Understanding the Stigma of Sexual Minority Youth in Context

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This work is dedicated to those who were not given enough time to show the world their greatness and to those who have ever been told that they are not great. You are great.

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"Great people are those who make others feel that they, too, can become great." – Mark Twain

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i. Motivation

I was hearing the question almost every day: "Why are you doing your research on this topic?" It is a completely valid inquiry and an essential one to understand. Students and academics each have their own answer, some more personal than others. Almost a year ago when I began to receive the question, I was fearful that detailing my research would reveal my sexual identity, and, because of this, I would deflect and tell others that I had not brought a narrow enough focus to my research. Little did I know, I had already begun to give myself away with the way I would describe the general sense of my project. One would be able to make out the crack in my voice as I talked about the youth that had died or hear the strength of my voice increase as I discussed the issue. Yet, with most individuals, I usually responded with a cordial reply, stating that there is not anthropological literature on the subject, or I desired to find out more because of the tragedies that had taken place in the past two years. These responses are absolutely correct, but they do not answer the question fully. Honestly, I chose to study this topic out of anger, frustration, and deep sadness. As a gay individual, I certainly understand

stigma and discrimination against sexual minority groups in the United States, but I had never felt the urges of suicide or depression. I had never been bullied, physically or emotionally. However, I had been closeted for most of my life. When numerous gay teen suicides began to take place across the United States, or perhaps I should say began to be reported by the media, along with many more incidences of bullying, I searched for the answer to the fundamental anthropological question of "why?" I waited to see the response by the public, the government, the school systems, and other organizations. All I was met with was intense frustration. Few were taking the time to talk to sexual minority youth or create upstream solutions to the problems taking place. The suicides were often referred to as an "epidemic," as if it were a spreading illness that had spun out of control. I knew that I needed to bring focus to the subject, and while some told me that I was too personally attached to the topic and would not be able to conduct impartial research, I knew that I had found the ideal vehicle for my interests in anthropological research. I had often told others that I enjoyed reading ethnography a great deal because it was informative writing infused with passion and emotion. The researcher was never separated from their work. A good number of my peers and colleagues could agree that in order to create a fantastic thesis, a topic must be chosen that one wants to constantly mull over, read endless articles covering the subject, and, then, write and edit a major piece of work exploring said subject. I had found that topic in the life experiences of sexual minority youth, and as a gay individual, I felt an obligation to allow their voices to inform the public through the medium of qualitative, ethnographic research.

When I began to delve more deeply into my topic, I was recommended *Out in the Field* (1996)*, Out in Theory* (2002)*, and Out in Public* (2009) edited by Ellen Lewin and

William L. Leap, each a book of essays covering a variety of issues related to lesbian and gay anthropology. While each essay deserves its own merit, I felt a personal connection to one particular essay, *Being Gay and Doing Fieldwork* (1996) by Walter L. Williams. In the essay, he states,

> "From the beginning of my academic career, I structured my research around questions that are important to me. Many anthropologists do this, of course, but it strikes me as odd that some ethnographers don't seem to have any particular motivation for doing what they do. My suspicion is that those anthropologists who have personal motivations make better ethnographers" (Williams 1996:71).

I strongly feel that my personal motivation for this project will aid in creating an intimate, yet, informative thesis. Williams continues,

> "I had decided that, having devoted years of my life to helping racial minorities overcome prejudice and mistreatment, it was time for me to devote my energies to helping my own gay minority. I clearly would not have undertaken this research had I not by that time developed a positive gay identity" (1996:72).

Although much of his essay is used to urge gay anthropologists to explore the decreasing number of cultures around the world that have not yet been touched by Western anti-gay sentiments, I believe that the above statement is appropriate for my motivations as well. After personally experiencing the journey of coming out the past two years, I feel obligated to dedicate part of myself to helping sexual minority youth feel comfortable with their identity. Along with Williams, I too think that unless I was comfortable in my own surroundings and took the time to create a positive gay identity, I would not have been successful in conducting this research. This thesis was an incredible opportunity to both devote time to exploring the topic further and challenge myself intellectually and emotionally.

In all honesty, part of my desire to work on this topic was born from my frustration with the field of anthropology, and with academia in general. The past four

years, I have read astounding and fascinating research conducted by anthropologists, specifically medical anthropologists, that reveals issues with diverse populations or theoretically explains unfortunate social inequalities. Yet it has often seemed that this information has not been put into action. The information has been found, but not used. Instead, it is stuck on the shelves of academia. I am an advocate of anthropological research being conducted on all levels – theoretical, critical, engaged, and applied – but I find myself confused as to why there is often not a bridge between great research and effective application. Therefore, I wanted my thesis to be a piece of literature that not only contained ethnographic analysis, but also contained information that can be used to contribute to progressive ideas on stigma of the adolescent sexual minority community. Once, when I told an anthropologist about my vision for the thesis, she critically replied, "Anthropological research is not an activist handbook." I do not expect my research to be revolutionary. But I do expect it to be helpful and contributive. And if someday an activist, such as myself, uses it, I will be happy knowing that the words reach beyond the pages of a thesis.

After conducting my interviews, I sat with my advisor, Dr. Holly Peters-Golden, and discussed the incredible stories and information my participants were open to telling me. I had a list of topics that I had separated my transcripts into, including, but not limited to: relationships, teachers and parents, friendship, and gender non-conformity. Every transcript was filled with fascinating information, but my advisor expressed her concern that she could not conceptualize the main focus of my thesis. She said that she would be able to tell her colleagues four of five different concepts I was exploring but could not explain the goal of my thesis in a simple sentence or two. I understood her

confusion, as I too was having difficulty finding a way to frame my thesis in a manner that would not simply be a gathering of stories without a backbone. It needed a framework so that it would not be a soapbox for me to express my concerns. She looked at me and asked, "What are you trying to do with your thesis? What is it is that you want to do? What are you trying to answer?" I responded that I wanted to understand the stigma of sexual minority youth so that I could explore ways to reduce it. With Dr. Peters-Golden's kind push, I had finally realized the heart of my thesis. I was able to conceptualize a structure that would allow me to infuse a theoretical foundation with the narratives I had compiled.

ii. Methodology

The methodology I had imagined for my project was inspired by ethnographies, such as *Vita* (2005) by João Biehl and *Pathologies of Power* (2003) by Paul Farmer, that explore the narratives of their informants while also exploring the larger processes affecting the individual. However, having less than a year to complete the thesis and, at the same time, complete my undergraduate degree, it was not possible to immerse myself in the field for an extended period of time and conduct in-depth ethnographic "data" collection concurrently. Therefore, I utilized a life story methodology as modeled by Gloria T. DiFulvio's research for her article *Sexual minority youth, social connection and resilience: From personal struggle to collective identity* (2011). While she used the methodology to understand risk and resilience in the sexual minority youth community, I hoped it would help me understand the intersections of concepts such as tolerance and stigma in the adolescent population. DiFulvio states,

> "Life stories are considered to be important expressions of one's identity and are shaped by personal, social, and cultural contexts. They tell 'who one thinks one is and how one came to be that way.' The life story allows for people's narratives to include feelings, perceptions, and interpretations of life events. This

methodology is particularly useful in research with the most vulnerable or invisible participants as it may reveal hidden aspects of experience" (2011:1612; Titon 1980:290).

I was attracted to the methodology for its ability to reveal personal and vulnerable aspects of people in a short period of time. For my study, I required that the interviews lack rigid structure for I hoped that the meetings would consist of free-flowing conversation. The participant had control of the conversation and topics that were covered, and I started the interview with a very open statement or question such as, "Tell me about yourself" or "Can you give me a short autobiography?" While I did not have a specific set of questions or order to conduct the interview, I did have questions on hand if the individual had difficulty starting the dialogue. Additionally, I had creative questions prepared, including, "Can you construct your safest place for me?" or "How would you describe yourself on a college application in comparison to a first date?" These questions provided me with biographical insight, but also placed the control and power in the hands of the participant. While creatively constructing answers, they maneuvered the conversation and were not simply reacting to my questions. I spent approximately half of the length of the interview in this mode, and, then, when I felt that the informants were comfortable, I switched the conversation to a narrative of sexuality. Subjects were not required to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. In general, subjects spoke with me about experiences with their own sexuality or with others of differing sexualities. However, in order to elicit ethnographic data that would be more specific and relevant to my project, I asked questions regarding their understanding of discrimination of sexual minority youth or their experiences with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. Afterwards, all study participants were given a

survey that asked for self-identifying demographical information, including their pseudonym.

