

Supporting Students of Diverse Sexual Orientation in Higher
Education: An Ethnography of an LGBTQA Center

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Abstract

The authors conducted an ethnography of a university queer cultural center's role on campus and in the surrounding community. The dataset included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and artifacts. The authors present a review of LGBTQA issues in higher education, heterosexual attitudes, transgender, ethics, and queer theory literature. The findings of roles/barriers to the Center's mission plus the devastating murder of a woman who was transgender and suicide of a Center student prompted the authors to use research poetry as a means to express the inexpressible. Furthermore, they illustrate tensions between contemporary queer and traditional gay theories through the telling of a *straight tale* (traditional report) and a *gay tale* (experiential report), interrupted with *queer tales* (poetic interludes) and *queer asides*. At the heart of the tale is the transformation of a gay man to a researcher and scholar of gay issues. This tale is therefore at all times queer, gay, and straight.

Keywords: cultural center, education, ethics, ethnography, GLBT, higher education, LGBT, poetry, queer, safety, suicide, transgender, university, violence

Supporting Students of Diverse Sexual Orientation in Higher Education: An Ethnography of an LGBTAQ Center

Picture a broom closet, where the janitor keeps the yellow mop bucket with the obligatory “Caution: Wet Floor” warning, used to avoid those pesky torts lawsuits; the giant, industrial sized vacuum cleaner; an oversized plastic sink; and, of course, a broom, sometimes more than one.

Taking another perspective, the closet becomes an open window, a fish bowl. After making the visual image of little fish fins with her hands behind her ears while sucking in her cheeks and puckering her lips, the Center’s director explained that the analogy of a fish bowl came about because of a relatively large window giving visual access to passersby, especially the participants of campus tours. The guide points out the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, ally, and questioning (LGBTAQ) office, also referred to in this article as the Queer Cultural Center,¹ and the prospective students and their parents quickly peek in to satisfy their curiosity while avoiding the possibility of looking too interested. Consequently, the director always felt on display.

In our quest to figure out why and how students choose to utilize the LGBTAQ Center, two overall areas of focus emerged. First, we became interested in the Center’s purposes, separate from simply providing literature and tangible resources. We learned that the Center has specific goals and that those goals came with specific barriers. These goals and their inherent barriers are discussed in the findings section. Second, we sought to meet the ethnographers “imperative to make what is familiar in these processes strange as well as to make the strange familiar” (Preissle & Grant, 1998, p. 8). This focus speaks generally to the presentation of this article and specifically to the various forms of data representation that follow.

In the context of this study, *Center* is an inclusive term used to encompass the LGBTAQ office, the LGBTAQ social group’s meeting room, and all other locations the LGBTAQ travels on campus to do its work. In other words, the Center is the culture under study. There are other cultural centers on campus (e.g., Women, African American, Hispanic). None, however, has the space limitations of the LGBTAQ. All other cultural centers have dedicated buildings, two have spacious buildings, and some are brand new or newly remodeled. Furthermore, these cultural centers have plenty of space, though not all have the nicest of conditions. The LGBTAQ Center is the only cultural center housed in a pod of university offices (e.g., student activities, off-campus housing, Greek life).

All right, you got us—this closet does not have any of those janitorial items, except maybe a vacuum, but the “closet” is small, small, indeed.

Seen as an activity office and not a cultural center, a visitor might get confused and sign-up for an off-campus apartment and become a lesbian at the same time.

The Researchers

Eric

I² came out of the closet as gay when I was 19 years old, still an undergraduate college

¹ We use the word queer here to indicate that while the university culture center’s community members may at first seem to have little in common outside of the need to ban together to create safe space on a campus community, by invoking the word queer the members of the culture center may be said to be seeking a “radical deconstruction of all conventional categories of sexuality and gender” (Plummer, 2005, p. 359).

student. As a gay male who has spent over nine years on one college campus or another, I never sought out any type of support from a center. When the opportunity arose to study the LGBTAQ culture, my interest was piqued to explore exactly *who* does seek out this resource center and *why*. I knew such centers existed and what sorts of resources they provided, but I could not fathom visiting such centers myself prior to this study.

If you were to ask me why I would never have visited such a center, I might tell you that it's because I met a fellow college student whom I suspected was gay. We became good friends, and he was all the support I needed at that time. Because this is not true for everyone, I wanted to completely immerse myself in the LGBTAQ campus culture to understand the culture of the LGBTAQ. Though I am part of the gay culture per se, this is not the same as being part of the culture of the Center.

Maria

I have always considered myself an ally of people who are LGBTQ, even before I had a word to describe my stance. A stereotypical story for many heterosexuals is both personal and poignant to me. I have a gay uncle I am proud of and love. I have stories of Uncle Dan going back to my earliest childhood memories. This is the ultimate example of Borido's (2000) concept of meaningful contact. Related, as a feminist I have always felt that female issues are tied closely to homosexual issues. When things become bad for gays, they become bad for women and vice versa. These two groups need each other.

Thank God for Gay Uncles!

Besides my personal stance, as part of my work as a researcher, I was asked by the university to evaluate the Center that Eric ultimately studied. My evaluation occurred several years before Eric's ethno pry and provided a historic reference point for our discussions. The evaluation consisted of a document review, visits to the Center, and an interview of the graduate student director, a student leader, and an undergraduate student. This was time intensive work that I took seriously with my primary recommendation being that sexual orientation is not an "activity" and should emerge from the auspices of student activities to the status of a university cultural center. I am now not as naïve and understand the study was conducted merely to check a box and is shelved, gathering dust as no changes recommended were enacted or indeed ever referenced in any context I have access to.

The focus of some 'others' seems to be on the 'activity' of being LGBT (i.e., mostly sexual or stereotypical outward appearance).

Co-researchers

We first met in a graduate research course where Maria was the instructor and Eric was a student. As Eric continued in his graduate work both as a research methodologist and J.D., we began to know each other better and became interested in similar research work. Ultimately this particular study came about when Eric was enrolled in an Educational Ethnography course with Maria as the instructor. As Eric conducted the research firsthand and Maria engaged with it secondhand, they both experienced a journey. For Eric the journey might be seen as a jubilant journey from a man who is gay to a man who is now also a researcher and scholar of gay issues. For Maria, the journey was complex as she moved from an ally of students who are queer to

² Throughout the article we will use I to indicate Eric, the first author, and I to indicate Maria, the second author. In the findings section, we will use I to indicate Eric. While Maria had a major role in this article's development, from inception to fruition, Eric's role as researcher and his transformation from peripheral member to full member of the LGBTAQ center should not be interrupted and indeed would be diminished by the use of a co-author voice.

engaging firsthand with queer scholarship and research. This is a place of growth for her that is thought provoking and enhancing.

