities. Jack and Emma later described that they can do anything together and specifically found a new activity to mutually focus on. They have developed a sense of pride in their growth together:

> So we used to play tennis together during the pandemic, and Jack’s like a phenomenal athlete. You know, they, they didn't know tennis very well either, but I was quite bad, not very well coordinated, but we both, for the last few years, have really been like working

> at it, you know, independently, together. And there was this time we were playing like last month or something, and we just had like the best fucking rally. Like it was like we were both hitting it like hard and like pretty close to the net, and like we were just getting to it. And I was like, oh my God, you know, like not only did has Jack done this, but like, I've done this too, you know, and we like, got there together, which I thought took a lot of discipline and fortitude. And I felt really in sync when we were doing that. And flow, too.

Lily and Zara also discussed having fun together and enjoyed quality time through shared activities and enjoyed quality time. Zara stated, "I kind of just like anything can be fun with you." Lily added to this stating, "No matter what the activity is, it really feels like that quality time is what's most important. Yeah even if it's just spending a day at home," later talking about being a "shared space." When discussing balancing alone and together time, Zara emphasized it feels important to:

> Share hobbies, like also later on, we're probably going to drink tea we love yeah, we love sharing like tea and coffee with each other and just reading books next to each other, you know, sharing space…. We have a lot of things that like we still do like really enjoy together and it's organic.

Some couples made efforts to create shared time. Laura adjusted her work schedule to join Victoria on her work travel. They shared about finding a fun shared activity even when there are differences in activity preferences, particularly on vacation:

> it was always trying to find things we could do together on an excursion or you know when we weren't doing stuff so that, you know, that was fun, you know, we had fun. We enjoyed that and got to know each other and got to know other people and, you know, and it was that was that was good times, too.

Laura and Victoria valued their time together and found enjoyment in shared activities. Couples found that taking trips together created strong memories. This phenomenon showed up particularly if it meant celebrating their queer identity at Pride events or meeting each other's families. Jack and Emma shared, "We've taken some trips together. I mean, I loved going to Montreal with you like that felt very just romantic and enchanting and fun. We have gone to San Diego Pride a couple times." Emma recalled one trip to San Diego:

> Jack's from San Diego and I really felt initially really welcomed into Jack's family and friend group and it was super fun to like see where they were from and you know, do that and just also like simple, I mean like big events and stuff were fun, but like I just Jack's my favorite person, you know, so like anything that we are doing, like if we're just like watching baseball game or, you know, whatever, like I think that those small moments really stand out to me as well.

Jack and Emma were reflecting on memorable moments together with each other's families. Sabrina and Brianna also reiterated how shared experiences, such as travelling, and dancing, built the foundation of their relationship. They learned the importance of time together and having fun, stating:

> I felt like it was just a really fun start, like had a great time dancing together, was attracted to Brianna, was curious, like had really interesting time getting to know her through conversation. I really like felt like I respected her kind of right off the bat from like hearing about her journey, her experiences, like with school and work and family and, and just goals and dreams. So yeah, it was, yeah, it was I wouldn't say like easy, easy, but it definitely flowed naturally. And I was, yeah, just excited to get to know her more.

Other participants also talked about just enjoying spending time together. Samantha and Katie recalled an early date: “We end up hanging out for like 12 hours just talking and taking so many edibles because we're both trying to be cool. It was really funny. It was fun.” Samantha and Katie noticed their new work schedules now limit their time together. Samantha shared, “It does force you to, like, do things together.” She gave the example of planned activities: “So like, for like, my birthdays, we always make a point to, like, do stuff for our birthdays.” Samantha connected the importance of quality time to the other aspects of their relationship: “I think just having quality time with each other, too. I mean, our schedules are very, very different. And I think that's like a really big issue with some of our stuff right now.”

Couples noticed when they had less time together. For example, Jason and David noticed the need to make a concerted effort to acknowledge the impact of less shared time together:

> It can be too much sometimes. But yeah, we just kind of found our way whenever I just kind of had to let him know, like how often I'm going to be traveling or as far ahead of time. Yeah, and then we mentally prepare for it… I mean when I'm traveling, I think we definitely like you know, we, we FaceTime and stuff like this…Yeah, it just sucks like it, you know, you know, had the feeling was like just like separation was like the first few days when you were with each other for constant period of time and then you kind of leave like you're out of nowhere too so.

In response to traveling more for work and noticing the impact of less quality time together, Jason has prompted more ideas for shared activities, such as ceramics.

Sabrina and Brianna were another of the many couples that acknowledged the toll it takes on their relationship, where there is less shared time:

> I think there's more balance now, more joy, more fun, but it felt like we were just really doubling down, and that I think that did impact our relationship, like our intimacy, our emotional intimacy because we were kind of drained.

At the beginning of each interview, couples were asked about their favorite memories together. Most shared an intention to continue engaging in activities from their favorite memories. For example, David and Jason recalled some of their favorite times together were watching RuPaul Drag Race. They continue watching in the present day and intend to continue.

Many couples shared about a time they got through a challenging experience together, further creating intention in building a safe shared space. For example, Ally shared with Chris:

> The moment I knew that I loved you, um, I have had health issues basically my whole life, um, skin issues in particular, and I had to get some biopsies done that required stitches on like my like groin area, and I had to like delicately clean them. It was really painful, and I remember Chris like helped, you know, dab a little wounds, and it was like a very vulnerable feeling, and really embarrassed to like all of this skin stuff I have going on um and so that was like, yeah. That was one of my like little Inside Out core memories.

Couples discussed the importance of humor as they remembered the importance of fun. Many couples made jokes during the interview. Jack and Emma would acknowledge when something was a joke, used to lighten the discussion of more serious topics like power and roles. For example, Emma stated, “So two kind of like jokes. So one is that we talked about how we're in a boss battle, like from video games, you know, where it's like, which is we're not actually like in a battle.”

Victoria and Laura found humor when recalling conflict, naming a memory from early in the relationship: “She looked at me. She goes, we have a communication problem and I'm not talking about it. And I just started laughing.”

Steve and Chris also lighten the mood around conflict, and shared about their playfulness:

> We play fight, like, like it's funny. It'll be funny. And then just laugh because like, yeah. We will call each other horrible, and then we're like, this is how we are and we think it's the funniest, best thing ever. But then sometimes in mixed company I forget we have to explain ahead. Yeah, we're really. You can be really, it sounds like we're mean and fighting, but we're not.

Together, these descriptions show that humor arose naturally in some couples’ recollections of conflict.

Theme 1.2 Connecting through Shared Values.

This subtheme includes sharing values, leading to dreaming together and feeling more connected. Ally and Charlie shared that they connected through their shared values of adventure and risk tolerance, and aimed to balance them. Ally shares, “I would say that we are both also have very similar like levels of risk tolerance.” Sharing these values led to safety and comfort in making joint decisions and building trust in each other. They gave the examples of their shared dreams to buy a home and move to Europe.

Jack and Emma also spoke about finding shared values. They could create relational values by caring for and understanding their partner's values. Emma explained:

> I would say the pinnacle of our shared values is freedom, and I think that that is something that we, you know, empowering each other… You know, but when it really comes down to it, I think that is our tether is I think that we both care so much about both

> security and diligence and loyalty, but also autonomy and freedom and being honest about who we are and who we are evolving to be.

Sabrina and Brianna spent time creating shared values around connectivity and community. Sabrina described her identity development and how it frames her current values as a teacher and community member:

> My older brother lived here, so I was visiting a lot and became familiar with Portland. But it was really, you know, like really a big part of my forming like a sense of identity in my mid to late 20s. And I think it's something that I just have carried with me into adulthood, whether it's, you know, talking to other queer friends or appreciating their perspective or their experience and feeling like they'll understand kind of what I'm going through in a way that's different than like my straight high school friends. Um, but I, yeah, it, it's been like a really important piece for me. I was like sponsoring pride club and, you know like GSA's and things like that, like trying to kind of continue that spirit of connectivity and community.

Brianna and Sabrina also shared how learning about their values built closeness and connection:

> Pleasure and enjoyment. Like, I mean, we're not hedonists, but like, you know, like whether it's music, food, like kind of spontaneity, like kind of trying to find a way to like have all of that in our lives that are, you know, pretty structured and like full of responsibility is important to us. And like other values I think like kindness and like being like community oriented and compassionate like both of us work in helping professions and I think that bonded us in a way of like kind of seeing that like what's important to you is important to me and like that Sabrina is like a very naturally empathetic person, like made me feel like

> connected to her and and just like we can connect in that way I think we both are just, you know, different ways, but it's like a core kind of value.

Kevin emphasized that Peyton and he have a shared work ethic, stating "We both kinda put a lot of our time and effort into work, really." Peyton reflected on lessons Kevin and her learned prior to their relationship that shaped them individually, particularly around a sense of competitiveness that fosters personal growth, stating, "Competitiveness too, to just like, constantly be pushing yourself to be more, to be better."

Many of the shared experiences connected to the couples' current shared values. For example, John and Todd both wanted to be parents. They share the parenting value of keeping kids safe due to both growing up in dangerous areas as a queer person. John and Todd are also both therapists and share the professional value of disability advocacy due to coping with their own disabilities in the current society. John summarized these shared values:

> Different abilities. Parenting, disability... Just different abilities, yeah. Todd likes to work with disabled children in his job. I did like a clinical rehabilitation track and did like disability focused counseling. Like my client are all like disabled. So I think like that is like a core value. Also valuing the kids and keeping the kids safe to do in different ways.

Shared relationship-oriented values also permeated throughout the interview. Steve and Chris shared the value of family, emphasizing the desire to be close to their families. They received love and support from each of their families. Chris first said, "we're both hardcore family comes first huge for both of us and our in-law family," and later added:

> Steve's family loves me like a lot a lot, a lot, a lot and my family freaking adores him and if we tried to break up our families wouldn't let us because they love each other, you know, like and so I think that's important in a relationship.

When considering difficult conversations, Steve and Chris also reflected shared values of honesty, trust, and accountability. In turn, this created less fear and more security during conflict. Steve reflected, “It's the accountability, right? We, it's the whole, our whole world is, is, is honesty, trust, and accountability. I mean, we talk to each other all the time.”

One area that stood out was that no one spoke about sharing similar religious beliefs. Instead, Katie commented that she teaches Samantha about religion. Samantha added, “Sometimes she'll point out things culturally that I'm like, that's religious? And she's like, yes. And I'm like, what the hell? What is it? Religion is like everything. Yes. And I just don't know.”

Theme 1.4 Balancing togetherness and autonomy.

Balancing shared time and individual time emerged as a subtheme, highlighting how couples protected a sense of self while also nurturing a sense of *we*. Most couples balanced shared and individual time, including Jason and David, who said, “It's good to have alone time.” Lily and Zara also discuss balancing a sense of individuality in hobbies and togetherness through share activities. Lily shared,

> I think that's really important for couples to kind of have their own like their own thing to do, but then also to kind of share hobbies, like also later on, we're probably going to drink tea we love yeah, we love sharing like tea and coffee with each other and just reading books next to each other, you know, sharing space.

Ally and Charlie reiterated the desire to support autonomy and identity development within the context of the relationship:

> I want to go do adventures to I want to provide the best life experience for you because it makes me happy to see you experience like so and I want to be adventures together in our own way, in a way that like is accessible for both of us, you know, so. But it and it's also

> nice to know that like there are some things that like I want to go do that Ally probably cannot physically do or just straight up is not interested in. But they like, you know, still encourage me to go do it, even though sometimes I'm like, well, no, we can mark it off the list. Like, you know, we'll do something else and then, you know, go do it. So, but yeah, it's changed like from changed to a provider way in, in all aspects.

Peyton and Kevin connected this balance to acknowledging shared values, stating, “I had a lot of respect for her independence and her drive, and that's the type of person I wanted to be with. And then I got to know her, and then the rest is history.” Emma and Jack added, "We both care so much about both security and diligence and loyalty, but also autonomy and freedom and being honest about who we are and who we are evolving to be." Victoria and Laura gave another example of supporting having separate and shared activities on the cruise.

Theme 2: Turning toward and inward.

The theme of turning toward and inward described the phenomena or intra- and interpersonal dynamics that fostered emotional intimacy. The subthemes include patience and understanding, self-awareness, self-control, and growth, learning individually and dyadically, respecting, and attraction and affection.

The couples also navigated a balance between turning toward each other, for mutual attunement, and turning inward, for self-attunement. This process fostered emotional safety characterized by patience, openness, understanding, non-judgment, and responsiveness toward both self and partner. Many couples became emotional as they reflected on shared experiences. Sabrina and Brianna emphasized the importance of being honest with themselves and each other, particularly by bringing vulnerability into their most difficult conversations.

Theme 2.1. Patience and understanding.

Patience emerged as a recurring concept across multiple dyadic interviews, including those with Lily and Zara, Laura and Victoria, and Steve and Chris. Samantha and Kelly added “giving space” when they named the importance of patience. Laura learned patience and unconditional love coming into Victoria's life as they navigated parenting and grandparenting. However, Victoria simultaneously named it as putting Laura’s "foot to the fire" since Victoria had two kids living at home.

Couples tended to connect patience with understanding as they strived for honesty and vulnerability. Kevin and Peyton shared that they felt safe to talk to each other and could "say the uncomfortable thing."

Sabrina and Brianna summarized this theme well when reflecting on how honesty and vulnerability during the most challenging conversations can lead to more connection:

> Being like open and honest and vulnerable with each other and not sitting in like, fear of insecurity or judgment or like worrying about what the park, what Brianna is going to say or think. And like, that is something I think for me that has developed over time, like have kind of struggled a little bit with at times and has, you know, proven that like some of the most uncomfortable conversations or like struggles or arguments have actually come out resulting in like more love. More trust and more connection.