The study was approved by the IRB at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor on November 8, 2011 under the name *Social Attitudes and Personal Identity in the Adolescent Community*. Informants had to be between the ages of 14 and 21 and were recruited through the use of fliers at LGBTQ resource centers and contact with said centers, gay-straight alliances (GSAs) at various high schools, and, finally, college students. The length of the conversations averaged 60 to 90 minutes. Obviously, the use of this method does not allow for longitudinal study, but receiving input from multiple sources regarding their life experiences aids in gathering information from differing perspectives.

During the initial months, as I was preparing for my interviews, I planned only to interview young adults who identified as sexual minorities, individuals who do not define their sexuality as heterosexual. However, as I began to read literature on the topic, I learned that peer relations have a major impact on the lives of sexual minorities and their ensuing life experiences. Yet few academic studies, and none in anthropology of which I am aware, have taken the time to explore how youths of differing sexualities understand each other and place themselves in the dynamic of the adolescent community. In order to effect change, I believe there will have to be a collective effort towards reducing stigma in both the sexual minority and heterosexual youth populations. Therefore, I decided to do a study of personal identity across the entire gender and sexuality spectrum. Also, as stated earlier, while the study had stemmed from my interest in the recent gay teen

suicides, it does not focus on that topic, but, instead, attempts to understand the stigmatization of sexual minority youth.

Before moving on, I would like to quickly discuss a dilemma I faced while interviewing: I struggled with whether to reveal my own sexual identity to the interviewees. Of course, I believe that anthropologists should be as open as possible with their subjects, as they are expecting the same openness from their informants. Understandably, there are anthropologists who withhold their sexual orientation if it has no relevance to the study or places them in danger because they are in a part of the world that is violent towards individuals with non-heteronormative sexual practices. This was not of concern to me, as I did not expect violence. But for the sake of receiving truthful information from the participants, I struggled with whether to reveal that part of myself. From personal experience, I know that sexual minorities tend to be more open with their opinions and feelings with other sexual minorities as they may be more empathetic. Also, there is a decrease in the potential fear of being ostracized or rejected. At the same time, I was hesitant to reveal my identity to heterosexual interviewees, not because I was fearful of personal ramifications, but because I was concerned that they would temper their opinions and discussion of their relationships with people of the LGBTQ community. Concerning this issue, I refer back to Walter L. Williams, who discusses how being openly gay can help ethnographers navigate through false information and also aid them in connecting with certain populations. I particularly appreciate a remark he makes regarding how one should conduct their fieldwork. He states,

> "I want to emphasize that being openly gay is not by itself sufficient to ensure a good fieldwork experience. What is most necessary is to treat people with respect, caring, and earnestness and to interact with them on a human-to-human basis. Without this, no amount of fieldwork training or sophisticated research methodology will allow one to establish and maintain a positive relationship of

any kind. Being open about oneself is necessary before one can establish a genuinely trusting and sharing interaction with people. […] My experience convinces me that the most important factor in successful fieldwork is the ability to empathize with others on a soul-to-soul level" (Williams 1996:77, 84).

With this sentiment in mind, I naturally allowed the conversation to progress and revealed my identity if appropriate, as I did not want to detract from the informant's experiences, and if it seemed natural to the discussion. Depicting a sense of empathy with certain adolescents can be essential to gaining their trust, especially with intimate details of their lives.

iii. Introduction

There is a common story that is found floating around in the discipline of anthropology. There are various modifications made to it depending on the audience, but the following version was penned by medical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes:

> "A doctor and three medical anthropologists – Hans Baer, Michael Taussig, and Arthur Kleinman – are standing by a river. Suddenly they hear the final cries of a drowning man. The doctor jumps into the river and, after battling against the swift current, hauls in and tries to resuscitate the dead man. After a short while another body floats by and the same attempt is made to save it. Another and another comes down stream. Finally it occurs to Hans Baer to head upstream in order to investigate the contradictions in the capitalist mode of production that are responsible for the mass fatalities. Meanwhile, Taussig goes off, very much on his own, bushwalking in search of the cryptic message in the bottle that at least one dying man or woman would have had the foresight to send out. Dr. Kleinman, however, stays behind at the river bank in order to help facilitate the doctor-patient relationship" (Scheper-Hughes 1990:189).

This is the dilemma of all critically applied anthropologists, and one that I have found myself having trouble with as well. If we are to save the individuals drowning in the river, which is the best way to solve the problem? If we are discussing sexual minority youth who are experiencing the afflictions of stigma, is it best to be the doctor and save them from bullying and victimization? Or is it best to stay with Kleinman on the shore

and establish relationships? Or should one run upstream, like Baer, to find the source of

the problem? Or, perhaps, should we follow Taussig into the woods and discover the

messages that sexual minority youth are sending? Unfortunately, none of these are

adequate on their own. It takes the teamwork of all four members, and the help of the

drowning individual, to create a solution. As Paul Farmer states, "Case studies of

individuals reveal suffering, they tell us what happens to one or many people; but to

explain suffering, one must embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture,

history, and political economy" (Farmer 2003:41). It is my hope that my study *reveals*

experiences of stigma and *explains* stigmatization of sexual minority youth in order to

provide each of the three anthropologists and physician with the tools necessary for

saving the individuals in the stream, and, ideally, prevent any more from passing by.

There is a great deal of research and a flood of statistics that uncover the troubles

of sexual minority youth (e.g. Diamond et. al 2011, DiFulvio 2011, Eisenberg et. al 2006,

Hong et. al 2011).[1] LGBTQ adolescents are much more likely than their heterosexual

peers to commit suicide, and they experience much more discrimination and

victimization as well (Diamond et. al 2011, DiFulvio 2011, Eisenberg et. al 2006, Hong

et. al 2011). These predicaments are well known and well researched. Yet my thesis

focuses on the source of the problematic outcomes: stigmatization. This paper will

attempt to examine the narratives of sexual minority youth and their peers using

prominent stigma theories, and, in turn, use the narratives to analyze whether the theories

hold true for the current state of sexual minority youth. Because in order to appropriately

address the troublesome issues at hand in today's cultural climate, we must understand

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[1] There are a multitude of other resources referenced in these works, along with other articles in the works cited, if one would like to explore this further.

the stigmatization of the population and how to lessen said stigma. Therefore, Erving Goffman and Zachary Gussow and George Tracy's works on stigma will be used as the scaffolding on which to build an essay that illustrates the present plight of LGBTQ individuals. By using the narratives from my participants, I will navigate the current challenges faced by sexual minority youth and question whether the theories are still applicable.

The thesis will be separated into three sections. The first will utilize the concepts Erving Goffman outlines in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) to explore stigma of the LGBTQ adolescent community. Goffman's theory has been considered one of the foremost pieces of literature on stigma, and it is still referenced often by scholars in many academic fields. However, I contend that certain premises put forward by Goffman are no longer valid for addressing stigma of sexual minority youth. It is evident that those individuals who are stigmatized do not always follow the actions that Goffman describes. Context must be underscored because the era in which he published the book was a considerably more dangerous time for sexual minorities. Therefore, the ways he explained how marginalized communities experience stigma and respond to it were realistic and logical. Yet, if we are to pull stigma theory into the 21st century, we must address the differences in context. In an article on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)-related stigma written by Parker and Aggleton, they state,

> "The fact that Goffman's framework has been appropriated in much research on stigma (whether in relation to HIV/AIDS or other issues), as though stigma were a static attitude rather than a constantly changing (and often resisted) social process has seriously limited the ways in which stigmatization and discrimination have been approached in relation to HIV and AIDS" (2003:14).

Parker and Aggleton's sentiments regarding HIV and AIDs-related stigma relate to stigma of other marginalized populations. As they assert, stigma is not static, and as it was understood in the early 1960s is unlikely to be the same as it is understood today. Therefore, in the first chapter, I analyze how Goffman's basic premise – that stigmatized individuals feel inferior because they hold the same norms as the greater society – works in current context (Goffman 1963:7). The next chapter focuses on his discussion of militancy and the stigmatized bearing the burden of negotiating social situations. Finally, Chapter Three will explore the parts of his theory that are still applicable to understanding stigma in sexual minority youth.