Background of Study

In this section we briefly review literature regarding LGBTQA student issues in higher education, heterosexual dominant attitudes, and the term transgender³. We also explore the narrative of tragic queer (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004; Taulke-Johnson, 2008) versus *super queer* and suggest an alternative more feasible identity of vulnerable yet capable and competent queer (Lahman, 2008). We finish by highlighting the ethical literature we engaged with as we considered how to research this population in the most respectful manner possible.

LGBT in Higher Education

LGBT students, faculty, and issues are becoming more visible on college campuses (Evans & Herriott, 2004). Nevertheless, the media and scholarly research indicate LGBTQA individuals and students are still subjected to negative attitudes, harassment, and violence in society and on campuses (Liang & Alimo, 2005; Lugin, 2004; Taulke-Johnson, 2008). However, little in-depth research has been conducted on LGBTQA university cultural centers. Of note are several studies by Berbrier (1996; 2002) and Berbrier and Pruett (2006) that use the GLB office at Indiana University as a case study for discussing larger issues of inequality and minority status.

The “T” (transgender) at many campus centers is attached last to the acronym representing diverse sexualities, almost as a tacked on token that remains underrepresented and misunderstood (Stone, 2009). The murder of a transgender community member, Angie Zapata, brutally shoved the identity of transgender citizens to the forefront of this study. Of interest to us is the unity or false unity of the terms LGBTQA in one movement, cultural center, or group. This issue has been called “one of the biggest questions threading through American political culture” (Berbrier & Pruett, 2006, p. 258). How do we “deal with a wide range of putative inequalities” (p. 258)? Take any of the terms for example, such as G and T, and little might be found in common other than obvious humanity. This issue is of note to our study because gay and straight researchers are trying to respect and make sense of Angie Zapata’s murder and transgender orientation. Diverse sexual groups do and must band together in order to have more impact when they speak and to create a safe place for those out of the heterosexual dominant frame.

It is possible that bisexual and transgender persons are among the most difficult sexually diverse citizens for other individuals to understand and thereby, sadly, to value. In one research study a gay participant strikingly shared, “trans people get discriminated against more than any other group, and a lot of it is from gays and lesbians” and a lesbian participant speculated “I’ve had a lot of things said to me because I’m gay. But I would venture to say that any trans person has had 100 times that” (Stone, 2009, p. 340). These cultures collide over issues such as sexual binaries and perceived value of monogamy (Kaufmann, 2010). It might also be that the “addition of ...transgender, to the LGBT movement requires what is perceived as the sharing of scarce movement resources” (Stone, 2009, p. 338). This sharing has been summarized as “the

³ While we use the term transgender, which first developed in the United States, it is important to note, as with all self-identification, people might refer to themselves in terminology as varied as bi-gendered, cross-dresser, pan-gendered, spansexual, and transsexual. At the core of all these terms is a sense of diversity rather than unity (Wilson, 2002). “Transgender covers a very wide range of social groupings and individuals, and the differences in their needs...means that it is difficult to...speak of a unified “transgender citizenship” (Monro & Warren, 2004, p. 346).

contentious relationship between transsexual politics...and the more powerful gay, feminist, and women's movements which often sought to exclude transsexual people" (Flannery, 2006, p. 256). Wilson (2002) reported venomous and violent reactions when transgender disclosure occurs. We also found these types of reactions regarding bi and transsexual identity; however, the aspersions might be deemed mild.

Heterosexual/Homogeneity Literature

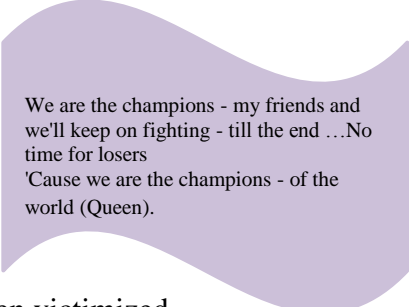
It has been suggested that studying the attitudes of heterosexuals and the dominant heterosexual campus culture will allow researchers to propose effective ways to develop an inclusive and welcoming campus culture to persons of all sexual orientations (Evans & Herriott, 2004; Liang & Alimo, 2005). Allport (1979) proposed the contact hypothesis that states as members of different groups meet, negative attitudes decrease and "new information challenges stereotypes of stigmatized groups" (Liang & Alimo, 2005, p. 240). Others have expanded this hypothesis, including Herek (1986), Harro's (1996) cycle of liberation, and Borido's (2000) notion of meaningful contact. The various types of contact hypothesis are important because allies might develop from these experiences. The literature identifies three different types of "approximating experiences" that allow people to use their own experiences to relate to others' experiences, thereby developing kinship: 1) persons using "borrowed approximations" serve as witness to others' suffering, 2) persons using "overlapping approximations" suffer in similar ways as others, and 3) persons using "global approximations" utilize the same political frames as others (Stone, 2009, p. 338).

Tragic Queer versus Super Queer: Barriers to Authentic Queer Narrative

A pervasive narrative strain running through the LGBTQ discourse is that of martyr-target-victim (Rofes, 2004), wounded identity, (Haver, 1997) or what has been termed the Tragic Queer (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004; Taulke-Johnson, 2008). This narrative strain has been embraced as unproblematized by many, including heterosexual liberals, such as author Maria initially did, and might be the initial draw for many allies. The victim narrative remains dominant in education (Harwood, 2004; Rasmussen, 2004; Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004) and might appear in higher education in the following way: "the entire gay student population is . . . defined almost exclusively by reports of the prevalence, incidents, and consequences of anti-gay attitudes and behavior on campus" (Taulke-Johnson, 2008, p. 122). This narrative remains a partial, pathological narrative, ignoring "that which is positive, affirming, pleasurable, empowering, and fulfilling" (p. 122). The tragic queer narrative places emphasis on negative aspects of the LGBTQ communities such as likeliness to commit suicide, use drugs, be depressed (Harwood, 2004), or be harassed (Liang & Alimo, 2005).

Alternately one may see a romanticized narrative of which we are calling the *Super Queer*. This narrative is equally uncomplicated as the person is seen as "completely out" at all times (Rasmussen, 2004), a leader, a crusader, and a "champion" worthy of superhero status. Maria's uncle was initially narrated to her as a Super Queer: a gay leader and founder of religious gay nonprofit organizations who worked tirelessly for others. Shades of Super Queer may be seen in the student leaders in this study who exemplify Super Queers in training or brave young activists.

Although we do not align ourselves with the queer victimization literature, we realize sexually diverse groups have been victimized and that victimization is only one part of their identity. What we are proposing is a more



We are the champions - my friends and
we'll keep on fighting - till the end ...No
time for losers
'Cause we are the champions - of the
world (Queen).

complex narrative that takes into account a round, fleshed out story where a person has room for tragedy, super achievement, and even the mundane such as data that did not make its way into this article; times when participants were just sitting around doing nothing much. We are calling this more complex narrative the vulnerable yet capable and competent *Every Queer*.