Jason and David described a positive feedback loop in their relationship. They gained insight into one another’s thoughts and feelings by confiding in each other. This created more reliability and assurance. Chris and Ally connected this positive feedback loop to the process of coming out. Chris was encouraging and compassionate in a way that provided confidence and safety in the relationship:

> I definitely would not have had the confidence to talk to like other people, you know, like coming out at work and with my family and stuff if it weren't for that, like soft landing, um and encouragement and um, allyship from you so, but yeah, it's always. I've never been worried to bring up with Chris. It's Chris. I know whatever I say, however different it's going to be, that it's still us, you know? Yeah, yeah.

Alongside patience, couples focused on validating each other's feelings and needs. One example came from Jason and David's description of how they communicate about finances. When discussing David's financial situation, Jay stated a few different times, "I understand that." Couples viewed their partner's response in the context of their earlier experiences. For example, David, in turn, understands Jay's anxiety about money in the context of childhood influences. David emphasized how helpful it is "knowing each other's like history or like childhood and kind of connecting the connecting the dots sort of in a way to like understand each other."

Through patience and understanding, mutual acceptance bloomed for several couples. Peyton and Kevin shared, "Just being accepted for who you are and liking them for who they are, finding a way to like it and not pick people, pick them each other apart." This can take time to reach, as explained by Steve and Chris: "we've reached a level where we just accept each other and it works so well between us."

Peyton recalled a time riding an ATV when Kevin was understanding and patient when she was scared:

> Um, I think it was just like how calm he was about everything, and I'm over here like just kind of losing my head and he just stayed really calm, and like you were supportive and stuff, and I like that, but it was like yeah, a little bit of coddling, I guess.

Most couples understood that learning about each other takes time. The goal during conflict was to focus on understanding rather than criticism, as emphasized by Chris:

> And just kinda picking up on those small differences, like he's kind of in those kind of attuning to each other, like picking up on those cues, like you learned a lot about each other. Like decoding each other. Yeah, because somebody else may like pick up that. Oh, Ally is all cranky for some reason. But to me it's you're cranky because of this and because of how you're reacting. It's these very specific things.

Chris and Ally shared how they shift towards seeking understanding and away from the need be right. Ally shared about this phenomenon:

> I think just like less of a concern about being right or like being in the right, and more of being like, this is how the person feels and like, what can we do about that? And, and maybe it's not even that we did anything wrong, which I feel like, was it a problem for us, it's like you did this wrong.

Ally also acknowledged the balance of self-advocacy with understanding for her partner, explaining, "being able to stand up for yourself, but also having the power to sort of set aside your ego and tend to your partner." Jack and Emma named this phenomenon humility. Others called it collaboration. Lily and Zara shared:

> Being able to like express ourselves in the moment when we're feeling those feelings, when we're feeling those emotions, and recognizing like. You know, this is how I'm feeling right now about this subject and this is what like gives me hope. These are my fears. Um, how do they overlap? How does one help the other? You know, like, get out of it, like turn that fear into something workable?

Couples noted that their intentions did not always align with the impact of their actions and acknowledged how individual factors, such as neurotype, mental health, or physical health, shaped these dynamics. However, couples could move back to the concept of acceptance when their partner was having a difficult time. Jack finds it hard to admit when they are wrong to Emma:

> I certainly have a hard time admitting when I'm wrong… It's hard for me to. Yeah, I can like later on, but in moments when something is said in a way that feels off to me, or I'm already feeling irritable, I think this also has to do with our difference in neurotypes. I think that is a big feature of where things get messed up. I can be a little bit more like set in my ways and and literal and sort of like I'm right and this is the way you know, and Emma is trying to be more collaborative and I'm like, no, I can't collaborate on that. Like it's I think that is a big thing. And I I can watch my, I watch myself doing it. And I'm like, Jesus, like be more flexible. Like you can adjust. Why are you acting like this? But yeah, like in the moment, I don't know. It's like if I let go of my position, then I have lost all of my footing. I don't know what's going on there, but yeah.

Theme 2.2 Self-awareness, self-control, and growth.

With patience and understanding, there was a foundation for learning and growing between partners. This next theme focuses on self-awareness, regulation, control, and growth, mediated through vulnerability. Couples also shared about self-awareness and knowing. For example, Jack and Emma defined the experience of emotional intimacy as "taking the mask off, you know, being real and authentic." They try to be open, curious, and "be here."

Couples shared how managing themselves was a key to accessing understanding and patience. Jack and Emma spoke about managing their internal response to be emotionally

responsive. Others then noticed returning back to their partner to share their individual response. For example, Peyton and Kevin shared about walking away when needed to stop and think more clearly before returning. Chris and Ally named this "self-control" and viewed it as a source of power. Steve and Chris saw power through the ability to take a break during conflict, showing responsibility rather than control, acknowledging that it requires inner and outer work.

In turn, couples, like Jack and Emma, trusted that the other is doing their best, with some couples, like Kevin and Peyton, calling it "trying." In another interview, Jason felt he could be patient about finances because he felt David was trying. Samantha and Kelly reiterated this by saying, "It's true because it's about effort and being aware and just trying."

Couples were influenced by their previous and current relationships. Peyton considered the influence of her relationships with women to be a potential factor in her self-awareness. Peyton, potentially in turn, has influenced Kevin, who has always been with straight women. He stated, it has been a "growing process, if you will. The training, as long as I'm in training, everything's okay. That's what I hear." Samantha and Kelly emphasized the willingness to grow and learn from one another. Lily and Zara cared about aiding mutual growth through working together.

> I think I think the biggest thing for both of us is like being like open to like helping each other grow and knowing like where our like being I guess vulnerable to have each other, kind of find out where we need to grow and then working together on it.

Jason and David noticed that the differences between them have led to a positive influence on each other. This has led to more ease and humor for Jason and more structure, cleanliness, and responsibility for David. They appreciate the difference now. Jack and Emma provided another example:

> Emma helps me to be more flexible and more adventurous, and you know, and I feel like I help you with more grounding and less of a chaos monster. Most couples went beyond willingness to readiness, specifically readiness for a committed, romantic relationship.

Several couples shared about the need to be emotionally ready for a relationship before committing. Victoria and Laura reflected on being emotionally ready for a relationship and trusted in the timing and process when they met. Mary and Sara waited to commit until they were ready for a committed relationship. Kelly got sober first with Alcoholics Anonymous before her relationship with Samantha. Jason and David said they started a relationship when both were ready and wanted a relationship. They noted that a lot of gay male couples, like themselves, began with casually "hooking up" before transitioning to a romantic, committed relationship.

Accountability was explored as the couple talked about readiness, willingness, and self-management. Both members agreed and seemed to know their relational process. Lily and Zara shared that accountability comes with action and a willingness to do something. Emma and Jack also shared the need to change behaviors through action, whereas Chris and Ally focused on emotionally tending, understanding, and empathy when thinking about accountability. Steve and Chris also brought accountability back to communication, trust, and honesty, as they considered their commitments, stating, "Our word is big." Sabrina and Brianna also discussed their commitment being key, stating that accountability is "responsibility and commitment to like each other and our shared life."

The couple's individual needs also shaped how accountability was expressed within their relationship. By deepening their understanding of both themselves and each other, they developed awareness of the underlying reasons behind accountability. John and Todd illustrated

this sharing about their preferences with apologies. John values verbal apologies, a need he connects to his professional identity as a therapist, whereas Todd emphasizes behavioral change, reflecting his background as a behavioral analyst. Their different processing styles complement this dynamic. John tends to apologize quickly, while Todd prefers to reflect and write about his feelings before responding. John's patience with Todd's internal process reflects mutual respect for each other's distinct ways of engaging in repair.

Theme 2.3 Learning individually and dyadically

This next theme focuses on the process of learning. It includes learning about their partner, communication skills, and how to build healthy relationships. There was a recurring rhetoric of intentionally learning about your partner, even in everyday life. Ally and Charlie noticed the positive impact of "just kinda picking up on those small differences, like he's kind of in those kind of attuning to each other, like picking up on those cues, like you learned a lot about each other." There was a theme of wanting to, rather than *should,* learn about each other that was echoed by four couples specifically. Laura and Victoria shared something they learned just a month or so before the interview. By asking a question with curiosity, Laura learned that Victoria "can't stand to talk before I'm ready, before I'm really awake" and said, "we've been together 26 years and I just found this out."

Couples also emphasized that their partner could sometimes pick up on their cues before they did. Lily and Zara shared that they noticed the other needs to physically rest. Charlie and Ally gave another example:

> It's realizing when they need something before they realize they need something, and then kind of soft parenting that and kind of suggesting that like, because then you kind of

tell when Ally is like maybe pushing a little too hard and then they're gonna get burnt out and sure enough, they get burnt out.

Learning outside of the relationship to benefit the relationship was also common. Many couples went to couples or individual therapy. Victoria and Laura learned about the impact of their careers on the way they process and communicate. Victoria reflected that in her previous relationship with a man, she did not fight for 18 years. In contrast, now their favorite memories are getting through fights together and finding the humor in them. Steve and Chris attended pre-marital counseling and learned that many of the red flags were present in their previous marriages, though unknown to them. Steve felt that by knowing the red flags and seeing none in their relationship, he felt more at ease getting married. Sabrina and Brianna went to couples counseling to learn about themselves and "identify my own feelings."

Some couples, such as Jack and Emma, shared about teaching and learning from other queer couples due to the lack of queer relationship models. A few other couples also discussed sensing that their relationship was the model for a healthy queer romantic relationship for their friends. For example, Samantha and Katie shared about being approached by a younger cousin who found comfort, inspiration, and permission to be more fully themselves through witnessing their relationship:

> Samantha: She loved us. She was cool. And then we found out that she was like, comfortable, like hanging out with us. And she came out and I was like, that's cool.
>
> Katie: I don't think I had realized until you just said that. And that makes me a little emotional to think about because, yeah, I didn't have that growing up.

Jack and Emma went to couples therapy in response to the lack of queer role models in their lives in hope to learn more. They have explored the book Polysecure and Esther Perel’s

work on romantic relationships, stating “we had to become very vulnerable with ourselves, like it was a, a different pathway trying to find some of those things that would work. Being okay deconstructing the relationship and feeling free, yet overwhelmed.”

Theme 2.4 Respecting and supporting.

Respect was another consistent word across seven of the dyadic interviews. Kevin brought respect back into the theme of acceptance, sharing about Peyton: “I respect her for who she is. That's pretty much it. You know?” Steve and Chris’s experiences reflected the phenomenon of mutual respect and validation. Chris wants to hear "your feelings are valued… You are seen and understood.”

Alongside respect, couples adjusted communication to the needs of both individuals. Laura and Victoria intentionally communicate how the other needs them to communicate. This included giving them time to process a question, asking them a question directly, or simply giving them time to express their feelings. Samantha and Kelly stated they find new ways to communicate as they learned more about each other. Part of this was listening to ideas, as Ally and Charlie shared, or to “hear the things that someone is saying” instead of getting defensive.

Respect also involved acknowledging individual needs, particularly in offering support when stressed. Josh and Sam added that support means to “believe in each other, turn up for each other.” Steve knows that Chris wants cuddling and touch, whereas Steve prefers emotional intimacy. Samantha acknowledged about Kelly, “You do better body doubling too. So I think having me around, like on the couch, helps you, but I'm not sure. But I tried to stay around even when she's working just to be like present, you know.” Kevin's favorite times together were when Peyton let him help her with work.

Couples considered how differences in support outside of the relationship pushed them to have more awareness and provide more support. Jack and Emma acknowledged the impact of having to come out "over and over" with family. This is tied to a term consistently used: "cheerleader-ing" when discussing any support surrounding identity and coming out. Ally, Charlie, Jack, and Emma appreciated being cheerleaders to their transgender and/or non-binary partners regarding their partner's gender identity development journey. Lily and Zara said, "I love that for you," when Zara wanted to begin transitioning, noting that sense of support and advocating from Lily.

Couples seemed to challenge dominant social scripts of respect and love. For example, Victoria and Laura pushed against a common rule, believing instead that it is ok not to like someone all the time and still love them. Zara and Lily challenged the rule of not going to bed mad. John and Todd had learned from their families of origin to placate and talk behind someone's back. Instead, their relationship has no_secrets, and they talk about everything.

Theme 2.5 Attraction and Affection.

This last subtheme of attraction and affection fostered patience, understanding, and respect throughout their relationship. Couples discussed both initial and ongoing attraction to one another. Laura and Victoria remembered first seeing each other. Laura recalled seeing Victoria first and thinking, "There you are." A few days later on their cruise, when Victoria looked up at Laura and made eye contact, she had the same thought.

Alex and Charles described how they exchanged phone number. Charles wanted to let Alex know he was attracted to her. Alex explains:

> He gives me his phone and hands it to me. And, you know, when someone hands you something, you naturally want to take it. And the, the there was a contact card on there

like that's super sexy girl, Alex. And he's like, he really finished the contact for me. And I'm like, OK, like that's a good move.

Couples provided examples of how attraction continued in their romantic relationships. Alex and Charles emphasized that attraction continued as their gender expression shifted.

Alex: like experimenting with different things, like wearing a Packer, like having more masculine appearance, shaving my head, like switching pronouns. It's always been like oh that's hot. Like I feel like that's how you even handle it. And you're like, ohh, cool, you're wearing dresses again. You're growing your hair out, like, cool. So yeah, it's always just been like. I've always felt like you still see me as though, like you're still you.