The next section will emphasize Zachary Gussow and George S. Tracy's stigma theory, outlined in their work *Status, Ideology, and Adaptation to Stigmatized Illness: A Study of Leprosy* (1968). Despite being published only five years later than Goffman, Gussow and Tracy's theory addresses stigma in a much less passive manner. They were writing during a time of rebellion. For instance, both the civil rights and women's movements were prominent at the time. In their work, they critique Goffman's theory because it does not allow the stigmatized to ever destigmatize themselves (Gussow and Tracy 1968:317). As the goal of this thesis is to find ways to reduce stigma, or help sexual minority youth reduce their own stigma, Gussow and Tracy's theory provides a framework to examine how this can be done. They describe how the stigmatized create their own theories to challenge those of the greater society. In the paper, they put forward four different conditions that must be met in order for destigmatization to be successful. Each will be given its own chapter in the thesis. Chapter Four will, first, provide the basic premises of Gussow and Tracy's stigma theory. Next, the four

conditions will be addressed in relation to the experiences of sexual minority youth. The four conditions are as follows: inadequacy of the existing social model, a subculture of like others, members having agency, and, finally, the presence of "career patients"[2] (Gussow and Tracy 1968:324). Gussow and Tracy only studied leprosy patients within one hospital, which limits their discussion of how environment affects stigma. Therefore, Chapter Nine, the last chapter of the section, will address environment.

The last section of the thesis explores possible future areas of research on stigmatization of sexual minority youth today. Two major waves of stigma theory will have been analyzed, and I propose that there are concepts that will aid in the creation of a third wave of stigma theory. The subsections within this chapter include: Internet and media, new categories and norms, romantic relationships, difference to normalcy, and activism and change of self. It is my hope to provide a comprehensive, ethnographic, and progressive piece of work that will contribute to the awareness of and response to LGBTQ youth afflicted by stigma.

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[2] Career patients are those who reveal their stigmatized identity in order to educate the public (Gussow and Tracy 1968:322). For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter Eight.

Section One

Erving Goffman in the 21st Century

The first three chapters of the thesis will analyze the stigma experienced by sexual minority youth through the framework provided in sociologist Erving Goffman's book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). Often referred to as one of the most influential resources on stigma, this work has been used to examine the stigma experienced by marginalized communities for the past half-century. However, I contend that his premises and methods for reacting to stigma are not as applicable to the situations sexual minority youth face in the 21st century. The first chapter of this section will analyze the validity of Goffman's basic premise, that stigmatized themselves feel inferior because they hold the same norms as the "normals,"[3] within current contexts. The next chapter will explore the concept that stigmatized individuals bear the complete burden for negotiating relationships and are expected not to act militantly. The last chapter will illustrate which parts of Goffman's stigma theory may have a timeless quality, applicable to sexual minority youth stigma today.

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[3] The term "normals" is used by Goffman to address persons who do not possess the stigmatized trait (1963:5). My use of the term in the paper does not imply that I believe that they are, in fact, "normal." It is simply a way of recognizing his use of the term and addressing others who do not identify as sexual minorities.

I

Goffman's Basic Premise: Absorbed Inferiority

While I will argue that Goffman's basic premise is not entirely relevant to sexual minority youths of today, I would like to take a moment to reiterate the concept of context that I mentioned in the introduction. Published in 1963, Goffman's theories were constructed in a time when it was illegal to conduct same-sex sexual activities in most areas of the country, and homosexuality was considered a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) (Silverstein 2009). This, of course, changed in 1973 when it was removed (Silverstein 2009). Also, same-sex sexual activity was not legal in all states until the ruling of the United States Supreme Court case Lawrence v. Texas in 2003 (Spindelman 2004). Nineteen sixty-three was a considerably dangerous era for sexual minorities and the stigma was not only stronger, but also much more widespread. This is not to diminish the gravity of bullying and discrimination today, but it is understandable that Goffman would suggest that stigmatized individuals may themselves feel inferior and lay out a multitude of ways in which these people may

avoid confrontation with "normals." It may have been the safest and most pragmatic approach to stigma. However, with the increase in resources and education in LGBTQ communities, conditions have changed. Because of this, we must take the time to understand stigma theory in the context of today's society and the narratives of current teens and young adults.

When I inquired about Leif's coming out experience, he seemed not only comfortable, but also excited to describe his journey. His first step, which he believes is a first step for most people dealing with their sexuality, was coming out to himself and "realizing you're gay and what to do and how to proceed next." As he was going through puberty in middle school, he was often confused by the feelings he was experiencing as he began to feel attracted to other men. He distinctly remembered a night during his freshman year in high school when he was participating in a Catholic youth group. The topic of discussion was homosexuality. He felt nervous and "had a nasty feeling inside" when he realized what the subject of discussion was going to be that night. He recalled that while there were many differing opinions offered during the span of the meeting, the teacher of the group "taught us that the view of the Catholic Church is that you are gay or you are not. God wants you to choose not to be gay, and it's a sin to have these feelings." As she was speaking, she taught that if any person had non-heteronormative feelings, the individual should pray about it, not act upon the feelings, and conceal it from everyone else. With a smirk on his face, he remembered the teaching point, "If it doesn't go away, you should be celibate the rest of your life." However, the church group discussion, he stated, "forced me to think about it at a younger age than a lot of people I've talked to." Regarding the end of the night, he reported,

"I remember thinking, 'Oh gosh, my life is not what I pictured it being.' I felt sick that night realizing I was gay. I guess I knew it wasn't going to go away. I think I had prayed a little bit about it before, and I didn't know what to do. I was more religious at the time than I am now and that is what I was taught to do. That didn't work, obviously. Surprise! It was a time of questioning my sexuality and faith, and they kind of went hand-in-hand. I definitely knew I was gay and didn't believe what my church taught me."

He continued his discussion with comments on socialization:

"So those two things [faith and sexuality] were a big part of the process of me coming out to myself and learning what it means to be gay and being taught by society what it means to be gay versus actually learning for myself what it can mean for me. I guess that was the biggest thing for me. We all get socialized to believe certain things about different identities, then all of a sudden you realize that you are a part of this identity that you've have these construed views about that you've learned about throughout your life. You wonder who you are and question what you have been taught."

Leif's narrative of realizing his sexual identity works well to examine Goffman's basic premise of his stigma theory. One can see that the norms that had been in place during Leif's adolescence, specifically due to his experience with the Catholic Church, clearly stigmatized his identity. Leif's explanation of his reaction somewhat follows Goffman's basic premise, which is explained in the following passage:

"The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact. […] He may perceive, usually quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really 'accept' him and are not ready to make contact with him on 'equal grounds.' Further, the standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be" (1963:7).

As a member of the Church, Leif felt sick once he realized his gay identity. He had been taught that it was something of which to be ashamed; therefore, he had conflicting feelings about his orientation. Leif discussed how there is a tension formed once an individual realizes that they are a member of a group that they have been conditioned to believe is outside of the norm. Numerous other academics have discussed the self-realization of sexual minorities as "others" and the struggle that can ensue (e.g., DiFulvio

2011, Wexler et. al 2009). Yet, as mentioned in the passage, Goffman's overall theory suggests that stigmatized individuals hold the same norms as the "normal," and, because of this, *agree* that they are *inferior*. Internalized stigma, "in which a stigmatized individual accepts negative beliefs, views and feelings toward the stigmatized group and oneself" is still one of the main chronic stressors of the minority stress model (Logie et. al 2012:1262; Herek 2007, Meyer 1995). More specifically, internalized homophobia by sexual minorities has been defined as agreeing with the predominant sexual stigma and harboring negative feelings about one's own sexual identity (Herek et. al 2007). One of the most famous and clear examples of this is seen through the devastating story of Bobby Griffith, made famous by the book *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother's Coming to Terms with the Suicide of Her Gay Son* (1996) and the movie made later in 2009. Bobby Griffith committed suicide in 1983 after he came to despise himself for his identity as a homosexual male. He was bombarded and surrounded by intolerant Christian norms that considered him inferior. In this case, Bobby took on the same norms as his mother and agreed that he was inferior. However, Bobby's internalized feelings were a product of his environment. The strength and consistency of both the felt and enacted stigma in his life led him to reject his identity.[4] These factors must be taken into consideration.

After speaking with my participants, it is clear to me how Goffman's premise does not work in today's context. The first dilemma is that of inferiority. While internalized homophobia may still exist, from conversations with my informants, I believe it to be much more of a rarity in sexual minority youth today, and its presence is not because of submissiveness, but, instead, because of the brutality of felt and enacted

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[4] Felt or perceived stigma is defined as "awareness of negative societal attitudes, fear and expectations of rejection," while enacted stigma is defined as "overt acts of discrimination" (Logie et. al 2012; Herek 2007, Meyer 1995).

stigma. The next dilemma is that of holding the same norms as the "normals." If Goffman's premise is to be used in the twenty-first century, sociocultural context must be brought to the forefront. It is troublesome to generalize that norms are consistent and simply absorbed. As will be shown throughout this thesis, stigmatized sexual minority youth are affected by their surroundings and are much less passive than portrayed.