Ethics

Ideally, a researcher's ethical stance should be stated clearly and deliberately prior to conducting research involving human beings. Practically, however, much of the development of ethics comes while one reflects and grows in the field. Procedural ethics (Ellis, 2007), or standards mandated by the federal government and discipline codes, are a necessary place to begin, but not a site of naïveté where no additional issues are thought to exist.

Rather, the researcher must go further and develop ethics in practice (Ellis, 2007), which require contemplation of the unanticipated scenarios arising once the researcher has entered the field. "Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). While both procedural and relational ethical dimensions (Ellis, 2007) will guide the researcher through the quest of ethics, the relational dimension evolves over time. That is, as relationships between the researcher and participant transform over the course of time spent in the field. With this passage of time, the researcher's ethical responsibilities may change as well (Ellis, 2007).

Because no one supervises a researcher once the study has been approved, the researcher must make the decisions determining what is ethical and what is not, a line drawn based on one's ethical beliefs and research experiences. The unanticipated murder and suicide in this study called for much discussion and interaction with the IRB at our university and researcher reflection.

On a more general level, studying LGBTQ individuals introduces additional layers of ethical complexity, with the participants seen as vulnerable by IRB regulations. As explained by Dodd (2009), issues of homophobia, heterocentrism, and heterosexist bias infect the LGBTQ culture as a vulnerable research population. This status requires researchers to be cognizant of the effects of cultural biases before, during, and after the study. Because these biases seem ever-present in the current culture of Western civilization, research on LGBTQ individuals is influenced by a distorted "research lens, creating invisibility, and filtering out relevant ... studies" (Dodd, 2009, p. 477).

The issue of including sexual orientation in a study brings forth other issues. Because the nature of sexual orientation is often sensitive, the participant's privacy and confidentiality are of primary importance (Dodd, 2009). Consequently, potential harm is innate in studying LGBTQ individuals, and obtaining permission to study LGBTQ individuals requires stricter institutional review. This authorization to some extent forces the researcher to examine the power she or he holds and at least consider the possible detrimental ramifications of neglecting sensitive issues.

Even though the researcher may attempt to be unbiased toward the LGBTQ community, there will be readers who are biased. Therefore, heterocentrism is always at least an implied part of LGBTQ-related research (Dodd, 2009). Researchers must remain aware of this bias toward LGBTQ individuals and address it constantly and appropriately, depending on the nature of the study.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was a combination of queer theory (Gamson, 2000; Plummer, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990) and constructivism (Schwandt, 1994)⁴. When gay and lesbian researchers first wrested their research narrative from the hands of primarily positivistic, pathologizing, stigmatizing researchers and research agendas with the focus of fixing “the broken,” what was desperately needed was the documenting of experience, outside of the heteronormative purview by members and allies of what came to be called in various forms the LGBTQA communities. Academically, this research of experience is seen in anthropology and in Gay and Lesbian studies and was framed primarily by constructivism, which includes an emphasis on deconstruction (Schwandt, 1994) in order to reconstruct new understanding.

Soon queer theory emerged from this initial movement and was marked by a critical voice that mirrored queer politics. Queer theory’s birth is celebrated by some as the publication of Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Queer theory might be seen as an examination of and an advocating for change of the bifurcation of sexuality that underlies most forms of contemporary life. Queer theory, then, is less about the lives of queer constituents and more about questioning and contesting all ways of dominant, heteronormative knowing (Gamson, 2000; Plummer, 2005).

Gamson (2000) contended that qualitative researchers do not need to choose between gay experience or queer texts, the gay institution or queer discourse, or settle “the necessary competition between queer fluidity and gay solidity” (p. 360). Instead researchers should focus on “transforming the tensions on which sexuality studies have been built into new sources of productivity” (p. 360). We argue that the new research Gamson calls for is a place of tension where faceted experience is documented, deconstructed, reconstructed, fragmented, fractured, but ultimately “known” for a transcendent moment in time. Without the possibility of “knowing,” research risks falling into a pointless endeavor of the exotic where academics speak only to academics, and what we research remains lost or hidden to our larger communities. Speaking to this concern Halberstam said, “It’s very tricky because you also do not want to produce narratives that run counter to the people with whom you are working” (Crowley, 2004, p. 464). For example, while queer theorists may speak of gender fluidity or transcendence, those they study might see gender as a binary or “fluidity” as a phase (Wilson, 2002). “There is a dangerous tendency...to ignore real queer life” (Stein and Plummer in Wilson, 2002, p. 427). Kauffman (2010) has poignantly called this an issue of analytical erasure where the participants constructions of their lives are erased during the researchers analytical deconstruction. Too much emphasis on theoretical jargon limits research transparency and participants’ access to research, leaving only the most theory deft academics access to queer work (Stein and Plummer in Wilson). This new research will fit the needs of the participants who often are not in a queer place and do function with clearly defined “gay” identities.

Finally, we sought to immerse ourselves in the newly emerging trans theory (Kaufmann, 2010) and research (e.g., Monro & Warren, 2004; Stone, 2009) as a way of making sense of and showing value for the “T” portion of the cultural center of study and Angie Zapata’s murder. We honestly state this is a new place for us, full of potential for learning and self-awareness.

⁴ It is of interest here that an anonymous reviewer responded to our use of constructivism and queer theory to frame this study by stating unequivocally the theories are incompatible. Therefore, we will spend some time explaining what we are attempting. We appreciate the challenge to clarify our thinking.

In this article, we illustrate the tensions between contemporary queer and traditional gay theories through the telling of a *straight tale* or traditional ethnographic report, a *gay tale* or experience of gay institutional life, and interrupting these tales with *queer tales* or poetic interludes⁵ and what we have termed *queer asides*⁶. This tale is, therefore, at all times queer, gay, and straight. At the core of the tale is the story of a man who is gay engaging with an academic and queer community as a researcher.⁷

Educational Ethnography

Educational ethnography was used as the mode of inquiry into the culture of the LGBTAQ Center. To better understand its purpose, we break the term educational ethnography into two parts. First, ethnography is a type of research with roots in cultural anthropology and with heavy emphasis on research time spent in the field. Primary characteristics of ethnography include “prolonged time in the field, generation of descriptive data, development of rapport and empathy with respondents, the use of multiple data sources, [and] the making of field notes” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 96). Second, educational ethnography, a sub genre of ethnography has the same emphases except all the fieldwork, participant observation, and data collection take place in the context of an educational institution or setting.

Through ethnographic research, culture is interpreted and represented or “written” into being. Culture might be said to be the shared beliefs and values of a group of people (Lahman & D’amato, 2007). Participant observation then is the method ethnographers believe allows the researcher to best capture a sense of the elusive term culture. The term participant observer captures the dual role of the ethnographer. The ethnographer participates in order to observe. For example, Eric participated in many roles including stranger, audience, friend, panel member, activist, and advisor. Educational ethnography is also referred to as classroom inquiry, ethnography of schooling, anthropology and education, and school ethnography (Lahman & D’amato).