Zara shared about attraction and compatibility continued throughout gender affirming transition. She acknowledged that while transitioning can impact attraction and compatibility in other couples, she felt more comfortable coming out as transgender to Lily because she was bisexual.

Zara: And I was just kind of glad that like. I'm glad you're bi cause yeah,

Lily: it worked

Zara: So maybe feel a bit more comfortable about coming out to you. Like ohh, God, it wouldn't be like ohh, gosh, my wife is presumably heterosexual and like this could easily like throw our entire relationship for a loop and I I know a lot of, uh, late in life trans people who have experienced that and it's, it's sad and sometimes they

Lily: they lose

Zara: their spouse because it's not compatible. They're just not compatible anymore. And glad that that didn't happen to us.

Steve and Chris also recalled having an initial attraction to each other that has sustained, calling each other “cute.” They noticed that during arguments they held on to the attraction and used affection when needed.

> Chris: We're super into each other that way. Yeah. And we weren't into our exes at this level. Is this at this level? He said he wasn't at all. Ohh, no, that is OK. Like, but all the time, like, like if you really like the person emotionally and you're really attracted to him, well all of a sudden, everything else just kind of works itself out like, you know, like you're compatible basically, you know, and yeah, so it's kind of funny.

Emma and Jack had a different perspective about the importance on ongoing attraction and affection. Jack first shared, “Emma is more interested in like sexual relationships outside of ours and I'm more interested in like emotional or romantic.” Then later emphasized a focus on shared values and trust as a key to longevity, rather than attraction.

> Emma: you know, sexual attraction, passion, you know, those things are amazing. And that's not the core of a relationship, especially when you get older. And so I think that to be able to trust the person, count on them, share values, that's a big one.

Affection was discussed by many couples around activities with their pets and the way these activities brought them together as a couple. For many couples, pets emerged as an important symbol of affection and connection. Several participants’ pets were present during the interview. The pets reflected the couple’s shared care and responsibility, becoming a central part of their relationship story. For example, Kelly’s fond memories of being driven to the pet hospital highlighted how mutual care of pets becomes meaningful in building intimacy.

For some couples, pets carried even deeper emotional weight, especially when paired with grief over the possibility of not having children. Three couples openly grieved the idea of

not raising kids, while another described the sacrifices they would make in their personal and romantic lives if they chose to have children.

Research Question 2: How do queer couples perceive, respond to, and experience power in their romantic relationship?

The second research question examined how queer couples perceive, respond to, and experience power in their romantic relationships. Table 3 illustrates the overarching themes and subthemes that emerged from the data, beginning with mutual trust, and (re)defining power dynamics. These themes are built upon the foundation of emotional intimacy, as participants emphasized the importance of trust, respect, connection, and safety in navigating power within their relationships.

Table 3
RQ2. Themes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Mutual trust	1.1 Mutual trust in decision-making
	1.2 Creating a team
2. (Re)defining Power Dynamics	2.1 Adjust based on strengths, preferences, and abilities
	2.2 Collaborative decision-making
	2.3 Allowing each person to be powerful

Note. Themes capture couples' relational processes in constructing equitable and collaborative expressions of power.

Theme 1. Mutual trust.

Mutual, or shared, trust showed up throughout the interviews. Couples experienced mutual trust as a foundation for communication, decision-making, and creating a team, describing it as the foundation that allowed them to be vulnerable and navigate challenges collaboratively. Trust enabled partners to speak openly, assume good intentions, and approach

conflict with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Participants emphasized that trust fostered emotional safety, which in turn supported power-sharing, mutual influence, and the sense that both partners were committed to the relationship's well-being.

Theme 1.1 Mutual trust in decision-making.

This first subtheme includes trust built through honesty, openness, and ongoing communication in decision-making, from proposing an idea to reflecting on a decision's impact. Couples intentionally set the stage, or perhaps foundation, for safety, allowing them to get to a place of mutual trust in decision-making. Lily and Zara shared as they considered future decisions, "We each have each other's and our own, like shared and individual best interest at heart, and that comes from like 12 1/2 years of being together." Victoria and Laura also shared about the importance of trust. Laura trusted Victoria when signing papers to buy a home without reading through them:

> Victoria: Yeah, no. So I'm like, so I had laid it down. I went sign here, initial there, sign here. And she said what what am I signing? What am I signing? It doesn't matter. It does not matter what you're signing. You have to sign it and you have to initial. And there's nothing to think about. So you just do it. You sign here.
>
> Laurie: That was just…
>
> Victoria: That was a biggie
>
> Laura: Huge. I was like, I and it's like, okay, I trust you. I'll just sign. And and if anything goes wrong, it's your fault [joking].

Victoria and Laura were one of many couples who spoke about trust in moving in together. While some couples needed to check with a roommate about their partner moving in, Victoria asked her two children to live with Laura since they were moving to a new city. They believe

"it's ok to ask questions and put your foot down." Other couples also shared about trust during decision-making. Brianna and Sabrina begin with openness to make decisions easier, stating:

> I think we both value just like not making assumptions and foreclosing things, but like everything is open for us to decide together. You know, there's some things like I know would never work, like living in different cities or whatever, like, but a lot I think is kind of up for discussion.

Theme 1.2 Creating a team.

A phenomenon arose from discussions of emotional intimacy and power dynamics: creating a team. This emotional intimacy built another sense of *we-ness* to navigate difficulty and connected to a sense of shared power. Some couples used metaphors to honor their team, such as Lily and Zara, who stated, "I'm glad we're both main characters." Emma and Jack both said, "We're in a boss collaboration."

Other couples emphasized working and learning together to combine their strengths. Steve and Chris summed up: "We've been side by side, traveled together, worked together, lived together, raise kids together." Sabrina and Brianna felt a sense of *we-ness* created in planning their wedding. It allowed them to work together, celebrate, and utilize their community, and create a shared vision to accomplish their plan. Another couple, Josh and Sam, emphasized the power in working together: "It's like when we work together, we can achieve more."

By creating a team, decisions can be made with more ease. Jason and David, like many of the couples, noticed moving in with limited anxiety. Brianna and Sabrina moved in together in preparation to move to another country jointly. Sabrina recalls:

> We were obviously going to live together in Thailand. So it was a good trial run too, but we were also so busy at the time. So it was, it felt like we wanted to, but also it was for

Brianna: Practical

Sabrina: Practical reasons as well.

Brianna: Like there was no way we weren't going to live with each other in Thailand, you know? Yeah. Like we were already committing to that by wanting to, like, move abroad. Yeah. And I think we were… was it optimism or optimism and adventure? Like we were just like really like both feeling positive about how it would likely go and willing to take the risks.

Many couples, such as Samantha and Kelly and Josh and Sam, tied in feelings of reliability as they built a sense of *we-ness.* Victoria and Laura noted, “You cannot like somebody and still love them and the relationship not be over.”

Theme 2. (Re)defining power dynamics.

The couples pushed against dynamics in which one person’s voice was disregarded, excluded, or disempowered in some way over the voice of the other. Many acknowledged the impact of patriarchy on power dynamics. Victoria and Laura acknowledged that the word power can be triggering because men in society have power. Victoria and Laura defined power as having control and being overbearing, while defining their relationship dynamics as “equal” and able to fluctuate. David was raised in traditional gender dynamics. His mom stayed home to clean and care for the kids while dad worked and traveled. When his dad was home, he would become very angry. David and Jason have both committed to creating a different communication pattern in their marriage. David shared the following about Jason and his marriage:

But I think we're both, we both learned from that, seeing that, and like not wanting to, we'll have a try to have a level kind of a conversation if we're ever like an impasse with anything, that's probably the best thing for us.

Jason's mom worked full-time and was out of the home, influencing Jason's ideas about equity and power in relationships. Other couples were also exposed to non-traditional roles in their family, such as Sabrina and Brianna, who saw "equal roles" in their parents' relationships. Kevin was modeled to be responsible as the provider for the relationship. He was the provider and the person women relied on in previous relationships. He reflected:

> So I think that's also something we can learn too is like when our families also did the same thing. If they were away from the home, they didn't have as much time, quality time together or vacations or relaxation. Like those things also get modeled around our kind of responsibilities to relationships too like be a provider, keep going.

Since meeting Peyton, Kevin has viewed roles differently and has found other ways to provide for their relationship, such as by providing support and being physically present. He shared, "I'm not traditional by any means, you know, Peyton, you know she doesn't need to be barefoot and pregnant [joking]." After the interview, Kevin reflected that he had never thought about power dynamics before being asked. While others acknowledged power dynamics and pushed against it, Peyton noticed early in their relationship that Kevin could remain unaware. Peyton noticed that at the beginning of the relationship, he would use the term "raping the clutch." She talked to him about it, and over time, he started replacing the term. She began to feel he was willing to make changes and listen to her.

Theme 2.1 Adjust based on strengths, preferences and abilities.

The participants created roles based on strengths and needs, rather than based on gender. The roles did not define the level of power, and each person could name the role they enjoyed. For example, Ally manages the administrative tasks, and Charlie enjoyed being the provider.

Brianna and Sabrina shared that they do not have to think about power often in their relationship, and instead considered their individual strengths. Brianna noticed that she uses her ability to “influence and organize” to benefit their relationship. For example, Briannas “help[s] Sabrina come to the table.” This, in turn, aids in initiating conversations that leads to joint decisions.

Others agreed about the benefit of “leaning on each other’s strengths,” as Lily and Zara experienced. Samantha and Katie agreed, stating, "I think a lot of the roles that we have are based on what our natural strengths are.”

Adjustments in the relationship can also be made based on differences, such as neurotype. This phenomenon occurred in which one or both people identified as neurodivergent. Todd sometimes gets burned out in their role of caregiver and fixer in the family. John and Todd smiled as they said they are "middle-aged queer parents now,” balancing their roles as partners and parents. Roles can also be flipped based on preferences. For example, David and Jason shared that their roles change during sex. David is more powerful, and Jason is more submissive during sex. When asked about ways that power comes up in their relationship, they said:

David: Sex and money.

Jason: Money and power. But I mean, I feel like we definitely like there is like a power role in terms of like him is like a sexual role too, because he definitely is like the more like wants to be more in the power too. And then I am more submissive when it comes to that too.

Roles could also be flipped when a partner is in need. Lily and Zara stated that they can step in when the other needs:

> I feel like like power dynamics from, you definitely can fluctuate within a within a, uh, like a relationship and I feel like ours fluctuates in a healthy manner where you know, if I see you struggling, I, I like to take charge and make sure we're all like. Like for example, we're doing a lot of paperwork for something and I'm like, you know, what did you do this and this and that, you know, like keeping us all really like, like focused on what we need to do. And like when I'm struggling, I know you do the same thing to help me stay focused and power dynamics I know.

Sabrina and Brianna shared another consistent response of stepping in when the other is struggling. Victoria and Laura further reflected on this shift in roles:

> Laura: I knew I had her so I could freak the fuck out, which I did because I was like, we're we're never going to be able to move. Oh my God, you know, just... but when I freak out, she just gets this calm thing and go for it
>
> Victoria: and take care of it.

Finances was another area of the relationship based on preferences, strengths, and abilities. Peyton and Kevin keep finances separate, whereas Sara and Mary are “50/50 like we just split everything.” Emma and Jack, “split it in a way that is more equitable.” Couples also gave space for the process to shift. For example, Brianna and Sabrina’s finances were separate and are now shared:

> I think back to our relationship history when we didn't have a shared account, then it was more challenging. But also there are reasons why Sabrina didn't want to share the account. And now that we have a shared account that we both look at and more equally manage it I think it's gotten better, yeah. Feels more transparent, yeah.

Values were connected to decision-making. Brianna and Sabrina noticed individual needs and preferences about finances. Brianna is more strategic, while Sabrina is flexible with the value of freedom.

Couples also shared about the division of financial caretaking of the pets and when discussing the distribution of and decision-making regarding roles and responsibilities in the home. Brianna and Sabrina were one example:

> Brianna: Yeah, it's all kind of organically like happens. The only thing I can think of that we've like made a plan around is the cats like the litter box. It's like we've divided up the week and like who does like the litter box different days so it feels fair. That's like the one thing.
>
> Sabrina: I think that we had to just kind of, well, I, do their vet appointments and things like that. So I think I take on a little bit of more of the cat responsibility.

Theme 2.2 Collaborative decision-making.

Couples created space for processing when making a joint decision with the ability to come back and re-negotiate. Some reflected concerns about finances, such as Lily and Zara. Some worried about their health, such as Ally and Charlie. Others, such as Brianna and Sabrina, expressed concerns that their relationship would suffer if they had kids due to the time and energy resources needed.

Brianna shared that their individual processing was at different paces when making the joint decision about having children. Brianna is more of the initiator in decisions and gives space for Sabrina to process, acknowledging it as a type of influence. Brianna acknowledged she tends to:

> Especially initiate communication and be more ready quickly to speak to my needs and my feelings and what I want and so that's the kind of like power. I think I always try to yield it in the interest of our relationship, right?

Another collaborative decision involved choosing their relationship orientation. It was based on what works for them, rather than on the dominant discourse. John and Todd both learned about "default monogamy and family first." They are focused on "what works best now," staying connected to previous partners, and "poly-adjacent." As couples shared about polyamory, there was a care for their relationship, such as Jack and Emma reconsidering equity in non-monogamy over time. Brianna was polyamorous before their relationship. However, Sabrina and Brianna decide together what their relationship looks like now and will continue to discuss it.