The youth may realize that their identity is seen as inferior by the "normal," but often do not, in fact, agree with this opinion. The awareness of the negative social attitudes is termed "stigma consciousness" or perceived or felt stigma (Herek 2004, Lewis et. al 2003, Logie et. al 2012). However, none of my participants ever referenced negative feelings towards their own sexual identity. No one expressed a sense of internalized inferiority. Some conveyed the desire for their LGBTQ peers and their lifestyles to be considered in the norm, but none spoke in a demeaning manner regarding their sexual identity or the LGBTQ population. None conveyed desires to be heterosexual, even those who identified as questioning. Similar to the way in which the stigmatized patients in Gussow and Tracy's work reacted, all negative attitudes were directed towards the misunderstanding greater society (Gussow and Tracy 1968).[5] Participation in organizations such as youth LGBTQ activist groups and GSAs demonstrates resistance to an inferiority status. In a study of 200 same-sex attracted youth, researchers found that the majority of the population felt positively about their orientation (Hillier 2004).[6] Although the prominent discourse is still one of alienation, "young people were able to feel good because they were resisting the negative beliefs about their sexuality by faulting and reframing the dominant discourses in order to

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[5] For a more detailed discussion of Gussow and Tracy's work, see Section Two.
[6] It should be noted that this study was conducted in Australia.

reposition themselves in positive ways" (Hillier 2004:91). Leif, for instance, experienced conflicting thoughts about his identity, yet, immediately, he stated that he did not believe that the church was in the right. As Leif went through the process of coming out to himself, he was able to separate from the stigmatized viewpoint of his status, and, instead, began to explore an identity he could create on his own. During the conversation, he talked about his mother's reaction to his coming out, and he stated, "She was sad because she didn't want me to face any extra hardship or anything. But at the same time, I wanted her to get to a place like, for me, it is something I am really happy about, and I think it makes me interesting, and I haven't faced that much hardship, thankfully." He describes his sexuality as an identity of which he is proud. As DiFulvio found in her study of sexual minority youth,

> "the process of self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender created an internal struggle as they tried to come to terms with the 'otherness.' […] [Yet] the participants invariably described a turning point – a time in which they made a decision to no longer fear their status of 'other,' but reclaim their identity and work toward a sense of pride" (2011:1614).

She describes this as "affirming the self." The concept of differentness will be explored later in the paper as we progress to Gussow and Tracy's destigmatization theory, but it is significant to mention at this point that stigmatized individuals do not necessarily see themselves as inferior beings, like those who stigmatize them do. Leif recognizes the inferiority status others have of him, but does not abide by it.

Next is the assumption that stigmatized individuals hold the same norms as the "normals." Obviously, the norm that Goffman is referring to is that of the negative attitudes towards the stigmatized. As with Leif, one can be socialized with that norm, but reject it. However, it is dangerous to generalize that norms are similar across

environments, especially today. When Goffman wrote, the spread of the stigma was much more consistent and prominent. Youth in the modern era are being exposed to the fact that there are many more people who have the same identity. Therefore, there are other stigmatized individuals who do not feel inferior because they hold different norms to begin with. As opposed to Leif, Sonni had a more positive experience while first realizing her still undefined sexual orientation. Although she recalls her first attraction to a girl at the age of five, Sonni began dating her first girlfriend in middle school. Reflecting on the relationship, she stated,

> "I guess I didn't really realize it would be a big deal. I wasn't afraid to tell people because I didn't think that they would care. […] My only real experience with it was positive with my mom, or positive or neutral at parties. No one would talk about the fact that they were gay. They just treated them like everyone else. So I thought everyone was like that, I guess. Anyway, I thought it was normal. I don't like using that word. […] I thought it was commonly thought of as a normal practice, not the way it is actually thought of. So we just started dating and were very open about it, and, then, we got criticism, and I was really surprised."

While sexual minorities may generally be stigmatized, not all individuals are exposed to those societal norms at a young age, as evidenced by Sonni. Sonni was not able to recognize the common inferiority labeling of sexual minorities because her childhood consisted of a different set of norms than those who stigmatize her. Her mother would often bring her to parties with diverse groups of people, including gay couples. She recalled her first time witnessing two gay men with a child, asking about it, and receiving a positive explanation of their love from her mother. She would eventually come face-to-face with the harsh realities of her stigmatized status, but I believe it is important to bring attention to the fact that Goffman's basic premise may still only apply to people who are surrounded and bombarded by the prominent norm of society. Adolescents are often insulated by their environment and parents when they are beginning to create their

opinions of groups of individuals. Therefore, recognition of stigma is only applicable when that stigma has been brought to attention. The formation and socialization of norms is dependent on a multitude of factors to which adolescents are vulnerable. For instance, most of the teens I talked to, especially those who live in a very liberal area of Michigan, do not view sexual minorities as inferior, or even different.

When Goffman's premise is true today, it may be devastating, as in Bobby's case. But let us remember that feelings of inferiority are not inherent or internalized failings. Sexual minority youth are not submissive and should not be portrayed as helpless victims. The distress is culturally produced; therefore, it is more beneficial to examine the sources of stigma and the context in which that stigma is housed. Similarly, Wexler et. al state, "Identifying as GLBT is not in and of itself a risk factor for suicide or substance abuse, but rather the risk is associate with environmental reactions to their same-sex attraction" (2009:568; McDaniel et. al 2001, Remafedi 1999). The deaths of Tyler Clementi, Justin Aaberg, Samantha Johnson, and numerous others who have committed suicide in the past two years, do not necessarily demonstrate that sexual minority youth agree that they are inferior because they hold the same norms, but, rather, are made to feel inferior by bullying and cruelty that results from public norms (Erdely 2012, New York Times 2012). This relates back to stigma awareness, both the felt and enacted variants. As Pinel (in Lewis et. al) asserts, a high level of stigma consciousness "...may have cognitive and behavioral consequences that shape the target's future experiences. Paradoxically, people's concern about their stereotyped status can actually have the unintended effect of spoiling their opportunities to move beyond it" (Pinel 1999:127 in Lewis et. al 2003:726). The more one was aware of the stigma, the more

distress one experienced. Therefore, distress is dependent on the persistent reminders from the surrounding society, such as bullying. In addition, Lewis et. al, using a scale for internalized homophobia, found that their participants did not experience significant stress due to their identity alone, while stigma consciousness created great anguish (2003:727). In addition, topics unique to sexual minority *youth* should be brought to the forefront. These individuals are made to face tension created by stigma at an age that is developmentally difficult for most people. It has been found that "early and middle adolescents are less likely than older persons to be able to cope with the isolation and stigma associated with their homosexual identity" (Hong et. al 2011:3). Furthermore, while studies suggest that youth are starting to come out now in late middle school, studies indicate that this is also the age at which the largest proportion of straight youth expressed that they would not want sexual minority peers as classmates or remain friends with them (Poteat et. al 2009:959). To make sense of this chapter's argument, it is helpful to explore more of Sonni's narrative. When the parents of her first girlfriend, Hope, found out about their relationship, they demanded that they not see each other anymore. Although they persisted for over a year in middle school, she recalled, "they knew that we were still doing it, so they got more and more severe with their punishments and strategies, and it turned her life into hell, so we stopped." It was an incredibly difficult time for Sonni, and it is still difficult to discuss, but her openness in sharing her feelings during that time helps to expand upon the previous discussion. The following is an excerpt from her reflection:

> "In middle school, not long after I came out, I was suicidal. Not really, and I say
> not really because I wouldn't have done it. But really because I thought about it
> a lot, felt it a lot, talked about it a lot with my friends. […] But I couldn't tell you
> if it was directly related to coming out or not. I think it was much more related to

not seeing Hope. But it's hard to say because it's such a hard time for kids, whether they are gay or trans or anything or not. And I think that really affects their perceptions of how hard their lives really are. […] [I] definitely [feel] sorry for my mom. She put up with a lot from me during that time because I was really, really sad, and I was angry at her because she was the only person I felt comfortable being angry at. I was so close to her, and the rest of the world I was really mad at. […] It's like losing yourself. […] And it's incredible to me that I could have felt that way, because looking back, yeah, losing Hope was really horrible. And how dare her parents do that? You shouldn't have to face discrimination ever, but especially at such a delicate stage of development. But when you think about just the facts, I couldn't see my girlfriend anymore. […] I was in middle school and people can be mean in just a normal way. Most of the bullying I experienced was from Hope's parents. It wasn't kids. I had that going on. […] I think a lot of it had to do with hormones, but also just realizing that the world isn't as beautiful as you thought it was. I was sheltered as a kid. I really saw the world exactly as my mom wanted me to. But mine was this ideal perfect little place, and my mom sheltered me from every problem in the world. […] She tried to keep me from people with hatred. She didn't talk about serious issues around me. So I think the real reason I had such a hard time in middle school [was because,] for the first time, I saw some of the cruelty of the world."