⁵ Lahman et al. (2009) first referred to poetic interludes as “a natural extension of Lather’s (2007) notion of providing interludes in a research or scholarly text” (p. 47) The poems serve as a break in the traditional text and provide personal view of the authors (Childers, 2008). Poems distill the data to its very essence and may provoke the reader to new insight (Furman, 2006).

⁶ “An *aside* is a dramatic device in which a character speaks to the audience. By convention the audience is to realize that the character’s speech is unheard by the other characters on stage. It may be addressed to the audience expressly (in character or out) or represent an unspoken thought. An aside is usually a brief comment, rather than a speech, such as a monologue or soliloquy. Unlike a public announcement, it occurs within the context of the play (Wikipedia) and in this case research article. By *queer asides* we are indicating both the lack of this type of voice in traditional research texts and that the queer asides are intended to provoke thought and illustrate discourse that is often hidden from the dominant community.

⁷ An invigorating component of ethnographic literature is the discussion that ethnographers write cultures into being thereby becoming fiction writers of a sort. Ethnographers have been encouraged to employ writer’s strategies such as metaphor, irony, tragedy, satire (Noblit, 1999), montage (King, 2000) and anecdotes, vignettes or a “dash of panache” (Wolcott, 1995, p. 205). Working in a similar vein, Van Maanen (1988) has identified types of ethnographic tales or primary ways ethnographers represent data: 1) realist tales, characterized by an absence of author from finished text to purport a ‘real’ account; 2) confessional tales, characterized by the author’s voice being present, relay behind the scenes of the research accounts; 3) impressionist tales startle the reader with rich sensory oriented accounts; 4) critical tales have a Marxist view through the eyes of the disenfranchised; 5) formal tales are specialized under terms such as symbolic interactionism; 6) literary tales draw on fiction writer techniques; 7) jointly told tales are told between ethnographer and participant; 8) Pathological tales have been added in the area of queer theory to underscore how the LGBTQ community has been researched and represented during most of the history of research (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). Building on queer terms, we have added *straight tale* which is similar to a realist tale; *gay tale* which is research into gay life and issues by gays and allies; and queer tale which fundamentally works against and seeks to dismantle the unified mindset of a straight and gay researcher.

Participants

Interview participants included student leader members of the LGBTAQ Center. In particular, five gay males and one lesbian were the primary participants: Pete, Jeffrey, Kevin, Philip, Ryan, and Sandra (pseudonyms). All were between 18-25 years old and undergraduate students except Pete who was a master's student. These six individuals were purposefully chosen because of their strong leadership positions in the organization. Pete was the graduate assistant in charge of the LGBTAQ Office, Jeffrey was co-president of the social group associated with the Center, and the others had subordinate leadership roles and were heavily involved with all of the Center's affairs.

Interviews

Each primary participant was interviewed using a semi-structured, in-depth interview designed to elicit free responses (Merriam, 2009). Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed in full, and verified by the respective participant through a member checking process (Merriam, 2009).

Participant observation

Eric observed the LGBTAQ office, related social groups, and the Center-sponsored events over the course of a semester for approximately 40 hours. The following semester he maintained a relationship with the Center, but his emphasis changed to participant more than observer as he participated in classroom awareness panels and conducted follow-up questions during data analysis. Observations were planned to be representative of all times during a school day, including several evenings when special events were scheduled. The special events observed included the National Coming Out Day booth, the World AIDS Day booth, and two speaker events: 1) the local district attorney speaking about the recent murder of Angie Zapata who was transgender, and 2) Reverend Mel White speaking about homosexuality and religion. Eric also participated as a member of classroom awareness panels on four occasions, each panel lasting about an hour. The panels included leaders from the Center and were designed to conduct Q & A panels and foster classroom awareness in undergraduate courses comprised of 80 to 100 undergraduate students. The panels typically consisted of three to ten students from the LGBTAQ Center.

Field notes

Field notes were taken during each observation period as a means of keeping track of all the events and activities occurring in the LGBTAQ Office, social club, and special events. Field notes were handwritten in a notebook and subsequently expanded in typed format.

Researcher journal

Eric maintained a journal reflecting on his experiences as a researcher and as a member of the group under study, i.e., a gay male, where he entered his thoughts, perceptions, and observations of that week into the journal, later coding it for emerging themes.

Artifacts

Artifacts were collected from the Center and special events, which included email from the electronic mailing list of the Center, event promotion literature, educational literature, and photographs of the Center and sponsored events. The university archivist confirmed the archived data on the LGBTQA center had not increased from the few pieces of paper Maria viewed five years ago.

Analysis

NVivo 8 was used to code and subsequently analyze the data for emerging themes. After all the coding was complete, each emerging theme from the interviews was compared to the

other interviews, observations, and artifacts for similarities and differences. Eric also paid special attention to himself as a gay researcher studying other gay individuals, comparing their current experiences and perceptions of LGTBAQ-related issues to his own experiences and perceptions of those same issues, having already dealt with many such issues in his own life.

Findings

The principal issues discovered in the emerging themes are best understood if the themes are broken into two categories: (a) role of the LGTBAQ Center in the participants' lives, and (b) barriers for LGTBAQ individuals, including the need to "come out," religion, physical violence, suicide, and psychological violence. The analysis will be discussed separately for each of the two categories.

LGBTQA Center

The Center will be discussed in terms of its physical environment as well as the Center's perceived role in the campus community.

Resource Office. Up to this point, we have referred to the LGTBAQ as a Cultural Center. However, as it is currently funded, housed, and staffed, the Center serves primarily as a Resource Office. On several occasions when I arrived to observe the Resource Office, I was dismayed to find the office empty. I decided to sit out in the commons area in student activities, watching the office from afar, hoping someone would show up. The office is only staffed with volunteers, aside from one part-time graduate assistant and is not a nine-to-five operation. However, when people are not able to keep their office hours, the Resource Office serves a diminished purpose.

It is also noteworthy that the Resource Office is the only non-activity-based office in Student Affairs, hidden among many administrative offices. I cannot help but wonder how an invisible LGTBAQ Resource Office can serve its intended community on this campus.

Sandra had this to say about the location of the Resource Office:

I know a lot of people really want a cultural center, but I'm not sure if there are enough minority group people to merit that because it seems like a lot of people who are GLBT...don't hang out here a lot...and someone might be really mad at me for saying that.

When asked if she were given the power to change one thing about the Center, Sandra made the point that there is not a long-term position in the budget to run the Center. Instead, each year a new graduate student is paid a stipend to conduct the administrative aspects of the Center. She discussed the burden this creates for both the new graduate student and the members of the Center:

Every year we get someone new who we don't know, so we don't have that personal relationship with them and they have to figure out the process, which is probably really hard to just be thrown in an office and try to figure out how to run the entire thing. I think a full-time person who's as awesome as Pete would be amazing, because he's done so much, he's so good at organizing stuff; he's really friendly and really good with people. And it's going to be really sad to see him go, because we're going to get someone new who might be just as effective as Pete but we're going to have to build a whole new relationship with that person and that person's going to have to figure out how to run the office, only to lose it again – a year later. So I think a more permanent person would be awesome.