Similar to many other couples, Kevin and Peyton acknowledged that they do not need power over someone else to be part of decision-making. Instead, couples emphasized being flexible, adaptable, listening, and willing to change. Sara and Mary shared how helpful it is that "We're also flexible planners too um so yeah it feels really cool to be aligned in the way we are um of like values and just like how we live our day-to-day."

Theme 2.3 Allowing each person to be powerful.

Rather than a competition for power, couples experienced the ability and encouragement to both be powerful. Jack shared, "I feel like Emma and I are both powerful people in general." Jack and Emma had a new take on power, saying that "the person who wants more has more power." Similarly, Chris and Steve brought up the same intention, emphasizing this theme as a whole: accept the others' strengths, maintain a desire to help make the other better, and allow and celebrate the other being in their power.

Research Question 3: How do queer couples perceive the influence of contextual and societal processes on power dynamics in their romantic relationship?

The third research question explored how queer couples perceive the influence of contextual and societal processes on power dynamics in their relationships. The theme acknowledge, accept, and accommodate captures how partners recognize and adapt to the effects of social identity, cultural norms, and systemic forces. Table 4 outlines the related subthemes: (1.1) building the relationship based on known differences, (1.2) acknowledging the impact of social identity and context, and (1.3) acknowledging and accepting imbalance.

Table 4
RQ3. Themes

Themes	**Subthemes**
1. Acknowledge, accept, and accommodate	1.1 Acknowledge the influence of social identity and context 1.2 Accept differences that create imbalance 1.3 Adjust the relationship to accommodate

Note. Themes represent couples' reflections on navigating social context, identity, and relational adaptation.

Theme 1. Acknowledge, accept, and accommodate.

Participants described acknowledging, accepting, and accommodating as essential to navigating differences, imbalances, and larger societal processes. The themes arising from the first two research questions, including shared respect, safety, understanding, willingness learning, and patience, laid the groundwork for how couples perceived the influence of contextual and societal processes on power dynamics in their romantic relationship.

Theme 1.1: **Acknowledge the impact of social identity and context**

To begin, couples acknowledged the influence of their social identities. For many couples, there was more than one factor. John acknowledged several differences between Todd and him. John is "read as cis and White," whereas Todd is "trans and Latino." John can make more money due to having more cognitive capacity and stamina with clients.

Finances were a common example. Rather than solely naming differences in income levels, couples acknowledged *why* there was a difference in the ability to earn. Couples agreed about the influence of neurodivergence on income. Emma has more financial power and can work more than Jack. Jack shared about how self-awareness led to acknowledging it in the relationship, leading to adjusting the relationship:

> We have the exact same career, and we have the exact same timeline of when we started that, you know, and I have throughout our relationship felt maybe like, I guess not as secure. Inferior is too hard, too harsh of a word, but like um not as able to have like power in career as you do or in the in the same like I don't know like amount of time spent with clients or money made or things like that. I have less mental capacity than Emma does and I get overstimulated and I get overwhelmed and Emma's like able to do more and so I think that we've found equity in that way of like Emma definitely makes more money, but she's also more able to make more money. And we've talked about that and kind of. Split our finances in a way that is feels more equitable. Um, and that feels really helpful and nourishing to me that she's open to that. So not like holding me to the same level because there's just no, no way I could do that. So that's how I feel like that's how we've figured that out.

Differences in physical health status were also acknowledged. Though Ally is more educated than Charlie, her physical health has diminished her earning power. Allie reflected:

> Like in a lot of ways, our financial power scheme mimics the typical man/wife thing where he's like, you know, I was always way made made way more even though I had more education and arguably harder jobs at times.
>
> Charlie: Uh huh.
>
> Ally: Um, and like our lifetime earning potential is is very different. But I really feel like any, any queer relationship is going to have a different flavor of power.

Another common example was gender identity and expression. Victoria and Laura shared stories about their grandkids discovering gender and sex. They acknowledged Laura's androgynous features and were ready to field questions about Laura's gender as they learned about anatomy. Referencing it as the "favorite moments when the kids trying to figure out if I was a girl or a boy." While it was known that many of their friends are lesbians, they did not discuss their experiences living in Texas as a lesbian couple, and Laura did not elaborate on her experiences as a queer female police officer.

Couples in which one was cisgender and the other identified as transgender acknowledged the power that comes from being cisgender. Emma shared in her interview with Jack:

> There's power in terms of privilege, access, like money, ethnicity. I'm not, you know, I'm like Demi woman, but like cis-ish Jack being trans. I think that like what's happening, for example, in the country. I feel like they have a completely different experience of disempowerment like that feeling of it then I do, you know.

Josh, a bisexual man, and Sam, a bisexual woman, acknowledged the impact of masculinity and gender expression in their relationship. Josh acknowledged how it is seen in his "personality, the way I dress." In the comparison couple, Peyton is a bisexual cis-woman and

Kevin is a White cis-man. When asked about acknowledging gender, Kevin said it is "not something that comes to mind." Peyton spoke about having shared values and not being an "overly feminine woman" as protective factors against the influence of gender:

> Jessica: Makes sense. Um, how is like gender, gender identity, gender socially like, how is any of that like kind of shaped your relationship?
>
> Kevin: I don't really have an answer for that one. It's not anything I think about, honestly. Doesn't even enter the mind really.
>
> Jessica: Ohh it's not something that comes to mind. That's interesting.
>
> Kevin: Being attracted to a woman is interesting?
>
> Peyton: No, she means like do our do our like genders play a role in our relationship? Like like, maybe
>
> Kevin: not really, I'm the man and…
>
> Peyton: Well, I mean, like I, I wouldn't say that I'm like an overly feminine woman. So, I guess like in that sense, maybe it's. I don't know like you think about like. Just think like Stepford wives. Right? Like they're like really girly and all that kind of stuff. And I think we're able to get along because we both like to go do adventures and
>
> Kevin: Yeah, that's all just sounds too complicated for me. I think it's simpler than that, but
>
> Peyton: Okay.

Kelly recalled how important it was for Samantha to get to know her family, calling it a "non-negotiable." Samantha shared:

> Her family is all female. That's why they're all women. Every single woman. There's so many, there's so many very loud, loud, loud women that are all like her. So, I think that's why anyway. And they're all really cool.

Later, Samantha knew that Kelly veers away from demographic labels, especially sexual orientation. They recalled:

> Samantha: I don't think you would use the words. You would just say I hate the word lesbian.
>
> Kelly: I don't know what it is. It's just the word that I hate. I don't know why, but I wouldn't identify as well as I do say that word a lot. Like I'll say gay or lesbian, but I use them interchangeably. I don't lose. It is fine if I'm being realistic. Like if we have to get down to semantics I guess I would probably be pansexual, but I find the labels exhausting. There are too many. Especially the idea of having to explain yourself. You know, like before I was in this relationship, dating men, people would be like, you like women? Yeah, right if you're not actively going down on a woman right now.

By acknowledging their differences, couples could acknowledge the influence of their children's sociocultural influences. For example, John and Todd have two Black teenagers who were raised in the foster care system before moving into their home. He noted, "They will not receive the same safety and resources." On the other side, their one-year-old daughter is White, blonde, and has blue eyes. John and Todd described these differences as shaping the distinct contexts in which their children move through the world.

The social context was acknowledged, whether it was current laws impacting queer relationships or the influence of COVID. Victoria and Laura intentionally waited to get married

in Texas until it was legal in 2015. After being together for 17 years, they got legally married at 60 years old.

Couples acknowledged the context of how they met as an influence on the power dynamics in their relationship. For example, Lily and Zara met at 18 years old in California. They begin in a heterosexual relationship. Lily came out as bisexual six years ago, stating, “I think six years, but I didn't like say it out loud yeah or until those six years but um.” Zara “came out as trans like 2 1/2 year, two years ago.”

> Zara emphasized the importance of recognizing themselves as individuals in order to acknowledge their differences:
>
> It's just hard to kind of not to, you know, it's been like a third of our lives basically like being together. Like it's very hard to like disentangle like who we are like from the other person, especially now that we've, we've been married five years. We were together for 12 and 12 1/2 at this point.

Other couples acknowledged socioeconomic differences as well. Todd is John’s boss at work and both have come to move from acknowledgment to acceptance on how that influences their power dynamics, stating that Todd “is more bossy.” Later, Todd shared about the burnout from always being seen as the boss at home and work.

Lily is unemployed due to physical and mental health issues. She reports struggling to accept the imbalance. Even when Zara says not to worry and tells Lily that she trusts and accepts her, Lily struggles to feel relief:

> This this may be one that we're really kind of struggling with, or at least I am a little bit in my head, but um, like she, Zaria, you're the breadwinner right now. Pretty much. Um, I currently and I'm and I'm unemployed and you know, just still job searching and stuff,

but I know that can sometimes throw me off in thinking like, ohh, am I doing enough? Or, you know, is there like some imbalance in our house of like, can I make, can I still make decisions? Like do I even need to answer like ask these questions about making decisions and I'm not like I don't know, I, I feel like I bring them out on upon you and you're, you're telling me like, you know, you tell me a lot of times, like no, no.

Zara: Don't worry about it.

Steve and Chris added an example of what other couples experienced: acceptance of the other person's emotional responses and personality.

Steve: As long as we are not in like one of our arguments or bickering moments. Yeah, it's I can play around like snapping at him, huh? If we are in one our arguments or whatever, I I won't snap or anything and I just yell. I just get loud. I just laugh. I'm Irish, I get loud. Did you ever run?

Chris: No.

Theme 1.2 Accept differences that create imbalance

Several couples learned to accept individual differences that created an imbalance in the relationship. This approach reduced tension and increased their focus on collaborative solutions. For example, Jason and David shared about the influence of immigration status on the power dynamics in their relationship. They remembered first struggling to accept the contextual factors that created financial imbalance, naming it as a topic that created issues:

David: yeah, from the moment that I lost my student visa or whatever, like I and even then I couldn't, I wasn't able to work, but still. So yeah, I had to like work in the restaurant, do whatever like washing dishes and stuff like that, like just making enough

money to have to live and he obviously like makes much more than that so I think that that caused some issues. And yeah, some issues.

Jason: I mean, yeah, it was in the beginning too, because it was just like he wasn't really, he wasn't relying on me for things like, I mean, I kind of voluntarily would like pitch in for things most of the time, but you would try to pitch in as much as you could.

While acknowledging why David could not work as much, Jason tried to remember David's effort. However, Jason's upbringing and experiences around class and income from his mother also influenced how he perceived the situation:

Jason: That was the thing is like, I was like, at least he was like trying to like do things with as much as he could do. And I understood that he couldn't do as much as he wanted to and that that sucked. But also like I'm, I do get this like habit from my mother as well too where I worry about finances constantly and I I work in finance as well too. So it's always in the back of my mind of like things going on money, finances, like how, how we're going to afford things, stuff like that too. So that's always just like something like a part of my personality and something that you don't really think about sometimes.

Couples perceived the influence of resources and skills on the relationship as a factor to accept. Brianna and Sabrina adjust their communication and decision-making process with their individual neurotype and mental health differences in mind. Brianna is an initiator to "help you kind of also come to the table in the same way to kind of discuss this, but it's a power in being able to kind of organize us in that way." Brianna can name what she needs more quickly, whereas Sabrina has other areas of power. She can build and create social capital for their relationship by striking up new conversations.

Some couples shared their current economic situation in the demographic questionnaire and interview. Brianna and Sabrina reported, "I think in resources our relationship is. I guess pretty equal, like our family backgrounds are like economically like we're not too far off from each other like." Though they both have master's degrees, they identify as lower middle class and "struggling to get by" financially. They were also one of the couples concerned about the impact of having a child. Brianna is a teacher and learned about the impact of COVID on parents. They came to accept the decision not to have children and to grieve. Brianna reflected the following:

> Hearing about everyone struggling with the balancing, like working from home and their children being at home like that. I think it was just sort of a wakeup call that was like, if I don't know if we would be able to do this, like I think we would really be struggling, and our relationship would suffer. And I think, yeah, just realize like we don't, we didn't. It. It just looked like it was going to be. Kind of impossible in some ways. So it didn't seem realistic.

Theme 1.3 Adjust the relationship to accommodate.

Couples adjusted to accommodate the mutual needs of each person and the relationship. For example, couples built roles based on known differences in neurotype, physical health, mental health, employment, and other individual factors. John and Todd challenged the need to focus on fairness and adjusted their relationship to consider strengths and abilities. In response to the known imbalance between Ally and Charlie, Charlie shared:

> Like what is I kind of took it as like a what, what kind of makes the balance of power in the relationship? You know, like how do we share the power with each other but also keep each other in check and like a positive way.