She continued,

"I don't know. I think that specific thing was a little more than I could handle. I did have a hard time. I did feel like it was hard to talk about Hope because my friends, they were sympathetic, but they were just middle schoolers. They didn't have insightful things to say. It wasn't insightful. It didn't make me feel better. I couldn't even get through it myself. I think that is part of the problem - you can't process it, you can't think through it, you can't understand it, you can't work through it, and none of my peers could. My mom tried to with me, but, I don't know, it just wasn't enough. I ended up going to see a therapist. […] And it was honestly one of the best things that could have happened. I had a gay therapist. […] I don't even remember what she said that was so great. She just helped me, she did the digesting that I couldn't do or my mom couldn't do or my friends couldn't do. Because she was gay, she understood. […] The world was cruel, and sometimes people were mean, and they had their own reasons for it, and sometimes they thought they had the right intentions and doing the right thing. […] I feel like when you are 12 years old, you are too young to deal with the fact that your girlfriend's parents are taking her away from you because they don't want you guys to be gay. [I was] just too young to be dating at all, probably. I was too young to have to deal with that, to be able to deal with that. […] Coming to terms that, at one point, I didn't want to "be" anymore is a crazy thing. If I was mature enough, I would have realized I just didn't want to be in that situation anymore."

She never expressed inferiority or disdain for her stigmatized identity, but expressed anger at the circumstances surrounding her. She questioned the norms in place. She conveyed the trouble with navigating these experiences at such a young age. The

narrative depicts the decreasing applicability of Goffman's premise as a practical explanation for sexual minority youth's reactions and feelings regarding their identity in today's cultural climate. Furthermore, this account of an emotional period in Sonni's life brings to light many of the concepts that will be explored in this paper: parents, resources, facing stigmatization, friendship, and relationships.

II

Burden of the Stigmatized: Who Should Adapt?

I would like to take the time to question the current relevancy of another of Goffman's arguments. In Goffman's theory, the stigmatized bear the complete burden of making "normals" feel comfortable. When the "undesired difference" is known to others, it is considered a "visible" stigma (Goffman 1963). Because of its visibility, stigmatized individuals are expected to do the job of "tension management" (Goffman 1963). These discredited persons are responsible for negotiating social situations and monitoring their actions and words in order to ensure others feel comfortable. "Others," or specifically for this paper, heterosexual people, are not expected to change, and because the stigmatized are seeking acceptance from these "others," they should not expect "normals" to exert effort to change as well. Sexual minorities are placed on an eternal tight rope and are required to balance in order to be tolerated by their peers. Goffman states, "[B]y hard work and persistent self-training he should fulfill ordinary standards as fully as he can, stopping short only when the issue of normification arises; that is, where his efforts might

give the impression that he is trying to deny his differentness" (1963:115). In this vision, sexual minorities must constantly battle with how much of themselves to expose and how much of themselves to conceal. Goffman, then, goes as far as to lay out a "formula for handling normals" (1963:116). The rules to abide by include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) "Normals" do not mean harm, and if they do, they do not know better. The stigmatized are not to reciprocate the harm, but, instead, must take the time to re-educate the "normal" and show that they are full human beings. (2) When "normals" have difficulty accepting the difference, the stigmatized must attempt to reduce tension. (3) Persons with the "undesired difference" should attempt to use language that they would use with their own group in order to make "normals" feel as if they are part of the "wise," sympathetic others.[7] (4) Stigmatized individuals must act as if the efforts of "normals" to ease tension, no matter if they are inadequate, are effective. (5) Acceptance must be taken with a grain of salt, and people who are stigmatized must understand the "limits" of the acceptance given to them (Goffman 1968: 115-25). In effect, stigmatized individuals were asked not to demonstrate that their burden was heavy.

This predicament illustrates the elusive problem that people who have difference must adapt to the outside word instead of the outside world giving the effort to adapt to them. And even worse, the adaptation the stigmatized are asked to make does not allow for destigmatization of their identity. While I take issue with the way in which Goffman's theory places the stigmatized into an eternal life of contradiction between being stigmatized by others and harboring a self-stigma, as evidenced by the last chapter, and the way he does not give them an opportunity to fight their stigmatized status, I should say that there is evidence that these expectations may still be held by some

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[7] See Chapter Three to see a more detailed discussion of the "wise."

"normals." However, there is also evidence that the unequal level of responsibility is shifting, and more straight individuals are being urged to be supporters of justice for the sexual minority youth population. In today's society, Goffman's approach of handling "normals" is not as pragmatic as it once was. First, militancy and attitudes regarding stereotypes will be examined. Then, narrative discussing GSAs and interactions between straight and sexual minority youth will be explored in order to ascertain if the stigmatized still hold the responsibility for making others comfortable.

The idea of militancy needs to be addressed, as it is the only form of defiance and attempted destigmatization that Goffman offers. Yet he tends to condemn the practice. He states,

> "Taking this tack, the stigmatized individual in mixed contacts will give praise to the assumed special values and contributions of his kind. He may also flaunt some stereotypical attributes which he could easily cover. […] The stigmatized individual may also openly question the half-concealed disapproval with which normals treat him, and wait to "fault" the self-appointed wise. […] The problems associated with militancy are well known. When the ultimate political objective is to remove stigma from the differentness, the individual may find that his very efforts can politicize his own life, rendering it even more different from the normal life initially denied him – even though the next generation of his fellows may greatly profit from his efforts by being more accepted. […] In short, unless there is some alien culture on which to fall back, the more he separates himself structurally from the normal, the more like them he may become culturally" (Goffman 1968:114).

Goffman opposes stigmatized individuals speaking out against an "other," as he believes it will lead to further stigmatization and victimization. From a certain angle, he is still correct. Let us compare Goffman's written word to a narrative from Sonni:

> "[M]y best friend, [Melvin] really was [discriminated against]. He is a gay man who was not out of the closet in middle school and not out of the closet freshman year of high school, and, then, all of a sudden came out our sophomore year and came out loud and proud, and I wouldn't consider him over the top now, but at the time he was a bit [over the top] because he had been in hiding for so long that I feel like he just needed to shout it out. You know when people are repressed or they aren't used to something, they overcompensate I think. I think that is what kind of happened to him. He was just very confrontational about it. He was very

> willing if he heard anything about it, like if he heard someone say fag, not even to him or about him, but just the colloquial way we talk about people being fags or that's gay, he would not just say, 'Hey, I don't think you are thinking about the implications of that term. I'm kind of offended.' He would yell it at them. So in a way, I think he brought the discrimination upon himself just because of how aggressive he was with it. [Now,] he is doing it from a place of comfort and assurance rather than insecurity."