Although Sandra was not an advocate for a bigger space, she was concerned about the Center's invisible location. The other interview participants wanted to see a bigger location,

something on par with the other cultural centers on campus. Maybe the lack of visitors to the Resource Office is explainable by its lack of space.

LGBTAQ Center's role. During interviews with the participants, I gained insight into what the Center meant to each of the participants as well as how they perceived the significance of the Center in the campus community. Ryan compared the importance of the Center in his life with what he thinks others see:

The Center for some people can be like a sanctuary, but for me it is just a place. But I guess it is nice to know that this university has a GLBT office. It is nice to know that we have a place where we have a person who works for us. I guess it kind of sealed the deal for choosing a school, kind of like all right, you know, this school has a place for me.

When I asked Ryan how he felt about the location of the Center, he said, "I'd want it more well known where this office is. I'd want signs up. I'd want it to be a little bit more like we're right here; you can come to us."

Sandra feels the Center is "really wonderful for people who are struggling with that whole process to have somewhere to go, because when I was struggling with the whole lesbian thing, it was great to have people to talk to."

Referring to when she came out, Sandra said,

It was really good to have people to talk to, and if there had been an office [during her coming out process], it might have been even better. Even though they can't tell you what your sexual orientation is, they can provide a lot of resources, and especially a support system if things go badly when you come out.

In sum, Sandra feels the Resource Office "is a really important place for people just to feel welcome and comfortable and possibly get information if they're not sure about things, and it's really great for resources for papers, because they have a bunch of stuff."

Resource. It was clear the Center's principal purpose is to spread awareness about the LGBTAQ community. Awareness of pertinent issues was disseminated in many different forms, such as guest speakers, and special event booths, but the panels were the primary source of information.

Once the semester started, professors, primarily from the sociology department, would call to set up appointments for a panel discussion. The questions ranged from such sophomoric questions as gender roles in a same-sex relationship to hot political topics such as gay marriage. The panels, lasting about an hour, typically consisted of three to seven LGBTAQ individuals who sat side-by-side behind a long table in front of the classroom. When a student question was asked, the panelist with the most experience with the issue answered. Then, if any of the other panelists had additional input or an opinion on the question, he or she answered in turn.

To get a clear picture of what exactly goes on during the panels, I was preparing to attend several of the panels as an audience member. One day as I entered the Resource Office, Pete said he was "happy to see" me while the phone simultaneously rang. By the tone in his voice I could

tell he wanted something! Then, Kathy came into the office while Pete was talking on the phone and told me they were desperately seeking people to sit on panels and asked if I'd be able to help

While hesitant on the inside I happily agreed with a fake smile on my face.

out. She said, “It starts at 11:15,” which was in less than half an hour. I was worried for two reasons: I might be late arriving to teach my class on the other side of campus with no way of warning my students, and I had never before spoken formally to a large group about my sexuality.

Before long it was time to head over to the building where the panel was being held. Shortly after we filed into the classroom and took seats at tables, the professor introduced us in general as members of the GLBT community and told the panelists this was a Sociology 101 class, which he likes to refer as “life 101.” That immediately told me the majority (if not everyone) of the students would likely be freshmen. Pete made the first introduction, stating he is the graduate assistant of the GLBT Center, a graduate student on campus, and gay. And the volunteers went down the line, each

This made me slightly more nervous, if that were possible! I always equate the word freshman with immature. Good God! What sorts of questions were they going to ask?

Hi, I'm Eric Teman and I've been gay since I was born. I have been out of the closet for 8 years.

introducing him- or herself to the class, including sexual orientation. I was last to introduce myself and before my turn came, I got the feeling I was at an alcoholics anonymous meeting. I said, “I'm Eric Teman, I'm a Ph.D. student in the department of applied statistics and research methods, and I'm gay.” I felt overwhelmed by the experience of introducing myself after I said “...and I'm gay.” I have never said those words to a large group of people before, or any group of people. I've only ever come out on an individual basis. I felt so liberated! I think I even got the chills!

After the introductions, I was no longer nervous. Why would I be? I was completely exposed at that point. I felt comfortable answering questions and even related a story in a of a time when I hid in the bushes on one of my nightly jogs because a Jeep-

I wouldn't have ever fathomed doing panels! I certainly wouldn't have ever volunteered to do so! But it's the best experience I've ever had. It was absolutely amazing to share my deepest, most personal feelings with a group of strangers. I've certainly never done it before, but I'll definitely do it again! Pete put me on the list of volunteers and I couldn't wait to be on another panel. I was nervous at first, sure. But my nervous tendencies calmed themselves after I introduced myself. I let my guard down to the group of freshman sociology students.

load of guys kept driving up and down the street saying “we're going to kill you, you faggot.” Although this retelling of the story came forward in a humorous way, it was in no way funny when it happened.

professor asked who I added a lot of personality to the panel and Pete told me what an amazing job I did. I wasn't optimistic I'd be asked to do another panel, because I was only asked in a moment of desperation and the list of volunteers was quite long. How untrue that was! I was asked several times during that semester, and I was asked to serve as the panel leader.

Later that day I went to see Pete in his office. I told him I enjoyed being on the panel so much I would like to volunteer again in the future. He also told me that after I left the panel, the was. Pete told me the professor said I

I was always the oldest panelist. The panelists were typically undergraduate students still in their teens. Every one of them was so well spoken and thorough in answering such controversial questions. I was proud of them. There's no way I could have spoken out about such issues at their ages. What an amazing group of brave, young individuals. I wish there was a way

to more effectively gauge the panels' affect on the audience. For now we just have to trust the panels are having a positive impact.

During interviews with the participants, I asked several of them what the panels meant to them. Philip responded with the following:

Oh, I love doing panels. That's probably one of my favorite things to do. When I do a panel, I feel that I've accomplished something, that I've put part of myself out there, and maybe I've helped someone. I feel like I make more of a difference there than almost doing anything else, because that's when people can ask me any question that they want. I'm kind of in a sense almost baring my soul, letting them dig into whatever they want.

Kevin also enjoys doing the panels.

Personally, I think they're a lot of fun. I think that they're very important because it is an open forum for people to get their questions answered. Because, without knowledge, it's the blind leading the blind; whereas, we would like to educate people as much as possible about our lifestyle...about what's going on. I think...hearing it from the horse's mouth is always more important. So, it's more important than hearing it from like the news, ...you know I'm not saying that we're not slanted one way or the other, but you get a varying degree of different opinions versus one opinion. And then you can make your own educated decision.

The panels create a comfortable environment where differing views are shared in a respectful forum. From my limited experience, no one's views (from the panel or audience) were ever overtly attacked. Rather, the questions and answers venue allowed for a sharing of different knowledge bases and differing points of view. After each panel, the students in the audience completed a survey with their perceptions of the panel. Usually, the majority of the feedback was positive with only a small proportion including negative comments.