Other couples also challenged the need to focus on fairness. Peyton shared, “I like the idea of like a 2/3 relationship where everybody's always trying to do 2/3 so that you're always just like trying.” This allowed couples to determine their own balance that made sense, rather than being based on dominant relationship scripts. Steve and Chris spoke about a lack of fairness in several areas of their relationship, using the word 15 times, including, “It sucks, it's not fair, it's not fair, but it's just our personalities the way we are,” and later in the conversation, “It’s not fair, but it is okay.” When thinking about Steve’s role in ending an argument, Chris said:

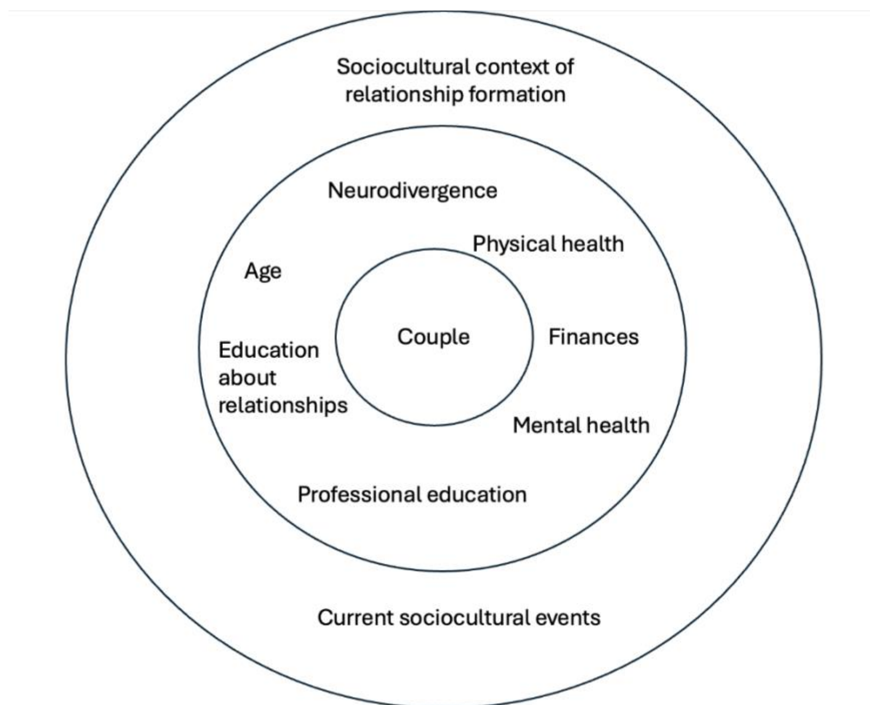
> It's kind of not fair in I don't know. I wanna say in many ways I'm the more responsible one like with the practicalities of life type of thing and sometimes I feel resentful and like wish she was more responsible with these things. But we've reached a level where we just accept each other and it works so well between us that like. Is what we accept each other… I can tell you that that was hard to get to that place. Because we both want it to be “fair.” He doesn't want to be the only one that is responsible for ending an argument. Yeah, I agree. That's a fair thing to say. And then I have, you know, equally I have things that I'm better at and I'm like, well, it's not fair that I have to be the one. And he agrees all the time. We agree we're like it's true it's not fair, but then just realizing it's never going to be fair because he's naturally good at certain things, then I'm naturally good at certain things.

Many couples underscored that their relationship roles and dynamics are flexible over time as they consider the broader sociocultural influences shaping queer couples’ relational processes, such as current events or location, and individual factors, such as identity, skills, and abilities (Figure 2). These contextual factors inform how partners experience, negotiate, and sustain connection within their relationships. Additionally, historical and situational contexts,

such as the time period of relationship formation, further impacted relational development, power negotiation, and emotional intimacy. Collectively, these elements highlight the embeddedness of queer relationships within intersecting structural and temporal realities.

Some couples regularly checked in with each other. Sabrina and Brianna willingly met weekly to discuss and adjust around money, sex, the relationship, goals, and worries. This act of willingness showed up in emotional intimacy and power dynamics and arose again in this presenting theme. Willingness was the desire to accommodate the relationship’s needs, leading to individual adjustments. This meant couples needed to determine what was accepted and what could be changed. For example, Jason and David acknowledged that Jason was currently the higher earner and David was jokingly the comedian and cook. However, there was a desire to be more “equally contributing,” when David hoped “we're not like constantly like talking or like about money.” This led to David working while going to school.

Figure 2
Sociocultural context factors influencing queer couple dynamics.



Note: This figure illustrates the layered individual and sociocultural factors participants identified as shaping their relationship experiences. The couple is the center, surrounded by individual characteristics and broader contextual influences described across interviews.

Samantha and Kelly presented a phenomenon similar to that of David and Jason. Once Samantha shared about her anxiety as the provider, and it was received with patience and understanding, the couple could adjust together. Samantha illustrated this process:

> I think in that moment was the moment where we had to have like those real conversations about like finances and stuff because I didn't want to be like, I'm really struggle-bussing like providing for you and Linda, and me, and the animals, like I was really having a hard time and then I had to like breakdown those barriers and have that conversation. And I think that really opened up a lot of trust. And I think now we're just

> like more open about like finances and stuff with each other. Now it's just like, whatever. I think it's more of a shared thing now.

Katie then made a goal based on her current circumstances to determine what she could adjust for the relationship, particularly because she did not want to be solely the homemaker:

> I made it my goal to after we had that conversation. It was when we were buying the house and she's like, this can't continue. I can't support everybody. And I was like, okay, and I you know, Sam is a nurse her income is drastically more than I was making at the time. And so I did some career changes, whatever it took me a couple years to really even it out, but I really made it a goal to just increase my income. So that way I think my goals were like if Sam wanted to quit her job because you know how it is.

Comparison of Results to the Literature

The findings of this study converge with the central principles of SCAFT by illustrating that emotional safety and shared power are foundational to intimacy in queer romantic relationships. In lockstep with Knudson-Martin et al. (2021), participants emphasized that mutual responsiveness, attunement, and openness fostered connection and a balance of influence. Consistent with McDowell et al. (2022), these results reinforce that relational equity is both a process and an outcome of sociocultural awareness and intentional communication.

Participants' descriptions highlighted that differentiation of self was central to balancing togetherness and autonomy, aligning with Bowenian concepts of maintaining individuality while remaining emotionally connected. Couples described moments of turning toward and inward. By balancing connection with self-reflection, couples could sustain emotional safety. This echoed Gottman's notion of Love Maps and friendship foundations, as partners cultivated curiosity and empathy for one another's inner worlds. Emotional intimacy was emphasized even more strongly

than in research on heterosexual couples, suggesting that queer partners may rely on deeper emotional communication as both resistance to and protection from external stressors.

The results parallel prior research demonstrating that when couples create emotionally safe environments, they can better share vulnerability and practice power sharing (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Platt & Bolland, 2018). Participants described co-constructing intentional safe spaces that counter heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, and other social threats. This relational safety is the root of many dyads' flourishing and resonates with emotionally focused therapy's emphasis on secure bonding through responsiveness. These findings align with the ANVIET guidelines of SCAFT, particularly attuning to context and power, naming injustice, and envisioning just alternatives.

However, the current findings diverged from previous conceptualizations of inequity. Rather than supporting the assertion that inequities can create relationship strain, limit coping strategies, and lead one partner's interests and experiences to shape relational patterns (McDowell et al., 2022; Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023), participants described using self-awareness, empathy, and shared decision-making to challenge and re-balance power. In many cases, couples reframed inequities not as fixed deficits but as opportunities to renegotiate care and responsibility. This divergence indicates that queer couples may demonstrate a distinctive relational resilience rooted in shared cultural awareness and mutual advocacy, expanding the theoretical understanding of relational equity.

Several findings also expanded SCAFT's application beyond previous literature. Rather than emphasizing psychopathology or mental health distress, participants more often discussed neurodivergence, chronic physical health, and the practical demands of care work. Such embodied considerations broaden SCAFT's relevance by demonstrating that equitable power

sharing also includes attunement to ability, energy, and capacity differences. The theme of shared communication was repeatedly linked to trust, learning about each other, adapting, and cultivating a sense of *we-ness*. This process made conflict easier, strengthened self-awareness and self-control, and reinforced mutual respect. These processes exemplify the socioculturally attuned principle of valuing what is minimized, as couples honored differences rather than seeking sameness.

Socioeconomic and generational factors further contextualized these patterns. Several couples referenced financial strain related to COVID-19, health changes, and shifting provider roles within the household, consistent with research showing that queer partners often navigate economic and structural stressors that shape relational functioning (Coppola et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022; Salo et al., 2022). For instance, one participant, Charlie, described appreciating his role as a financial provider while recognizing the relational implications of that dynamic, reflecting how shared responsibility and renegotiated roles support equity (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). Other participants described intentionally renegotiating responsibilities to maintain equality and emotional safety. Younger couples did not follow traditional milestones like having a child due to financial and emotional hesitations, echoing findings that queer partners frequently depart from heteronormative scripts and construct more flexible relational trajectories (Macapagal et al., 2015; Perales & Baxter, 2018; Rostosky & Riggle, 2017). Some couples grieved the possibility of having children, while others framed not having them as a liberating choice that allowed greater relational freedom. These findings diverge from heteronormative expectations yet align with SCAFT's call to envision just alternatives to dominant cultural scripts (McDowell et al., 2018; Knudson-Martin et al., 2019).

Participants' professional backgrounds may also have influenced their attunement to relational processes. Several participants, such as Jack and Emma, Lily and Zara, Brianna, and Mary, worked in human services and appeared especially reflective about emotional awareness, communication, and systemic inequities. Their engagement underscores how education and self-awareness can shape couples' capacity for mutual influence and relational equity. As Emma and Jack summarized, “one of the things that I find to be super cool about queer relationships … is that there is not a script." Their comment encapsulates the theme of rejecting prescribed heteronormative narratives in favor of co-creating unique relational models grounded in authenticity, flexibility, and mutual care.

Collectively, the findings fill a gap in the literature by offering a phenomenological understanding of how queer couples experience emotional intimacy and power as intertwined, contextual processes. They demonstrated an ability to develop relational models that challenge traditional relational scripts and emphasize emotional safety, flexibility, and mutuality. This study supports and extends SCAFT's relevance to queer populations by illustrating that couples achieve third-order change through reflexivity, willingness, and compassionate engagement with one another. These insights underscore the need for therapists to integrate sociocultural attunement and power consciousness into systemic and relational therapy with queer clients.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the study's findings, organized around the three research questions exploring how queer couples define emotional intimacy, experience relational power, and perceive the sociocultural factors that shape these dynamics. The thematic analysis revealed that emotional intimacy emerged through sharedness, mutual attunement, patience, and respect. Power was described not as dominance but as a collaborative and fluid process grounded in

mutual trust and care. These experiences reflected couples' capacity to balance individuality and togetherness while co-constructing emotional safety and equality in their relationships.

Participants also articulated the influence of sociocultural factors, including gendered expectations, the impact of individual factors, and generational shifts, on their relational experiences. Many couples discussed rejecting traditional scripts surrounding marriage and parenting, instead valuing authenticity, emotional openness, and flexibility in relational structures. These findings suggest that queer couples engage in an ongoing process of negotiating identity, influence, and intimacy within broader systems of privilege and oppression.

The findings support and extend the SCAFT framework by demonstrating that power sharing and emotional attunement are mutually reinforcing processes that promote relational safety, resilience, and growth. Chapter 5 interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and prior literature, highlighting implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and the broader contributions of this study to the field of MFT.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

This study aimed to understand experiences around relational power dynamics and emotional intimacy in queer couples through dyadic research. It addressed the problem of relational power imbalances in queer couples, particularly how power dynamics and emotional intimacy intersect and influence queer romantic relationships. This study also responded to the need for MFT models to extend the application of SCAFT to diverse relational contexts (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Using a qualitative phenomenological design (Mertens, 2020), twelve queer couples participated in dyadic interviews to describe how they co-construct intimacy, navigate power, and perceive sociocultural processes that shape their relationships. Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis revealed that emotional intimacy and power are intertwined, relationally constructed, and influenced by sociocultural contexts.

Several limitations were considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, as noted in Chapter 3, the sample consisted of self-selected participants who met specific inclusion criteria and voluntarily responded to recruitment materials. This self-identification aspect introduces the potential for self-selection bias, as individuals who are already reflective about relationships or interested in understanding relational processes may have been more inclined to participate. Some participants expressed that they enjoy participating in research studies, which may further indicate a sample predisposed toward research engagement and increased insight and self-awareness into these topics. This desire to positively impact research may be particularly relevant given that several participants work in the human services field. Their professional training and familiarity with psychological or relational language may have influenced their participation, the depth of their reflections during interviews, and their intentions towards increasing awareness of queer relationships in human services.

The final sample may also indicate a level of self-selection, as several participants reported that they had managed mental health concerns and had prior or ongoing involvement in therapy. While this data might be enriched with insightful participants, it may also mean that participants were generally more psychologically resourced and articulate about relational dynamics than members of the broader queer community. These factors may limit the transferability of findings to queer couples who have less access to mental health resources or professional training in human services contexts.

As I consider transferability, I acknowledge that the sample may not represent the full spectrum of intersectional queer identities in the United States. Despite efforts to recruit a diverse and geographically varied sample, there were limitations across identities, such as ethnicity and religion/spirituality, and geographical location. Most couples were White, non-religious, and in the Pacific Northwest and Southwest regions. I will consider these limitations as I present the implications of these findings, which are organized by research question. Lastly, I will provide recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and concluding reflections.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the interplay of emotional intimacy, relational power, and sociocultural context within queer romantic relationships. They contribute to the understanding of how couples create equitable, emotionally safe, and responsive relationships while resisting dominant societal narratives. In lockstep with the purpose outlined in chapter 1 and the SCAFT framework presented in chapter 2, these implications demonstrate that relational safety, mutual influence, and contextual awareness are foundational to sustaining intimacy and equity.

Across all three research questions, the findings converge with the foundational assumptions of SCAFT. Relational safety, emotional attunement, and power sharing emerged as intertwined processes that facilitate third-order change. Participants demonstrated how sociocultural attunement and mutual responsiveness cultivate resilience and connection, particularly within marginalized contexts. This study affirms that SCAFT can provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and transforming relational processes through equity, reflexivity, and shared meaning-making. Chapter 1 outlined the problem of power imbalances in queer couples and how these dynamics shape emotional intimacy. The current results underscore the need to center relational equity when understanding queer relationships.