It appears that even today, being directly confrontational can increase the stigma of an individual. It may also increase the stigma of an entire group due to stereotyping (Herek et. al 2007). Be that as it may, it is problematic in today's context to suggest that it is ill-advised and unwise for sexual minorities to fault others for discrimination of their group or "flaunt" stereotypes that they could cover. Given the stress associated with hiding one's identity, it seems misguided to recommend that sexual minority youth should have to hide their identity and easily succumb to victimization to make others feel comfortable (Diamond et. al 2011). It is not the responsibility of a child to have to negotiate these circumstances. I would like to make clear that I do not advocate using physical violence or verbal malice of any kind to defend an identity, as aggressive confrontation does not often lead to desired solutions or peaceful partnerships. However, I believe that youth do not necessarily have to take a passive approach in order to appease "normals." It is the young adult's prerogative to expose their identity and tell others if they take offense to anything. The passive mindset leads to ignorant views that blame children for their own victimization. For instance, one may say that if they did not act overly flamboyant, they would not get bullied, or if they did not dress as the opposite gender, they would not get bullied, or if they did not come out, they would not get bullied. A recent example is that of anti-gay crusader Barb Anderson in Minnesota, who is a co-author of the "No Homo Promo," a policy that "homosexuality not be taught/addressed as a normal/valid lifestyle" in schools (Erdely 2012:53-54). She recently blamed pro-gay groups for the rash of

suicides in Anoka, Minnesota, saying that if students were not encouraged to come out, they would not be bullied (Erdely 2012:57). Understanding the ramifications of such a mindset is especially important in a high school or middle school environment, where the people who have exposed their identity are often more outspoken in order to combat the discrimination they face. As Gertrude stated,

> "I think what was happening was that the only people that were open were extreme personalities. Quite honestly, if you were going to survive in high school like that, you had to have a very tough skin. So it was the flamboyant, gay guy that was calling everyone 'betch' and styling his hair [who was out], and he was definitely the token gay of the grade, and he happened to be a really good friend of mine. He fit that stereotype that he did not like sports, he wore tight jeans. And there is nothing wrong with that, but unfortunately, it reinforced everybody's ideas of the stereotype. I can understand why. […] It is still not okay because you are obviously associating gay with a personality, which is ridiculous, but at the same time, it didn't really help the situation. […] In that environment, the only ones that would come out are the ones that are outcasts already, and everybody already thought they were a freak."

The burden to change should not be placed on a young adult who is coming to terms with their sexuality, and civil militancy in the form of disagreement and exposing identity openly should not be punished. It is troublesome to condemn following a stereotype as well.[8] There is too large a burden placed on youth to represent the entire community. They are told not to act a certain way, or others will think all sexual minorities fit those characteristics. When Leif talked with me, he asked, not to me, but seeming to work through his own thought process, "But is following stereotypes really that bad of a thing?" He said he had to come to terms with the fact that sometimes he is more flamboyant, but that is not some "nasty thing I need to hide. I was more trying to hide typically gay parts of myself from myself than from the community. Of course, it was both because I was trying to hide all of that identity. I would think, sure, I'm gay, but not that kind of gay." Constantly monitoring outward personality traits is cumbersome.

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[8] For more discussion on stereotypes, see Chapter Five.

Instead, there must be a way to allow both stigmatized and "normals" to become more comfortable with each other. These ways, using the narratives of my participants, will be explored next.

Gay-straight alliances, which every informant was familiar with, provide an example to demonstrate whether the efforts to facilitate dialogue between sexual minority and heterosexual youth are successful or not. First, we will look at the examples of informants who did not have GSAs at their schools. Next, the narratives of individuals who had GSAs at their schools, but found them ineffective for various reasons will be revealed. Then, the positive consequences of having a GSA in place will be considered. Finally, the idea of asking questions about sexuality between sexual minorities and straight or questioning individuals will be discussed to see how it affects the dynamics of responsibility for negotiating social situations.

To begin, individuals who did not have GSAs in their high schools will provide their insight. Emily, like others in the study, described the change from high school to college, or, more specifically, from a conservative arena to a socially liberal space,[9] as a transformative experience that exposed her to diverse populations she had not been familiar with in the past. She talked about being anxious about conversing with people of different ethnicities and races. She even went as far to say she was "paranoid" about it. This sentiment included those with differing sexualities as well. She stated, "I never had any LGBTQ friends before. It was just a foreign concept to me." Not having a GSA at her school, she said that issues and discussion of sexuality never occurred. When she arrived in Bentonville, she "made some friends who just happened to be LGBTQ," and

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[9] When I write either conservative or liberal, I am describing the social environment. Here, liberal denotes the meaning, "more open to non-traditional opinions." This is not a commentary on political views.

stated, "I probably asked really dumb questions." She admitted not knowing a great deal of information concerning the LGBTQ community and asked sexual minority youth questions regarding the difficulty of making friends with people of the same gender, for instance. This dynamic may be at the root of many of the problems between sexual minority youth and their peers. Without being exposed to LGBTQ individuals or any information on the population, adolescents may feel uncomfortable with others of differing sexualities (Heinze and Horn 2009). This discomfort could escalate to stigmatization if those adolescents are not open to conversing with teens who identify as LGBTQ, and conversely, if the LGBTQ community is not open to teaching heterosexual individuals. Just as Emily was fearful of asking "dumb" questions, many may be afraid to learn due to the nature of the material. Yet these questions might break the barrier between heterosexuals and sexual minorities and prevent adolescents from constructing the personhood of their LGBTQ peers in a way that displaces them: "people fear what they do not understand." When people do not take the time to understand, or have never had the opportunity due to their limited interaction or exposure, fear may become the defining emotion between the groups. A safe and open arena to discuss these issues can help teens to better understand each other.

Meanwhile, Sarah, a heterosexual female, also informed me that LGBTQ issues were never discussed in her high school. There were only one or two people who were open with their sexuality at her school, and that is the only exposure she had to sexual minorities. Her high school did not have a GSA in place, and she stated, "I don't think students would have had the initiative to make one. I don't think anyone would have done it." While there are more than 4,000 GSAs across the United States, the community

environment affects whether or not one will actually come to fruition or be successful in a school (Toomey and Russell 2011:2; GLSEN). GSAs are more likely to be found in urban or suburban areas, politically liberal spaces, larger schools, and higher income towns (Toomey and Russell 2011:3; Fetner and Kush 2008). Sarah did not even begin to think about LGBTQ issues until she took a women's studies class at her current university, situated in a very liberal area of Michigan. She recalled, "I don't think I really had a viewpoint on it until I came to college." Much of the research on sexual minorities focuses on sexual minorities themselves, but we must also take the time to understand how heterosexual youth relate to their peers and can become LGBTQ allies (Heinze and Horn 2009). This is essential, as a great deal of the problems sexual minority youth face involve their peers. As evidenced by Sarah, if there is not a GSA in place at a school to facilitate dialogue, it is difficult not only for sexual minorities to have a safe space, but for straight individuals to have a space to feel free to face their misunderstandings or continue to be an ally. Without supporting straight individuals to start dialogue, the complete burden to negotiate the situation, as discussed by Goffman, may be placed in the hands of sexual minority youth.

However, while GSAs can be an invaluable resource, the environment must be conducive for it to be used to its full potential. Gertrude, who self identifies as an "estimated" heterosexual,[10] took the time to talk about her experience with the GSA at her high school, which was in a socially conservative area:

> "It's really hard. I remember going to a GSA meeting, and I obviously didn't belong. It got really awkward. I was the only one there that was straight, but that wasn't the part that bothered me. It was the fact they were all a group of friends because they had to be. Who else was going to hang out with them? They were the kooky ones. There weren't any straight people there. And people were like,

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[10] See Chapter Four for Gertrude's explanation of her self-defined sexual identity.

'You are straight?' And I was like, 'Yeah, but I just wanted to come and check it out.' I stopped going because it really wasn't an alliance. I just felt I was intruding on a safe space for them to talk about things, and as much as I wanted to make a political statement that straight people can be in this too, I didn't want to jeopardize something that is really important to them to make a stupid statement."

Later in the conversation, she returned to the subject and added,

"[I] tried going to the GSA, but it got really uncomfortable because it was a very distinct group of people who were marginalized, and I was not really technically marginalized at my school. Yeah, it got really weird. And it wasn't even like 'Ooh, everyone's going to think I'm a lesbian.' It was more like, 'I'm not welcome here because the people here are clearly struggling.' I felt like I was trying to prove a moral high ground. It was clear to me that I didn't understand what they were going through, and as much as I love the idea of a GSA, it wasn't the environment for one. I was a little uncomfortable too. I think it was a little sensationalized at my school."