Barriers for LGBTAQ Individuals

There are two major themes that emerged as barriers to LGBTAQ from the data: coming out and disparate treatment. These two themes are really barriers that act to disrupt the lives of LGBTAQ individuals in some way.

Coming out. Coming out of the closet is a liberating experience for many gay individuals; it is a time to celebrate who they are, no longer allowing themselves to be oppressed. But until one is able to admit openly their sexuality, the closet is the default. During his campus visit Reverend Mel White said, "Closets are dark and dismal places where people die" (personal communication, October 22, 2008).

Kevin recalls his coming out experience when I inquired whether he felt differently about himself prior to coming out and post-coming out.

There's a huge difference. I'm much more confident in myself now. Before I came out I was...it's not that I wasn't confident, but I definitely wasn't focused...a little less disciplined, a little less structured within myself. And then after I came out...that all kind of changed because I was forced to grow up pretty quickly, actually. And when that happened, a certain reform of myself came about. I started to focus more and I started to realize, okay, I need to be more aware of what's going on around me. I need to just basically be more careful. I started to realize I'm definitely more comfortable in this skin and with that came the confidence and stuff like that.

Sandra reminisces about a time when she kept her sexuality a secret, even though she was already out of the closet. She was at band camp and roomed with a straight female. Sandra thought it best to not mention her sexuality when the other girls were mentioning how hot some of the guys were. “When no one knew that I was gay, I felt so awkward. I didn’t like it at all.” This illustrates that a gay or lesbian individual is never done coming out. That is, it is not a one-time event; it is instead a process. There is no way, to come out just once—the individual must choose based on the setting and surrounding circumstances whether or not to come out.

(aside from wearing a sign, a scarlet Q of sorts)

After sitting on a panel in a Sociology of Minorities class, Jay told me that in the student evaluations, one of the students wrote something to the effect that he will be staying in the closet for many more years. Jay said he wished the student would have sought him out for individual help; Jay said he would have offered him a hug, telling him it would be alright.

Coming Out⁸

My mom and I were very close.

She cried...

She seemed to pull away.

They didn’t kick me out.

I’m not shunned from the family

Or anything like that.

It’s just another...

It’s just another part of who I am.

Dad and I spent four years

Doing nothing but fighting.

Maybe I would be completely ostracized.

Your life is going to be more difficult now.

I must be doing something wrong.

Oh, my God!

What have I done to myself?

I tried to have a crush on a girl.

I can’t hold your hand.

It didn’t really seem abnormal.

But it didn’t really seem normal either.

It was just the way it was.

Oh, okay, so...yeah...I just like guys.

I kind of want to flaunt it to the world.

⁸ This research poem is a transcription or data poem (Glesne, 2007) where all the text came directly from several interviews. Eric then worked to condense the transcript into the most salient and powerful words that convey the essence of the transcription poem.

Disparate treatment. While there are many issues relating to disparate treatment in the dataset, the emerging themes with the highest frequency were religion, physical violence, suicide of a student member, and psychological violence. Each of these sub-themes will be discussed in turn.

Religion. Sadly, religion appears to be a major contributor to the disparate treatment of LGBTQA individuals. Rather than openly accepting LGBTQA individuals, the religious right wants to forever ban marriage between same-sex couples. "I was in love with him and thought 'What the hell is wrong with me?'" Mel White said at a campus talk. "I was just taken by the infatuation, and from that moment, I thought I was sick and sinful." It is this mindset that the religious fundamentalist perpetuate. "The Bible is a dangerous book," White said. "The Christian right has decided to take six passages out of their biblical context and use them to condemn a population that is suffering terribly because of these condemnations" (personal communication, October 22, 2008).

Sandra also had a negative experience with religion:

Two people over Myspace (one who I knew from school) sent me Bible verses about why being gay is WRONG. It's because of comments like that that I feel so uncomfortable in churches these days. Getting that email from someone I considered a friend really hurt, especially because I still considered myself Christian at the time and I didn't know how to respond to her.

Philip is very religious, just not of the Christian faith.

I'm actually Pagan. Paganism is very, very open, and ...you define your own religion in a sense. You can pick and choose from religions. You can be very dogmatic towards one religion, you can incorporate – I mean, a lot of people can't even understand you can put Christianity into it as well, in a sense. I definitely lean way away from Christianity for the most part.

Because of his mother's open-mindedness toward religion, Philip never suffered through religion.

Ryan still struggles with spirituality issues. Though he did not live primarily with his father, Ryan often visited his father who is of the Catholic faith. They attended church together on a regular basis.

My religious beliefs at the time didn't condemn me to hell, but they condemned what I was doing was wrong. It's actually something I still struggle with. So, I didn't come out, I didn't accept it and...act upon it—well, no I acted upon it, but I didn't accept it till I was 18.

Ryan's father has not yet accepted his son's sexuality. Ryan is apprehensive of what the future holds for his relationship with his father.

I'm not looking forward to the 'are you sure? Have you tried this?' I'm pretty sure I'm going to get the—there's these camps you can go to; there's the psych—and we're going to have ... "the ...talks."

Violence. Physical violence is a major concern among the Center members in general. The summer immediately prior to beginning this ethnographic study, Angie Zapata, a young female transgender community member was beaten to her death with a fire extinguisher by her boyfriend when he realized Angie was not biologically female. The trial was the first of its kind, in that no state in the United States had before tried and convicted someone of a hate crime involving a transgender person. Although Angie Zapata was not part of the campus community,

she was part of the immediate community surrounding campus. Her devastating death is illustrative of the gamut of issues that the LGBTQA culture deals with regularly.

Angie's murder created pandemonium for the LGBTQA Center members. Students became increasingly worried about their own safety. As a result, I learned that the district attorney (DA) prosecuting the case against Angie's alleged murder was scheduled to speak to the LGBTQA Center about the trial and his personal reaction to the murder. This was my first formal research observation. I could not have been more impressed with the DA. He discussed how he personally had learned a lot about gender identity issues, including the effects of using incorrect pronouns, and further stated that there might not necessarily be negative intent behind using the wrong pronoun. People are just uninformed. For example, the arresting officer used she/Angie whereas the medical examiner used he/Justin. To add to his knowledge about gender identity, the DA arranged a four-hour lunch with a female transgender activist to broaden his knowledge about the relevant issues. Furthermore, he admitted "the DA's Office has undergone a 'growth process' as a result of the Zapata murder, giving the office a better understanding of the issues related to being transgender," adding,

The local police department has grown as well. The Chief is open to communication on all issues. In fact, he has a Latino advisory group, who advises him on issues related to the Latino community. He would be open to a GLBT committee, to serve as a liaison between the community and police department.