The findings of this study contribute to advancing the MFT theories by deepening the understanding of power dynamics and intimacy-related factors in queer couples. Research across both queer and heterosexual relationships shows that couples often feel more emotionally connected in affirming environments and more guarded in stigmatizing contexts, underscoring how relational safety is shaped by broader sociocultural forces (Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Studies also demonstrate that equitable influence and relational ethics support deeper intimacy and satisfaction across diverse relational systems (Fishbane, 2023), reinforcing this study's finding that mutual responsiveness is central to emotional connection.

The present results can be situated within the current literature, particularly socioculturally attuned frameworks. Participants' descriptions of feeling more open in affirming spaces built within their personal relationships directly reflect SCAFT's emphasis on attuning to context and power as foundations for relational safety. Through examining how emotional intimacy and relational power intersect, this study supports the continued development of therapeutic approaches that are culturally sensitive, reflexive, and socially responsive

(Scheinkman, 2019). These findings emphasize that therapists who attune to interpersonal and institutional power dynamics are better equipped to assess and intervene in relational patterns that may mirror or resist broader societal inequities (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). At the same time, socioculturally and socioemotionally attuned therapists are also able to draw out relational strengths that allow couples to build attunement and shared power that build a *circle of care* (Knudson-Martin, 2024). Ultimately, this research underscores how queer participants model relational responsibility, mutual influence, and shared vulnerability as pathways to emotional safety and connection (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023), providing valuable insight for both theory development and clinical application.

Research Question 1: How Do Queer Couples Define and Perceive Emotional Intimacy Factors in Their Romantic Relationship?

Participants defined emotional intimacy as a dynamic process rooted in emotional safety, authenticity, patience, and mutual understanding. The themes of *sharedness and turning inward and towards* built on mutual attunement and respect, and reflected partners' commitment to relational growth. These themes underscore that cultivating differentiation-of-self supports relational health and stability (Bowen, 1978). Consistent with SCAFT, couples demonstrated relational responsibility through curiosity, responsiveness, and engagement with each other's emotional experiences (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Therapeutically, this underscores the importance of cultivating spaces that prioritize vulnerability, commitment, internal growth, and trust. These conditions allow partners to explore differences without fear of judgment. This aligns with broader intimacy research indicating that responsiveness, shared vulnerability, and clear communication are central mechanisms of closeness across couple types (Haas & Lannutti, 2022; Scheinkman, 2019).

Theoretically, these findings expand SCAFT's understanding of intimacy as a relational process informed by understanding one's cultural context and social identity. Moreover, willingness, a core SCAFT process, was evident as couples intentionally engaged with differences rather than avoided them. This phenomenon of willingness showed up when navigating power, privilege, and health challenges within and outside the relationship. These findings align with SCAFT's emphasis on relational ethics by highlighting that emotional closeness and shared influence are constructed through the negotiation of power within the couple (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022).

Shared communication emerged as a central and unifying process throughout the interviews, weaving together multiple dimensions of relational functioning. Participants described communication as the foundation through which trust was established, intimacy deepened, and mutual understanding grew. Through ongoing dialogue, partners learned about each other's needs, adjusted their interactions, and created a sense of *we-ness* that fostered emotional safety and connection. Effective communication also made conflict resolution easier by facilitating shared power and collaborative problem-solving, allowing couples to navigate differences without compromising individual authenticity. Honesty, self-awareness, and self-control were identified as essential components of this process, enabling partners to remain attuned to one another and to themselves. These findings align with the principles of SCAFT, which conceptualizes communication as a vehicle for relational ethics and equity (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022). By co-constructing meaning through open, responsive, and reflective communication, couples enacted shared influence and sustained relational intimacy within their sociocultural contexts. The results parallel attachment-based

findings that emotional safety, responsiveness, and co-regulation strengthen secure bonding and deepen intimacy (Hudson & Fraley, 2017; Mazur, 2025).

The results of this study also indicate that participants define emotional intimacy as a process of sharedness and *turning inward and toward*, both of which foster a sense of *we-ness* and connection that extends beyond individual emotional expression. Participants also described intimacy as a co-constructed state built through shared meaning, intentionality, and balancing individuality and time together. This showed up as a sense of sharedness that created a safe space in which both partners could express shared vulnerability and individuality. These findings deepen understanding of emotional intimacy as a relational achievement fostered through individual and dyadic growth and learning (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022).

A key aspect of this finding is that *we-ness* was expressed differently across age groups and relational contexts. Among the three couples over 40 years old, intimacy developed through the experience of parenting or desiring to parent, often while forming blended families. These couples described learning about one another through navigating family systems, routines, and child-rearing values. Those experiences reinforced their sense of partnership and mutual trust as they took risks and trusted each other's experience, values, and abilities. In contrast, younger couples developed *we-ness* through other shared commitments such as caring for pets, creating shared homes, or developing joint rituals that symbolized belonging. Regardless of age, participants emphasized that queer couples often place greater emphasis on emotional intimacy than heterosexual couples, viewing it as both connection and protection in the face of external stressors (Boe & Baldwin, 2023).

The balance between togetherness and autonomy, or differentiation-of-self, was central to emotional closeness. Each person stated they felt that their individual needs mattered to the other

person and were considered and integrated into the relational dynamics. The individual needs varied. Some examples of individual needs included differences in the amount of alone time versus time together and the type of individual processing or reflection on a joint decision. This sense of *we-ness* allowed them to be their full selves without fear of rejection. Instead, each person received acceptance and care from their partner regarding their individual needs. These findings also connect to Gottman and Silver's (2015) framework of love maps and marital friendship. Couples described emotional intimacy as an ongoing process of learning about each other's internal worlds and adjusting behaviors accordingly. This practice of curiosity and responsiveness allowed partners to maintain connection during individual life transitions. This aligns with the SCAFT principle that relational safety and mutual responsibility are prerequisites for relational growth (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023).

Another major implication for therapeutic work with queer couples is the role of building an intentional shared safe space. This safety that participants built for each other allowed each partner to be fully authentic as a queer individual. Once this sense of safety was established, couples reported that trust, shared power, and mutual influence followed. This recognition of safety in relationships mirrors the progression of cultural humility and third-order systemic change (McDowell et al., 2022), demonstrating how emotional safety becomes both the foundation and product of relational equity, which will be further addressed and discussed in Research Question 2.

The findings of this study align with Habimana-Jordana and Rodríguez-García's (2023) work with multiracial women of African descent in Catalonia, Spain. The authors used relief maps to illustrate how identity, discrimination, and belonging shift across psychological, geographical, and social dimensions. Their study showed that experiences of self, safety, and

marginalization are fluid and context-dependent, shaped by the spaces individuals move through and the identities they inhabit. Similarly, in the present study, couples' narratives demonstrated that emotional intimacy and power were deeply responsive to their environments. Participants described how emotional comfort, relational safety, and shared influence shifted depending on sociocultural context. This reinforces that relational processes cannot be separated from the larger systems that shape partners' sense of safety and connection.

These findings have direct clinical implications. Therapists working with queer couples can draw on these insights to emphasize the co-creation of emotional safety, encourage curiosity about partners' inner worlds, and help clients develop relational rituals that support *we-ness* and differentiation. Both sociocultural and emotionally-focused frameworks provide guidance for facilitating attunement and responsiveness (Johnson, 2019; Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Additionally, therapists can model intentional safety in session by inviting conversations about power, privilege, and sociocultural context, helping couples integrate these dialogues into their daily interactions (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011).

Finally, these results hold theoretical implications for MFT research. They highlight that emotional intimacy in queer relationships is simultaneously relational, developmental, and socioemotional. Sharedness, willingness, and differentiation of self emerge as interactive processes that sustain connection while resisting systemic inequities. This contributes to expanding family therapy theory toward models that account for relational resilience (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023; Scheinkman, 2019).

In summary, the implications of this study's first research question reveal that queer couples define and sustain emotional intimacy through intentional sharedness, differentiation, and safety. Emotional intimacy becomes both an act of resistance and a practice of relational

healing. This is anchored in *we-ness*, responsiveness, and mutual growth within an attuned, culturally-aware partnership.

Research Question 2: How Do Queer Couples Perceive, Respond to, and Experience Power in Their Romantic Relationship?

The results from Research Question 2 indicate that participants perceived and experienced power as a mutual and fluid process rooted in trust, adaptability, and shared influence. Unlike traditional heterosexual power models, where one partner (often the woman or the partner with less social privilege) must remain vigilant of relational imbalances, queer couples in this study described power as less anxiety-inducing and more collaborative. Partners did not express fear or resentment around who held influence; rather, power was framed as a joint responsibility, where both individuals acknowledged and adjusted their positions to maintain relational balance (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022).

Across the sample, the theme of mutual trust was foundational to equitable power sharing. All twelve couples described making decisions as a team, grounded in trust that each partner's intentions supported the well-being of the relationship. This trust allowed partners to engage in flexible exchanges of influence based on context and capacity. Participants described adjusting roles or leadership depending on each partner's strengths, emotional resources, or expertise. This mutual awareness reflects the SCAFT principle of shared relational responsibility, which emphasizes that partners co-create safety and equity through awareness, responsiveness, and flexibility (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). When trust was present, couples experienced power not as competition, but as collaboration.

A second core theme, *(re)defining power dynamics*, captured how couples reinterpreted influence through cooperation and conscious choice. Ten couples emphasized that both

individuals could be powerful without diminishing the other. Participants reflected on what dimensions of individual identities and traits could influence power. These included, but were not limited to, individual strengths, neurotypes, income, physical health, and immigration status. Couples based roles on individual strengths, preferences, and abilities, rather than solely on areas of privilege within the relationship. On the other hand, couples recognized that individual levels of power outside of the relationship differ based on areas of marginalization and privilege, such as gender identity, neurotype, and race. Queer couples' approach to flexibility and adaptability exemplifies third-order change, in which partners consciously shift the sociocultural assumptions that structure traditional relational hierarchies (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). This redefinition of power demonstrates relational reflexivity and aligns with feminist and intersectional family therapy frameworks described in Chapter 2, which emphasize that equity emerges through mutual awareness, responsiveness, and the dismantling of systemic hierarchies within intimate relationships (Hare-Mustin, 1978; McDowell et al., 2022).

In reflecting on these dynamics, some couples implicitly illustrated how their relationships served as sites of safety and resilience within a broader sociocultural context marked by heteronormativity and marginalization. This notion echoes earlier research on "home" as a protective and restorative space for minoritized groups. For example, scholars have described how Black families intentionally cultivate safety within the home to shield against racism and systemic oppression (hooks, 2014), and similar patterns have been noted among queer individuals who co-create affirming domestic spaces that counteract social stigma and exclusion (Gorman-Murray, 2006). Within this study, several participants described their relationships as sanctuaries where they could express authenticity, autonomy, and shared agency without fear of external judgment. While not an explicit focus of this research, such findings

suggest that queer partnerships may function as relational “homes” that buffer the impacts of systemic inequities—a concept warranting further exploration in future studies.

Participants described power as fluid, co-created, and anchored in mutual trust rather than dominance. Couples reframed power as a collaborative process that allows for flexibility and negotiation based on empathy and shared responsibility. This aligns with SCAFT’s emphasis on equitable influence and relational ethics (McDowell et al., 2022), illustrating that power and intimacy operate in parallel processes. These relational patterns reflect other findings that equitable influence and relational ethics predict higher levels of emotional intimacy and relational satisfaction (Fishbane, 2023). Couples exhibited relational reflexivity by identifying how privilege, gender norms, and emotional regulation shaped their interactions. Clinically, this finding encourages therapists to support clients in naming and balancing power differentials while cultivating responsiveness and equity. These findings affirm that mutual empowerment enhances both individual well-being and relational resilience.

Interestingly, Steve and Chris were the only couple who reported having similar dimensions of social power and privilege. Their shared experiences of gender, class, and professional privilege created what they described as a level playing field, even extending to sharing clothing. They also stood out as the only pair who did not report physical health issues and explicitly questioned the need to discuss power, suggesting a possible connection to the assumptions of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 1995). The theory proposes that individuals with marginalized identities experience chronic, unique stress resulting from external and internal stigma, rejection, prejudice, and discrimination. It assumes that such stress uniquely impacts psychological and relational well-being, while resilience, community connection, and affirming relationships can buffer these effects. This observation highlights the ongoing influence of social

context and supports SCAFT's assertion that therapists must remain attentive to privilege (McDowell et al., 2022).

While this study did not employ observational methods, several nonverbal dynamics were noteworthy. Partners frequently demonstrated micro-behaviors of collaboration, such as nodding, affirming with "yes," or checking in verbally and nonverbally to confirm mutual understanding. Partners often used body language or timing to recalibrate, such as pausing, redirecting, or inviting the other to speak. These subtle embodied cues align with research on nonverbal synchrony and movement coordination in dyadic interaction, which finds that interpersonal attunement at the nonverbal level is linked to smooth interaction, relational connection, and shared regulation of the interactional space (e.g., Lin et al., 2023; Nyman-Salonen et al., 2021). In the context of intimate couple interaction, such embodied attunement may reflect an underlying relational equity, signifying a tacit commitment to mutual engagement and co-regulation. Although nonverbal interaction was not explored extensively in Chapter 2, these observations reveal a valuable area for future research on how physical communication and embodied awareness sustain power balance in queer relationships.

Across dyads, self-awareness and congruence emerged as key mechanisms maintaining mutual influence. Participants described monitoring their tone, emotional expression, and decision-making roles to ensure relational balance. Power was experienced as dynamic because it was continually negotiated. These findings reinforce prior research on relational ethics and mutual influence, which suggests that equity is cultivated through continuous reflection, communication, and adaptability (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023; Scheinkman, 2019).