From Gertrude's reflections, one can see that if the goal of a GSA is to aid in the creation of informative discussion and help straight people understand the discrimination of sexual minorities, the LGBTQ community must be welcoming of straight individuals. It is understandable that sexual minorities may desire a safe space and may be wary about trusting straight individuals in certain environments. However, in order for progress to occur, adolescents must be open to talking with other youth of all sexualities at a GSA meeting. One of the most common responses to my question of why sexual minorities are victimized or stigmatized was that others did not understand. Therefore, sexual minorities must be open to helping others understand, and that should start at a young age if the environment is cooperative.[11]

Another major barrier to GSAs being successful in schools is the fear of a "courtesy stigma" by straight youth (Goffman 1963:30). This is a stigma acquired by

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[11] Again, I would like to reiterate that I understand that revealing or questioning one's sexuality is not a valid option for all, especially those in environments that foster a great deal of anti-gay sentiment.

individuals who are not of the population, but sympathize with them. While Gertrude asserted that her discomfort was not due to her fear of being labeled as a lesbian, it may be a reason other straight youth are not as willing to join the organization. Leif told me that there was a GSA in place at his high school for approximately one week, but he chose not to go to the meetings because of the gossip he had overheard. Classmates would see someone in the classroom and immediately think that they must be gay. Leif remarks, "It felt more like a gossip thing, and I think that is why it didn't last that long. I'm sure it was a great effort, but I just feel that the environment didn't foster that." Even though youth are not required to reveal their identity in these meetings, many may fear being stigmatized for their association with the group. Other shortcomings of GSAs that have been found include the following: not being adequate enough to address the diverse concerns of the many identities in the club; some LGBTQ students may not consider the GSA a safe and comfortable space if it mostly consists of straight allies; if it is the only agent of change in the school, it is vulnerable if there is little follow through; and, finally, the club may provide a safe area and promote tolerance from other students, but may not address institutional and upstream changes (Griffin et al. 2004:19-20).

Finally, it has been shown that GSAs, when in a supportive environment, can be a great tool for balancing the responsibly of understanding between sexual minorities and straight youth. Many have studied the positive effects of GSAs, which include, but are not limited to: less victimization based on sexual identity; high levels of self-reported safety; increased feelings of empowerment; improved educational outcomes; the production of a safe space and positive relationships; greater sense of belonging; and a resource for coping strategies (Diamond et. al 2011, Toomey and Russell 2011, Walls et.

al 2010). But the important positive effect that is relevant for this argument is that GSAs are often a place where sexual minorities do not have to constantly manage the information that they reveal about themselves. Gay-straight alliances are examples of environments in which the sexual minorities are not burdened with the expectation of making others feel comfortable. And, more importantly, the prevalence of straight allies in GSAs demonstrate that there are others who do not expect them to avoid discussing their stigmatized status, as well. The following narratives are from individuals currently in high school, all of them members of a GSA:

Captain originally joined the group for the safe space they[12] believed it would be. They report that everyone is friends with each other, and because of that, negative feelings are absent from the space. They just talk openly with each other, not about sexuality issues in particular, but it can be a space for that if needed. There is an unsaid trust and respect. Captain said that most of the GSA members do not reveal their identity, and reflecting on the situation, they stated, "Most of them are my friends because since all of the people were seniors last year, I was the only member. So I kind of just pulled people in. I think most of them are straight allies. But that's good." It is clear that Captain is open to all people joining the group. Cam, Mishka, and Wendy are all either heterosexual or questioning, and they are all positive examples of the progress that can potentially come from the next generation. Each are open to discussing issues and learning. When I asked Mishka about her interest in joining GSA, she reflected, "[I] never heard of it at first, but then a friend told me about it, and I thought, 'Oh, that sounds cool.' So I joined it and met a lot of new people and different people. […] [I]t helps me understand gay rights and all of that." Meanwhile, Wendy informed me, "All my friends

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[12] Captain is an agender individual, and their preferred pronoun is "they."

are gay or transgender, so I was like, eh, I'll go and just see. And, then, I just became a part of the community. And I support gay rights." Again, these individuals are part of a more liberal community and may be more open to the topics discussed, but joining the GSA was by choice. They are giving their sexual minority peers an opportunity to talk openly with them and are not expecting their peers to hide their identity or make them feel comfortable. Cam may have responded most beautifully stating, "I joined because I like anything that goes against social misconceptions and ethical misconceptions. Anything that has to do with the whole progress." The attitudes of these particular youth demonstrate that there are others who do not expect change from sexual minority youth in order to be accepted. Instead, they are willing to embrace and support their stigmatized peers and do not place full responsibility on sexual minorities to destigmatize themselves by militant means. They take some of the responsibility for change. Progressive solutions for destigmatizing sexual minority youth must include the involvement of all youth and encourage the creation of supporters that are not part of the population. Placing tremendous pressure on youth to negotiate their stigma on their own can lead to devastating consequences.

I also talked with my participants about whether open communication and asking questions regarding sexuality would help reduce stigma in other settings outside of an organization like a GSA. I was curious whether non-LGBTQ friends asked questions, and whether it would help break walls created by ignorance. Captain's answer to my inquiry immediately brings us back to the topic of sexual minorities bearing the complete burden of negotiating social situations: "Yeah, I think if they [straight peers] were more active in seeking information, it would be better. We wouldn't have to put ourselves out

there and be like, 'Listen to us.'" Instead of requiring the stigmatized to do the job of

"tension management," Captain places expectation on "normals" to participate in making

it a comfortable environment for both groups. Straight individuals are expected to start

the dialogue, now, as well. Gertrude offered a very revealing and interesting reflection:

When I asked her whether she would be comfortable asking questions of an LGBTQ

friend, she responded,

> "[It] depends on how well I knew the person. Unfortunately, I have to cautiously
> think about this because it doesn't come naturally to me. But I kind of have to
> take a step back and say if they were straight, would I be comfortable asking
> about their sex life. I would if it came naturally. I would have to step back and
> think about it. I would find out that [girls] were into girls and I would have to
> stop and think, 'Hmm, let me think about our interactions.' But then, I would
> stop and think about it and think about [if] it [is] really about her or just because I
> found out she is gay? I think about it in the way that you have to think
> practically and ideally. Ideally, I'd have to think about if I would ask a straight
> person that. But practically, the way that society is going, since it is so taboo, I
> don't think that there is necessarily any problem with it, especially if you are
> comfortable with the person, to ask very specifically about it. I would never ask
> a straight friend, I mean I would ask about their sex life if I was close enough,
> but I would never be like, 'From your perspective, what do you feel about this?
> Do you feel marginalized?' I don't think I would be annoying about it, but I
> think there are very important questions to ask because my friends get a chance
> to talk about that whenever they want. They'll find someone to listen, but I don't
> think that people who are sexual minorities get that chance. And I don't think
> there is anything wrong with talking about whatever you want, but listen, if you
> really want to talk about it, you can talk to me about it. And I may not do that
> with a straight friend, but I would probably do that to a gay friend."

Gertrude may, in fact, be a model "straight" ally. She is honest about her reservations,

but also is willing to ask questions so that sexual minorities will be able to discuss topics

they may not get a chance to talk over that often. She thinks critically about what she

would bring up, but takes the pressure and burden off of her LGBTQ friends. Instead,

she lets them know that they do not need to hide their identity. There is a barrier to this

communication, however, that is exposed by Wendy. Regarding asking questions, she

states, "I just think it would be hard for them. Because straight people wouldn't know

they were talking to gay people until they knew they were gay. And a lot of people are in the closet, so that kind of communication could be hard to have. I think it would help though." In order for there to be open communication, the stigmatized individual must reveal their identity. Yet if straight youth express their openness to discussion and support, more sexual minorities may feel comfortable revealing. Part of the burden on children is to come out, and it would be helpful for others to help negotiate that as well. The costs of coming out can include physical harm and avoidance and disapproval by others, but if sexual minorities are made aware of the positive attitudes of their peers, they may feel more comfortable coming out and will not have to deal with the chronic stress of nondisclosure (Corrigan and Matthews 2003, Diamond et. al 2011, Rutter and Leech 2006).

Finally, I think it is important to know the type of communication with which people feel comfortable. Gertrude already expressed her hesitancies about asking questions of a personal nature, and others have addressed this too. For instance, while Leif is usually open to answering questions, he said that it may be difficult if he found the question offensive or clearly demonstrating a prejudice against him, such as "a stranger that tries to boil [him] down to one ridiculous question." He would also feel uncomfortable about answering questions that may seem oversexualized. He may talk about sex life with close friends, but he felt that if he would not ask the question to a straight friend, it should not be asked of him. Jessica, a questioning teen, shared the same reaction. Because of her questioning status, she had asked friends previously about how they realized their identity. Yet she shared,

> "I think there are certain times you can ask about stuff, but you have to know the person well enough before you start asking questions and know if they are comfortable with answering. If they are making gay jokes and openly gay, then

you know they may be more comfortable answering questions. But there are some people who haven't come out and don't know what to say. A girl asked my gay friend, 'How do gay people have sex?' And he was like, 'I don't really want to answer that.' With your peers it is different because you don't really know what to say. […] I think you just need to know someone a lot better, and don't ask anything really stupid. Ask questions that are worth their time and nothing you wouldn't ask of a straight person. 'What's your sex life?' It's not going to change if you are gay."