Prior to Angie's murder, the DA had no experience with any LGBTQA issues. To illustrate just how much the DA had grown on a personal and professional level as a result of this horrific murder, he responded to Pete's question about same-sex domestic violence crimes as follows: "I would charge a same-sex domestic violence as a domestic violence, not assault, if evidence of an intimate relationship is found" shows the fact not only that the DA's growth will affect him personally and professionally, but also that it will affect the surrounding community.

During the conversation, the DA said, "A gay officer on the police force would be a good thing, an asset, because diversity is good. I assume there are gay officers [in the local police department]." Pete asked, "What are some things you'd like to see put in place?" to which the DA answered, "Cops should go through a sensitivity and bias training. The intent would be to thwart police officers from profiling, by having institutional checks and balances in place."

The DA also made it clear that he came to campus that night to learn as well as to inform. He asked questions, too. He wanted to know what an ally is, to which an audience member responded, "An ally is a straight supporter." Then, the DA made a joke that he just learned what "a bear" is in the gay community. I would definitely classify the DA's visit as successful. Many questions were answered from the audience in a straightforward manner. The DA made it clear that he was available if the group needed anything else from him. I wondered how sincere he really was, though, about follow-up inquiries.

It is difficult to tease out how genuine the DA was given the inherently political nature of his position. The research literature for example identifies GLBT complaints of no response from police or further victimization when police respond to calls (Wolff & Cokely, 2007); however, the DA seemed open to learn.

A couple weeks later when I received a voice message from the DA, I was really nervous to have a call from the DA himself. What could he want from me? I did not even make the connection between the call and his talk at campus. When I returned his call, he said he had recognized me at his talk as one of his previous interns. I had worked for him during my second year of law school but only met him in person twice. I was sure the night of the talk that he did

not know who I was. He wanted to know if there was anything else he could do to put the LGBTAQ individuals' minds at ease before the Zapata trial, which was rapidly approaching. I directed him to Pete, the LGBTQA president.

Another week or so later, the DA called again, asking how things were going and offered me a job as a deputy district attorney, which I kindly declined as I was still in the midst of getting a Ph.D. It seemed he was a truly genuine person, that he really did grow as a person, and that he really did care about the LGBTAQ people and Angie Zapata's murder.

Transpanic Defense⁹

(an excerpt)

She is a he.
Angie was at fault for her own murder
because she was a transgender woman,
A woman....

He snapped.
He was outside of himself.
He lost control.
He never knew
He had that kind of rage.
Angie gained consciousness and sat up.

...He thought he had
killed "it"
Beaten mercilessly,
awakened,
beaten again,
until dead.

... "It is not like shooting a teacher
or a straight
law abiding citizen".
There is a difference between
killing someone who is
homosexual and
someone who is not.

"Gay things need to die".

Psychological violence. Despite all the talk about physical violence, it does not appear to be a major issue on this campus per se, but it is nonetheless a fear in the minds of many

⁹ Maria developed this *archival* or *artifact poem* entirely from newspaper articles from the local paper. She gathered over 100 articles and narrowed these down to 40. She then read the forty articles and isolated text that conveyed the way Angie's death was portrayed by the media. This is an excerpt from one of a series of poems through which Maria sought to honor Angie's life while bringing attention to her death.

LGBTQA members. Verbal violence, however, is something that is feared and endured continuously by members of the LGBTQA on campus and elsewhere. Sandra relayed the following experience she had in high school.

There were some random boys in school. I cut off most of my hair and my clothes weren't exactly form-fitting. I had "DYKE!" yelled at me and "Are you a boy or a girl?" from, I believe, the same group of guys. They also attempted to lock me in the band room one day by pushing the trash can and the door stop in front of the door and by tying the handles together.

A member of the Center recounts her decision to become an active ally of the gay community.

While I was already considered an ally in the GLBTA community in high school, I was not very active until one day in the fall semester of my freshman year of college when I was walking with a gay friend around campus. Someone came up to him and said: "You're going to hell, you faggot!" This upset me deeply. I don't understand how people can have so much hate towards someone they don't even know. It is something that angers me, and is one of my biggest pet peeves. It was at this time when I decided to show that Christians are loving and accepting of everyone, no matter who they are. After that experience, I have become a very active ally, doing whatever I can.

While audience members of the LGBTQA panels are not generally overtly expressive of their disdain for individuals with different sexual orientations from their own, I recall one instance where I became uncomfortable and passed on answering a question. A young male raised his hand to ask a question. Someone from the panel called on him and he asked, "Have any of you ever thought about converting back?" Interestingly, this was a Sociology of Minorities class.

At first, I wasn't sure I heard him correctly, but I clearly heard the word *back*.

Has he ever thought of converting?!

student's

condemning us all to hell. This cemented my initial suspicion that the audience member was a bigot. Incidentally, this is the same panel mentioned above in the coming out section.

Suicide. The Resource Office/Center has some literature on suicide in the gay community as part of its informational library. I have heard personal anecdotes of someone who knew someone who committed suicide because he or she was gay or because he or she was having difficulty coming out. I have also read news stories on the same issue, but I have never personally known anyone who has committed suicide for that reason...until now.

On Thursday, January 8, 2009, around 6:00 p.m., I opened my email and found the following message.

Unfortunately, you have to be included in this information on the passing of [Jay], as the GLBTA Resource Office Email list is the only way I know how to reach out. This is in no way intended to be an official testament or tribute to Jay, as no words from me can do justice to the person who he was. Details on his funeral...

My first reaction was, do I know this person? I knew a Jay whom I sat on panels with, but I didn't know his last name. I immediately emailed Pete asking who this person was and what happened. I never got a response. I also began searching through archived email for Jay's last name. If it was whom I suspected, the awful feeling in the pit in my stomach probably

wouldn't go away any time soon. Eventually, I was able to piece together information on Jay. It was he whom I had so desperately hoped it would not be. But how did he die? Maybe I read the email too quickly—maybe there is a clue there on what happened. There was a link to The Trevor Helpline¹⁰ included in the email along with a statement to seek counseling at the on-campus counseling center if necessary. I had no idea what The Trevor Helpline was, so I clicked on it and it was a suicide help site. Dear God! Jay committed suicide! But, why? Little did I know, I would never find out.

I think everyone in the LGBTAQ community assumed Jay's death was linked to his sexual orientation. But this never added up for me. He was always by far the most outspoken person on the panels, having something to say about all of the issues that came up, from religion, to coming out, to the nature versus nurture argument. In fact, he was the one who was so affected by the student who said he would be staying in the closet for many years to come. Jay wanted the opportunity to tell that person that it would be alright. Jay seemed too comfortable with who he was to end his life. What went wrong?