From a clinical perspective, these results underscore that therapists must conceptualize power not as a static imbalance to be corrected, but as a living relational process to be co-

constructed, monitored, and shared. Using frameworks such as SCAFT and intersectional feminist theory, therapists can help partners recognize how sociocultural privilege, marginalization, and identity shape their everyday relational patterns. This awareness fosters intentional collaboration and shared trust (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021; McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). Clinicians can also model cultural humility and curiosity in session, encouraging couples to engage in relational reflexivity and attunement to sustain equity and intimacy in practice.

Theoretically, these results contribute to the evolving understanding of queer relational processes as models for equitable and flexible partnerships. Rather than replicating traditional hierarchies, participants demonstrated how emotional intimacy and power can coexist as parallel, interdependent systems. Through mutual trust, adaptability, and collaboration, participants embodied the kind of third-order systemic change that moves relationships toward equity, authenticity, and resilience (McDowell et al., 2022). These findings invite further research into how queer partnerships deconstruct dominance-based narratives and co-create new relational ethics grounded in care and equality.

In summary, the implications of this study’s second research question highlight that participants experience power as a dynamic and co-created exchange maintained through trust, adaptability, and shared responsibility. Power becomes less about control and more about care. This care for one’s partner is an ongoing relational commitment that sustains intimacy, mutual respect, and equity within culturally diverse partnerships.

Research Question 3: How do Queer Couples Perceive the Influence of Contextual and Societal Processes on Power Dynamics in Their Romantic Relationship?

Findings related to Research Question 3 reveal that participants perceive contextual and societal processes as deeply intertwined with their experiences of relational power. Participants

described these influences through the overarching theme of *acknowledge, accept, and accommodate*, with subthemes of acknowledging the impact of social identity and context, accepting differences that create imbalance, and adjusting the relationship to accommodate or recalibrate those differences. These themes emphasized couples' reflexivity, adaptability, and shared commitment to navigating cultural, social, and identity-based factors shaping their relationships.

Participants discussed how external systems, including financial issues, gender socialization and expectations, and health factors, intersected with their relational processes. Many couples described intentionally rejecting relationship scripts based on heteronormative and patriarchal norms. The couples instead crafted partnerships grounded in flexibility and honoring their unique needs. This supports broader systemic implications, as couples who embody equitable influence model resistance to structural inequities. For therapists, these findings highlight the importance of helping clients connect personal experiences with sociocultural patterns and envision relational practices that align with their values and needs (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023; McDowell et al., 2022).

The intersection of financial change, physical health, and mental health emerged as a central contextual factor. Several couples described how financial instability related to the COVID-19 pandemic shifted relational power and role expectations, particularly around employment and caregiving. In these moments, one partner often held the weight of being the provider, and both acknowledged the dynamic. One participant reflected that he liked being the provider, demonstrating that for some, embracing this role felt empowering rather than burdensome. However, couples also expressed awareness of how such arrangements could inadvertently recreate hierarchical dynamics, prompting ongoing dialogue to maintain equity and

collaboration. This finding echoes Knudson-Martin et al.'s (2021) framework that emphasizes continuous negotiation and relational reflexivity as tools for sustaining relational balance.

A generational component also emerged in conversations around economic and emotional readiness for parenting. Some participants grieved the loss or uncertainty of having children, while others intentionally resisted traditional family scripts. Several couples articulated a sense of liberation in not feeling obligated to marry or have children simply because those rights were legally available. This generational consciousness reflects a collective shift toward autonomy and agency in defining what family means for queer couples, aligning with SCAFT's emphasis on cultural attunement and context-sensitive relationship building (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023).

Many participants noted that while individual socialization related to identity development and coming out were present, there were few relational models available for queer partnerships. Without culturally sanctioned scripts, couples described a sense of both freedom and uncertainty in constructing their relational norms. Emma and Jack captured this perspective, stating, "One of the things that I find to be super cool about queer relationships, kind of like you were saying, is there's not a script." This lack of prescribed structure allowed partners to collaboratively define what balance, equity, and intimacy looked like for them, underscoring queer relationships as potential spaces for relational creativity and reconstruction (McDowell et al., 2022; Scheinkman, 2019).

Surprisingly, participants spoke more about neurodivergence and physical health issues than about current mental health concerns. While on one hand this may have reflected awareness of how embodied and neurological experiences influenced relational power and empathy, it may also tie back to the sample. Earlier, I shared that many couples either reported previous or

ongoing engagement in therapy or currently work in human services. Those couples may have more internalized mental health resources and education. This may allow them to now focus on understanding other aspects of themselves with curiosity, such as learning about their neurotype. The increased discussion of neurodivergence among participants aligns with current trends of greater awareness and diagnosis of ADHD and autism in adults and adult relationships. This pattern also reflects a broader cultural recognition of neuroqueering, a concept described by Walker (2015, 2021) and applied by Loy-Ashe (2023) to capture how neurodivergent individuals express and embody their identities in ways that challenge normative expectations around gender, sexuality, and social behavior. Ashe (2023) highlighted that the intersection of neurodivergence and queerness affects how individuals navigate inclusion, self-understanding, and belonging, particularly in environments such as outdoor and recreational spaces that are often structured around normative expectations.

These insights extend systemic understandings of relational equity by illustrating how health and neurodiversity intersect with identity, privilege, and relational responsibility (Knudson Martin et al., 2021; McDowell et al., 2022). Differences can shape communication styles, sensory experiences, emotional regulation, and relational processing. Awareness of these variations allows clinicians to avoid pathologizing difference and instead foster understanding, accessibility, and equity within the therapeutic process. Therefore, an implication is the need to regularly broach the topic of neurodiversity in clinical practice.

From a clinical perspective, these findings underscore the importance of conceptualizing relational power as both contextual and intersectional. Therapists are encouraged to identify how larger systems shape relational experiences and connect personal experiences to broader structural influences (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Encouraging partners to name, accept, and

accommodate differences from a stance of mutual curiosity and empathy can encourage equity, compassion, and awareness within relationships.

Theoretically, these findings expand the literature by demonstrating how queer couples can serve as models of relational adaptability and social consciousness. Their ability to balance individual and collective needs while acknowledging external constraints exemplifies relational resilience rooted in attunement and equity. Couples' capacity to acknowledge, accept, and accommodate systemic realities without internalizing them as personal failures represents a transformative act of resistance and co-creation. In this sense, the relational strategies queer couples employ parallel SCAFT's vision of relational justice, wherein partners intentionally reconstruct their dynamics in alignment with broader social equity (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023; McDowell et al., 2022).

In summary, the implications of this study's third research question highlight that queer couples perceive contextual and societal processes as dynamic influences that require ongoing reflection and adaptation. Through acknowledging systemic forces, accepting difference, and accommodating one another with empathy, partners cultivate transformation. These findings affirm that awareness enhances relationship functioning and contributes to flexibility and shared relational responsibility.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study offer several recommendations for marriage and family therapists, educators, and supervisors working with queer couples. These recommendations are grounded in the Chapter 4 themes of *sharedness, mutual trust, (re)defining power, and acknowledge, accept, and accommodate*. The recommendations will also build on the literature discussed in Chapter 2.

Recommendation 1: Center Sociocultural Attunement in Couples Therapy with Queer Couples

Therapists are encouraged to adopt a socioculturally attuned stance that addresses emotional intimacy and power as relational processes influenced by context, identity, and lived experience (McDowell et al., 2022). Clinicians can enhance therapeutic effectiveness by facilitating conversations about how individual and relational factors, such as finances, health status, immigration status, occupation, and gender identity, affect relational processes. By maintaining awareness of these contextual forces that may impact daily interactions, therapists can help clients co-construct equitable patterns that promote shared influence and mutual trust. In doing so, therapists foster third-order change by helping couples identify and challenge internalized sociocultural messages about gender, heteronormative relationship scripts, and power, thereby co-creating new relational narratives that sustain mutual empowerment (McDowell et al., 2022).

Training programs and clinical supervision should intentionally incorporate SCAFT principles to prepare future clinicians for culturally responsive work (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). These principles include contextual attunement, interrupting inequitable dynamics, and promoting shared relational responsibility. Supervisors can model reflexivity by inviting trainees to examine how their social locations influence their understanding of power, privilege, and relational equity. Ongoing journaling, peer consultation, and supervision dialogues can help therapists sustain awareness of how personal bias intersects with practice. Reflexivity should also be viewed as an ethical stance, ensuring that therapists remain accountable for how their own identities, privileges, and biases influence the therapy process and the distribution of power within the room (Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). These educational shifts align the field with the

evolving social landscape and ensure that clinicians are equipped to serve diverse and intersectional populations with humility and competence.

Recommendation 2: Integrate SCAFT with Emotionally-focused and Gottman Models

Findings from this study emphasize that emotional safety and mutual responsiveness are foundational to sustaining intimacy and equity. Therapists can integrate the relational ethics of SCAFT with attachment-based methods such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2019) and structured interventions from the Gottman Method (Gottman & Silver, 2015). This integration allows clinicians to combine sociocultural awareness with empirically supported tools for repair, empathy, and conflict resolution. The Gottman Method focuses on strengthening friendship, managing conflict, building trust and emotional attunement, and creating shared meaning within relationships. EFCT helps partners identify and transform negative interactional cycles rooted in unmet emotional needs by fostering vulnerability, responsiveness, and secure emotional connection. Through intentionally addressing both emotional attunement and systemic context, therapists can help queer couples deepen connection, reduce reactivity, and strengthen their sense of *we-ness*. These interventions also equip clients with relational rituals that reinforce fairness and cooperation outside of sessions. Building on SCAFT's foundation of relational ethics (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023), therapists can intentionally facilitate equitable influence through shared decision-making, mutual accountability, and compassion, while integrating evidence-based frameworks that encompass the themes of this study. This integration not only enhances emotional attunement but also strengthens the relational justice framework central to systemic practice.

Recommendation 3: Expand Neurodiversity-informed and Neuroaffirming Practice

Participants' focus on neurodivergence reflects current therapeutic trends emphasizing neuroaffirming, strengths-based approaches that value neurological difference as an integral part of relational diversity (Kapp, 2020). Many couples in this study described how ADHD and autism shaped communication patterns, sensory regulation, and emotional expression, influencing both intimacy and power within the relationship. Partners often discussed learning to accommodate one another's processing styles and emotional pacing, which required patience, flexibility, curiosity, and shared influence. The growing cultural attention to ADHD and autism diagnoses, particularly among adults, illustrates a broader shift in how difference is conceptualized in both clinical and social contexts (Botha & Frost, 2020; Kapp, 2020). Increased awareness and self-identification have enabled individuals and couples to reframe neurodivergence as a difference rather than deficit. Couples can then focus on empathy and communication. Consequently, neurodiversity has become an emerging factor in relational systems that therapists must attune to when conceptualizing couple dynamics.

In order to further support equitable, culturally responsive care, therapists are encouraged to help partners explore how neurodivergence interacts with other contextual dimensions, such as gender, culture, health, and socioeconomic factors, to shape relational influence (Aulas & Fletcher-Watson, 2023; Botha et al., 2021). Clinicians can normalize differences in processing and communication while helping couples identify complementary strengths and shared strategies for regulation and repair, reflecting recent evidence that dyads benefit from understanding one another's cognitive and emotional pacing (G. Young et al., 2021). This includes attending to the sensory, attentional, and executive functioning aspects that affect emotional attunement and conflict management, which research has shown can meaningfully influence emotional responsiveness and escalation patterns (e.g., Kapp, 2020; C. E. Miller &

Hinshaw, 2020; Sibley, 2021). Through integrating a neuroaffirming practice with SCAFT principles, therapists can expand the SCAFT's inclusivity and responsiveness to evolving client populations (Boe & Baldwin, 2023). Therapists can utilize a practice that honors each partner's unique way of experiencing the world and mutual understanding to affirm difference as a valued aspect of relational identity (Fishbane, 2023).

Recommendation 4: Refocus on the Couple as a Catalyst of Change

This study highlights the importance of centering the couple as a relational unit that serves as both a stabilizing force and a conduit for cultural and systemic change. Much like the family in public health frameworks, couples function as foundational systems where patterns of equity, empathy, and shared responsibility are modeled, practiced, and transmitted across generations. When partners cultivate relational justice within their relationship, these dynamics can extend outward to influence family functioning, parenting, and community connection. Viewing the couple as a key site of relational health underscores that dyadic well-being contributes to broader societal resilience. Therapists can support partners in maintaining balance among care for self, each other, and children by examining how sociocultural and economic factors shape their decision-making. Encouraging couples to protect relational time and energy helps prevent burnout and sustain intimacy, particularly when navigating systemic inequities or external pressures.

Collectively, these recommendations call for therapists and educators to integrate sociocultural attunement, neurodiversity inclusion, and systemic reflexivity into their work with queer couples. Emphasizing emotional safety, equity, and contextual awareness allows clinicians to strengthen the couple relationship as both a site of healing and a model for broader relational and community transformation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings, theoretical framework, and implications of this study, future research can continue to expand understanding of how queer couples experience and construct emotionally attuned and equitable partnerships across sociocultural contexts and circumstances. Future research methods can incorporate varied designs, such as longitudinal, mixed-methods, and qualitative approaches with individual participants rather than dyads. Interviewing participants separately from their partners can encourage openly sharing views that may have been uncomfortable expressing in the presence of their partner (Kamali et al., 2020). Individual interviews with both members of a couple can also capture the unique perspectives of each person and ensure that interview validity is not affected (Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). The two individuals in a dyad could even complete interviews on the same day as their significant other to decrease the risk of sharing their answers. Longitudinal studies could examine how relational equity develops over time and in response to external stressors. Quantitative or mixed methods approaches could measure the impact of socioculturally attuned interventions on relationship satisfaction and emotional well-being. Additionally, expanding research to include more diverse couples not captured in this study would enrich the understanding of intersectional experiences. Researchers are encouraged to continue exploring how SCAFT can inform the cultivation of socially responsible therapists. In alignment with SCAFT's emphasis on justice and transformation, future studies can bridge micro-level relational dynamics with macro- level systemic advocacy.