During an interview with Kevin, I asked how he first reacted to the news that Jay committed suicide:

I didn't believe it at first. What happened was I got a phone call from a friend who actually was asking if I knew any information. They called and said we saw this on Facebook...you know we saw something on Facebook and we were wondering if you had any information about it. And, this was the first I'd heard anything about it, so I was like...so I said no, I don't, and I started calling around and basically saying OK...hey...does anybody know what's going on...? I tried calling...I tried calling the victim, because I had their phone number and it didn't go through, and so that's when I started to get a little worried. And, so I was kind of like OK...kept calling around and then when I called...and then I called my friend back and I said you know that I've been calling around and I can't find anything. And he goes you know it doesn't really...um...it's OK...it's been confirmed...you know this is what's happened. And I was upset but it didn't sink in...um...I was just kind of like...it was almost like that kind of...oh, well, this isn't real...I'm dreaming...I'm going to wake up sort-of-thing...whatever...and did that all the way up to the funeral. And the moment that it finally hit me was they showed a picture...um...from his 21st [birthday]...and I had my arm wrapped around him and he was wearing his crown and all that stuff. And that's when it hit me and that's when I suddenly realized this is actually happening...this is for real.

Jay's death was Kevin's first time dealing with the suicide of a close friend.

I've dealt with suicide before...in the sense of a friend, of a friend...you know...has killed themselves or an acquaintance that I met once five years ago has killed themselves sort-of-thing. This was the first time that I've actually had any serious interaction...any real friendship with somebody who's done that. He

¹⁰ The Trevor Helpline is tied to the "The Trevor Project [and] is the leading national organization focused on crisis and suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. The Trevor Project operates the only accredited, nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for LGBTQ youth. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone, call The Trevor Helpline. There is hope, there is help (The Trevor Helpline).

and I almost dated at one point, but for some reason it just didn't quite...we didn't quite mesh right in that regard, so it didn't work out.

Kevin's interview took place a couple of months after Jay's suicide, and I asked him to relay his feelings now that some time has passed.

You know...I'm still pissed at him. I'm still mad at him because...we all left the doors open and he shut them all. ...He knew that any of us were there...at any given time...um...but...obviously he went through something really bad because it was so out-of-the-blue. Nobody saw it coming.... There were no signs whatsoever that it was going to happen. The day before, apparently he was fine...doing well and then the next day.... So whatever happened...it was bad.

Jay was also a close friend of Sandra's. I asked her to recall her initial reaction to the news of Jay's suicide.

I was so confused – I had no idea why he would choose to do something like that because he was always such a happy person. Like, he is the exact opposite of someone I would think as a suicide case. When I think of someone who commits suicide, I think of someone who has no friends, who sits at home alone and cries. But he had so many friends and he was so happy all the time and so well-connected with everyone that it was just a complete shock. I had no idea, and I still don't know why he would have done such a thing, because he always seemed so happy. Obviously there was something else going on. He might have had some internal unhappiness – I'm assuming that's what happened. But he put on a really good act if he wasn't happy all the time, since he was so happy. And it was just such a shock.

The LGBTAQ individuals who didn't know Jay still had a strong reaction to the tragedy. Ryan sat on a couple of panels with Jay but never knew Jay as a friend.

In all honesty, it's hard for me to look at a suicide as not being incredibly selfish. I have been on a panel with him once or twice and he seemed incredibly happy. So I was really surprised. But it was hard for me not to look at it as, why did you feel the need to hurt everybody else, kind of thing?

Though I did not know Jay well, I considered him a friend. We chatted on several occasions as I was observing the Resource Office/Center. We volunteered at special events together. We were panelists in the same classrooms. We sure do miss him and were profoundly affected by his death.

Now, He's Not Alive¹¹
(an excerpt, Teman (in press))

This isn't real.
I'm only dreaming....

I did that all the way up to the funeral.

They showed a photo...

¹¹ While interviewing several participants (three gay males and one lesbian), I inquired into their feelings about suicide in the gay community in general and into the suicide of the center's leader in particular. The words of four of my participants are captured in this poem.

I had my arm wrapped around him.
He was wearing his crown.
That's when it hit me...
It was actually happening.

There were no signs.
Yesterday, he was fine.

Great...we've lost another one.

I am so confused.

Final Reflections

Eric's Journey

My first time meeting the individuals of the LGBTAQ Center was an uncomfortable one. At the time I wasn't sure why. I was gay, too. Why wouldn't they openly welcome me? Was it because I was older? Was it because they didn't know me? Possibly both reasons. Now, however, I believe it is because I introduced myself as a researcher. I later learned that many students come in to research them for various class projects, and they just assumed I was another one of those people—one-visit researchers. However, when I kept coming and poked my nose around in every aspect of the Center, everyone started warming up to me and realized I wasn't just there for a grade for some class.

When I went into the field to study the LGBTAQ, I doubted I had anything in common except that I, too, was gay. Other than this connection, I felt age would be a major barrier in forging any friendships. I was wrong. Pete and I became good friends, as did Kevin and I. I had some extraordinary conversations with many of the individuals from the Center, separate from the interviews. I learned a lot about each of these individual's lives, such as future plans and aspirations—things that only friends would know. I will remember these individuals always.

Limited Resources

In general, the Center's principal reason for existing is to spread awareness on all issues affecting LGBTAQ individuals. Their success seems hindered by two factors: the location of the Resource Office/Center and underfunding. The Resource Office is just that...an office. There is no physical LGBTAQ Center. Rather, the Center is comprised of many locations. Pete feels there needs to be a true cultural center, not just an office that travels around.

I think the biggest thing that could happen is improving our visibility. We're more of a culture center, not a student activity...gay is not an activity; it's as much of a culture as a race is a culture. So, I see us more in line with the cultural centers, and I think that would be the number one re-categorization that needs to happen, moving out of student activities and moving into the realm of cultural centers and sharing a building that's visible but that's also safe.

Underfunding is also a major barrier to the expansion of the Resource Office into a cultural center. Pete, a graduate student, is in charge of the Resource Office, which is, in turn, overseen by the Student Affairs office. No staff director oversees the LGBTAQ Center/Resource Office. As a result, a new part-time graduate assistant comes in every year to run the office. By employing a full-time director and moving the Resource Office out of Student Affairs, the Center could be more productive and its members would not have to undergo transitions that a new

yearly graduate assistant brings. Both of these barriers impede the process of spreading awareness.

It is difficult for an already marginalized community to see the limited resources as anything other than a reflection of a stigmatized status. While one can point to limited budgets in higher education and on this campus specifically, the question remains concerning heteronormative domination and comfort. Maybe a LGBTQA Cultural Center would deter conservative mainstream families from sending their children to the campus. Maybe it would make an easy target of the LGBTQA students as incidents at the local mosque have proven.

Maybe, maybe, maybe... all these words are excuses one drowns under as our queer constituents are left unsupported and in the closet of a resource office.

Eulogy

Two devastating and regrettable events occurred during the course of the study. We couldn't have begun to imagine at the start of this study that murder and suicide would have occurred in the immediate campus community. As new students arrive and old ones leave, the effects of these tragedies will not be everlasting in the campus community, but will live in the minds of we who were here.

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