Recommendation 1: Explore the Role of Economic and Sociocultural Pressures in Decision-making about Having Children

This study revealed that decision-making around having or not having children is shaped by sociocultural and financial contexts that often require pause from the couple. Future researchers could examine how structural factors such as financial insecurity, work demands, and healthcare access intersect with relational power and equity. In light of current trends showing that fewer individuals are choosing parenthood due to economic strain, changing values, and a desire for personal and relational agency, research should also consider how these broader social shifts influence couples' decisions about family formation. Extending this work through intersectional designs that include participants of varied racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds would deepen understanding of how external systems influence internal relational processes (McDowell et al., 2022). Such work could also address how couples navigate shared influence and relational responsibility in response to shifting economic realities and social norms.

Recommendation 2: Expand Relational Responsibility

Relational responsibility, central to both SCAFT and Socioemotional Relationship Therapy (SERT), emphasizes how partners organize care, influence, and mutual well-being within and beyond the couple subsystem. Future research could investigate how queer couples translate relational strengths, such as safety, mutual vulnerability, shared values, and equity, into parenting practices. It could potentially illuminate processes of intergenerational resilience through parenting. Beyond parenting children, relational responsibility can be explored across diverse relational contexts that were salient for participants in this study, such as shared responsibility for pets and community. Many participants described caregiving as a central expression of intimacy and collaboration, suggesting that forms of care outside of parenting children may offer additional insight into how queer couples co-construct equity and connection.

Examining these broader caregiving systems would deepen understanding of relational responsibility and expand family therapy research to reflect diverse family constellations (Glass, 2022).

To begin, future research can explore how queer couples conceptualize the influence of caregiving for their pets on their romantic relationship. In this study, many participants described pets as emotional figures within their family systems, symbolizing connection, responsibility, and shared care. Couples reflected on shared experiences in losing pets, how pets have brought closeness, built their family's foundation, and added to their roles in the home. Researchers could examine how caregiving toward pets or chosen family members parallels relational processes associated with emotional intimacy, power, and shared responsibility.

In another aspect of the results, many participants described lacking visible examples of queer partnerships, which led them to construct their own frameworks for intimacy, equity, and commitment. Despite this absence, several couples identified serving as informal models or mentors for friends and community members, reflecting a collective effort to redefine relational norms. Future research could examine how couples in long-term queer relationships can serve as models or mentors for other couples. This type of research could both explore how couples develop long-term relationships in the absence of accessible queer relational models and the process of caregiving through mentorship. Building upon existing literature on mentorship and modeling in queer identity development, further research could explore how couples co-create alternative relational scripts that promote relational justice, mutual empowerment, and belonging within their social networks. This line of inquiry would expand understanding of intimacy and power through SCAFT's framework of relational responsibility and community attunement

(Knudson-Martin et al., 2021). Together, these directions position relational responsibility as an evolving practice enacted across many relational contexts that queer couples inhabit.

Recommendation 3: Investigate Nonverbal and Embodied Processes in Relational Power Dynamics

Although this study focused primarily on verbal descriptions of relational experiences, future research could integrate observational or phenomenological approaches to capture embodied forms of communication. Nonverbal gestures such as eye contact, touch, tone, and body positioning can illuminate how couples enact shared power, responsiveness, and emotional regulation in real time. Methods could include video-recorded sessions that are systematically coded for nonverbal and affective cues, as well as participant reflections on their recorded interactions to increase awareness of implicit relational processes. Integrating these methods with SCAFT's emphasis on emotional attunement and contextual awareness would deepen understanding of how physical communication sustains mutual influence in queer relationships (Knudson-Martin & Kim, 2023). In addition, studies might include individual as well as dyadic interviews, particularly when one partner may feel more comfortable articulating relational experiences privately. Breakout and dyadic interviews could allow researchers to examine how partners' verbal and nonverbal expressions shift when they are interviewed separately versus together, offering insight into authenticity, emotional safety, and relational dynamics. Including these perspectives or using breakout interviews would also enhance trustworthiness by capturing variations in perception, engagement, and awareness across partners.

Collectively, these directions emphasize the importance of contextualizing queer relational processes within diverse cultural, economic, and embodied frameworks. Future researchers should consider mixed-methods and longitudinal designs that include both individual

and dyadic perspectives, as well as more racially, geographically, and occupationally varied samples. Extending SCAFT's framework to include physical, nonverbal, and nontraditional expressions of care will continue to advance culturally responsive, relationally just theory and practice. These recommendations continue the work that inspired this study and illuminate how queer couples cultivate intimacy, equity, and care within complex sociocultural systems, and how therapists and researchers alike can honor those processes through relationally just, attuned, and evolving practices.

Study Summary

This study explored how queer couples experience emotional intimacy and relational power within sociocultural contexts that have historically marginalized their relationships. Guided by SCAFT, the phenomenological design illuminated how twelve queer couples co-constructed safety, mutual influence, and equity in long-term relationships. In doing so, the study addressed the problem of limited systemic models in marriage and family therapy that reflect heteronormative assumptions and often overlook how power and contextual forces shape queer relational experiences. By centering queer couples' voices and examining their relational processes through a socioculturally attuned lens, the study contributes empirical evidence that expands the theoretical and clinical foundations of MFT.

The findings demonstrated that emotional safety, reflexivity, and shared vulnerability are central to intimacy and the balance of power. The three overarching dimensions, *sharedness and turning inward and toward, mutual trust and (red)defining power dynamics, and acknowledge, accept, and accommodate*, revealed that queer couples sustain connection through patience, self-awareness, and collaborative negotiation of power. These findings extend previous research by

empirically supporting SCAFT's emphasis on relational ethics, mutual responsiveness, and sociocultural awareness as mechanisms of resilience and healing.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the significance of power, intimacy, and context in understanding queer relational experiences. Through a SCAFT lens, it highlights how mutual responsiveness and contextual awareness foster both individual and relational well-being. Ultimately, when couples and therapists engage in socioculturally attuned, power-conscious processes, they promote equity, emotional safety, and relational justice. The results underscore SCAFT's transformative potential as both a clinical and social framework for relational justice and third-order change. Continued research with more racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse queer couples is needed to deepen understanding of emotional intimacy and power and to advance culturally responsive, equity-based practices in marriage and family therapy. At its core, this study shows that queer couples build strong, equitable relationships by intentionally co-creating emotional safety, mutual influence, and contextual awareness. This study offers evidence that relational ethics are possible and actively practiced when couples center a sense of *we-ness* and shared communication and responsibility through the work of emotional intimacy.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Each partner will answer the following:

1. What is your age (years)?
2. How do you define your ethnicity and/or race?
3. Can you briefly describe your current socioeconomic situation:
    - What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    - What is your current employment status?
    - How would you describe your current financial situation?
4. How do you describe gender identity?
5. What are your pronouns?
6. How do you describe your sexual orientation?
7. What religion and/or form of spirituality do you identify (if applicable)?
8. How would you describe your physical and mental health?
9. Where are you located (city/state)?
10. How long have you been in this romantic relationship?

Appendix B: Interview Guide

<u>Introduction</u>

- *Researcher Introduction* – Hello and thank you both for being here and for your willingness to participate. My name is Jessica Calcagni and I'm a doctoral student at National University conducting this study as part of my dissertation.
  - *If not on video yet*- Can you please pop on camera to verify your identity for IRBs?
- *Purpose of the Study*- Before we begin, I want to quickly go over the purpose of the study and what your participation involves. This study explores how queer couples experience power dynamics and emotional intimacy in their relationships.
- *Interview process overview* – We will have the first interview today and I will talk with you at the end about a follow-up email to check the transcript and provide feedback on initial themes. Our conversation will be recorded, and I'll also be taking notes to make sure I have complete information. It is expected to last about 60 minutes. Your identities will be kept confidential and all recordings and notes will be protected. Each of you will receive $10 as a thank you for your time. today's conversation will be very informal, and I am hoping to just hear about your experiences.
- *Informed Consent* - You can stop the interview at any time, skip any questions, take a break, or withdraw from the study at any time. Have you each had an opportunity to review the informed consent? Do either of you have any questions about it? Do I have your consent from each of you to continue with the interview and record it?
- *Participant questions* - Do you have any questions before we begin?

<u>Interview Questions</u>

Warm-up Questions

- How did you two meet? Tell me a little of your relationship story.
- What is your favorite memory together?

Emotional Intimacy

- How would you describe **emotional intimacy** in your relationship?
  - What does that look like?
  - What aspects of it feel most difficult?
- What types of things do you **confide** in them about?
  - Can you describe a moment when they **supported** you in a vulnerable state?
  - What helps you feel emotionally safe enough to open up?
- What helps you feel **seen and understood** by your partner?
  - How do you know when they are trying to get your attention?
  - Can you describe a time when you felt especially "in sync" with them?
- What does **closeness** look like in your relationship?
  - What is an example?
- How do they typically **respond** when you share your thoughts and feelings?
  - What about when they express a need for closeness or support?
  - How do they respond when you feel hurt in the relationship versus about something other than the relationship?
- How do you meet each other's emotional **needs?**

  - Can you share a time when you asked them to adapt to what you needed or expected? What happened?
  - What gets in the way of being responsive to each other sometimes?

Power Dynamics

- How would you define a fair relationship?
  - What do you notice each of you gives to the relationship?
  - In what ways is equality important to you both? Is that different than fairness?
- What does it mean to take accountability in your relationship?
- What kinds of **decisions** have you made together? How were those decisions made, and what influenced them?
  - What were some key commitments in your relationship (like maybe cohabitating or getting married)? How were those navigated?
  - Can you tell me about a commitment you made on your own that impacted the relationship or the other person?
  - Can you share a time when they influenced a decision you made? How do you balance each other's opinions when you disagree?
- How do you divide up **responsibilities**?
  - How did you decide?
  - How has the division changed over time?
  - What challenges arise?
- How do you decide how much time to spend together vs. apart?
  - Who changes schedules to fit the others' needs?
- What typically happens when you two disagree?
  - Describe a **conflict** between you—how did you approach it or resolve it?
  - What shifts in your relationship during conflict vs. times of more calm
  - What about when there is conflict about sex vs. like dividing up responsibilities?
- What do you think of what I say power related to a romantic relationship? What comes to mind?
  - Based on how you just defined power, how does power play out in your relationship?
  - How has power shifted over time in your relationship?
  - How do you define your role in the relationship?
  - How has your gender identity and socialization shaped your relationship, especially within queer contexts?
  - How does gender expression factor into your relationship dynamics?
  - Aside from gender, what influences power (listen for attachment, roles, resources, dominant group, the more knowledgeable other in the relationship, differentiation, addiction, mental health, other forms of socialization)?
  - With gender roles and gender being challenged, how are you navigating relational power?

Sociocultural Context

- Have either of you moved from a different city, state, or country before or during this relationship? Tell me more about that decision.

    - How has that influenced your relationship?
  - What generation would you each consider yourselves?
    - How has that influenced your relationship?
  - What were some lessons you remember receiving about romantic relationships?
    - How do those lessons align with or challenge dominant societal norms?
  - What values do you share?
    - How do those values (e.g., collectivist vs. individualist, religious, other core values) play a role in your relationship?

Closing

- Thank you for your time and openness in sharing about your experiences about intimacy and power dynamics in your relationship.
- Is there anything you would like to add or clarify?
- I included some resources you can access following this interview on the following page.
- I will email you a transcript via email for you to review. I will also share my initial reflections and want to remain aligned with your answers. You can respond with any corrections, clarify, or elaborate on anything from the first interview. Then I will email the $10 gift card to each of you ($20 total).
- Do you have any other questions for me before we wrap up?

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Appendix C: Participant Resources

Online Therapy

BetterHelp Pride Counseling - Specifically for LGBTQ individuals
Website: https://www.pridecounseling.com

HelpSpace - Flexible communication options (chat, audio, video).
Website: https://www.helpspace.com

Open Path Collective - $40–$70/session
Website: https://www.openpathcollective.org

National & Local Helplines

The Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ Youth, 24/7)
Call: 1-866-488-7386
Text "START" to 678-678
Website: https://www.thetrevorproject.org

Trans Lifeline (Trans support, peer-run)
Call: 1-877-565-8860
Website: https://www.translifeline.org

LGBT National Help Center 1-888-843-4564
LGBT Senior Hotline: 1-888-234-7243
Website: https://www.glbthotline.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24/7)
Call/Text: 988
Website: https://www.988lifeline.org

BlackLine - Peer support for Black, Brown, and Indigenous folks
1-800-604-5841

Support Groups & Resources

PFLAG - Local support groups and virtual meetings for LGBTQ+ individuals and loved ones.
Website: https://www.pflag.org

LGBTQ+ MeetUp groups
Website: https://www.meetup.com

Them.us - Mental health guide and resources
https://www.them.us/story/scotus-skrmetti-trans-resources-mental-health-mutual-aid