Jessica's comments reflect the need for communication that does not exploit young sexual minorities. While I believe that sexual minorities must be open to fielding questions from others, others must take the time to understand that personal, stigmatizing questions are not welcome. Contrary to Goffman's argument, these youth claim that these attempts to ease tension are not seen as effective.

Bringing all of this information together, I would like to come back to Goffman. He states,

"Thus, even while the stigmatized individual is told that he is a human being like everyone else, he is being told that it would unwise to pass or let down "his" group. In brief, he is told he is like anyone else and that he isn't – although there is little agreement among spokesmen as to how much of each he should claim to be. This contradiction and joke is his fate and his destiny" (124).

While this contradiction may, to an extent, still exist, I believe I have shown that it is neither their fate nor destiny, and they should not accept it as such. There are ways to battle the stigma and create a means for a communication that does not place the entire burden on sexual minority youth. A stigmatized individual can be both an accepted human being and expose themselves as a member of their group in today's society, and it has become clear that we can help youth down from the tight rope.

III

Timeless Concepts Revisited

It is apparent that there are ways in which Goffman's framework of stigma and the response to stigma by the stigmatized are not applicable to sexual minority youth of today. Stigma is not static. However, there are concepts put forward by Goffman that have stood the test of time and may become timeless stigma theory, and I would like to quickly address them. Of course, there is a great deal of Goffman's work that is of tremendous worth, but I would like to focus on specific topics that closely relate to sexual minority youth. It is important to understand how each of these works in current context and how they may help contribute to the understanding of life experiences of sexual minorities and their peers.

First is the concept of "invisible" stigma versus "visible" stigma, and how people in each category negotiate their identity in public. One who has a stigmatized identity that is not easily recognized externally is said to have an invisible stigma, while one whose stigmatized identity is apparent is said to have a visible stigma (Goffman 1963).

Objectively speaking, there are no inherent markings or signs on a person's body or clothing that identify a person's sexual orientation. Therefore, the stigma always begins as an invisible one. However, society holds stereotypes regarding gender identity that are placed upon sexual identity that can cause the stigma to be visible. One such stereotype relates to masculinity and femininity. The "gender belief system" in our society leads to judgments that if a male has more feminine characteristics, they are believed to be gay, and if a woman shows masculine characteristics, they are assumed to be lesbian (Herek et. al 2007, Whitley, Jr. and Ægisdottir 2000:2). For instance, if a man is wearing feminine clothing, often, people may assume that he is a homosexual male. Again, the clothing is not innately homosexual in any way, but society's expectations of gender norms correlate certain visible signs with the stigmatized identity of sexual minority. Therefore, sexual minority status has had a visible stigma attached to it as well, whether it is legitimate or not.[13]

Returning to the idea of invisible stigma, sexuality is not often an apparent identity. Because of this, if sexual minorities would like to keep their stigmatized status concealed, they have the job of what Goffman terms "information management." They do not allow particular details of their life to be exposed, such as relationships they have been in or people they have been attracted to, if they would like to keep their identity secret. This is in contrast to individuals who have a visible stigma and have the responsibility of "tension management," as described in detail in the last chapter. Goffman tries to make the distinction between having a visible stigma and having an identity that is "known about," but I believe the transition from invisibility to visibility holds the same consequences as one coming out. Unless another individual that knows

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[13] These societal expectations will be discussed later in the paper.

about their sexual identity reveals them without permission, the transition from one with an invisible stigma to one with a visible stigma is in the hands of the sexual minority themselves. As Goffman states, "He can voluntarily disclose himself, thereby transforming his situation from that of an individual with information to manage to that of an individual with an uneasy social situation to manage, from that of a discreditable person to that of a discredited one" (1963:100). Sexual minorities often have to do this numerous times throughout their life. Yet the decision to make this change is one that is dependent on many factors, including environment. There are many who decide to conceal their identity until they are comfortable. This relates to Goffman's discussion of "passing" (1963:73).

Goffman describes passing as the act of an individual with an invisible stigma who chooses not to reveal their identity in hopes of not being stigmatized. He states, "Where the stigma is nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it, who tells no one, then here again is a matter of minor concern in the study of 'passing.' […] Because of the great awards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" (1963:73-4). In relation to sexual minorities specifically, Wexler et. al quotes Mason as saying, "Indeed there is little doubt that one of the wider social effects of heterosexual hostility is reinforcement of an already pervasive tendency among lesbians and gay men to 'stay in the closet' or 'pass' as heterosexual" (Mason 1997:27 in Wexler et. al 2009:598). Many sexual minority youth choose to not to reveal their identity because of the fears of being stigmatized. I chose not reveal my identity until I was 19, as did Leif. Leif remarked he felt the pressure to constantly question whether his actions were too effeminate. Because he considered high

school a dangerous place to come out, he would make sure to be careful with everything he did or said. He was afraid of revealing his sexual identity since he wanted to reveal it "on [his] own terms many years down the road." He would even feign interest in girls. Also, he thinks that part of the reason he has not faced great hardship is that he stayed in the closet for a while to protect himself. Because of his closeted status, he did not experience any direct bullying or stigmatization, but he mentioned that the comments he would hear about gay people would take a toll. In this example, he demonstrated the acts of information management and passing. Both are still very common. Many of the questioning individuals I interviewed choose not to reveal their identity because they are worried about the reaction of others. Expressing oneself through love, emotionally or romantically, is a very basic thing that can be frustrating to keep hidden. As Goffman writes, "First, it is assumed that he must necessarily pay a great psychological price, a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment. […] Secondly, it is often assumed, and with evidence, that the passer will feel torn between two attachments" (1963:87). In this passage, Goffman is describing the psychological plight of the "passer." Others describe this as nondisclosure stress (Diamond et. al 2011). It is overwhelming both to constantly negotiate the information that is revealed about oneself, and to worry about pleasing "normals" and one's "own." For these reasons, people choose to reveal their sexual orientation.

Furthermore, Goffman's categorization of the "own" and the "wise" are still applicable today. Youth often find comfort in groups that they know consist of others that have the same identity, termed the "own," or others that do not have the same identity, but are supporters. The latter group is termed the "wise," also known as

"sympathetic others," and these people can be considered straight allies in this population of study (1963:19). Goffman states,

> "[T]he 'wise,' namely, persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who find themselves accorded a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan. Wise persons are the marginal men before whom the individual with a fault need feel no shame nor exert self-control, knowing that in spite of his failing he will be seen as an ordinary other" (1963:28).

Of course, we have addressed the issue with considering the identity as a "failing," but the concept of the "wise" is still very much used by sexual minority youth.[14] It may be as important today as it has ever been. Having more allies, along with having contact with others that share one's stigmatized identity, can lead to greater social connectedness (DiFulvio 2011). In her study with sexual minority youth, DiFulvio found connections to be an essential part of sexual minority youth resilience. She states,

> "The disconnection that is described through these stories is not merely the result of a bad interaction or an isolated incident, but rather woven so deeply with one's identity that it can be devastating. […] [Yet,] despite the negative consequences associated with disconnection, the participants also demonstrated resilience. […] This turning point was facilitated through connections – with individuals and groups – that enabled youth to identify with a collective identity and provide them with a compelling purpose" (1616).

To whom sexual minority youth choose to reveal themselves depends on the others' acceptance of their identity. Leif remembered choosing his first friend to come out to because she had a gay brother, and Leif knew she was incredibly supportive of him. Also, the formation of GSAs and local teen activist organizations automatically create groups of individuals with whom sexual minorities know they do not have to be responsible for "information management." Yet it can be difficult to know who can be

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[14] If we do not to generalize the term "sexual minority," we could consider lesbians part of the "wise" in regards to other minority sexualities, such as bisexual men, and vice versa. But for the purposes of this paper, we will be using the general term "sexual minority," as to include members of all non-heterosexual sexualities.

trusted as part of the "wise." This difficult distinction is part of the plight of sexual minority youth. As I discussed being comfortable revealing their questioning sexuality to others, Jessica stated, "I don't know. I haven't really talked to many people about it. I've talked to some people at camp about it, but it's just different there because people don't really care about it, and, here, some people really care, and you don't know who those people are. They could just be wherever." As Jessica reveals, it can be difficult to know who will be accepting, and the fear of consequences can cause youth to stay closeted. The fear will also reduce their chance of destigmatizing themselves.

While it will be made clear how the "wise" can be of tremendous help as ally career patients or members of LGBTQ resource centers, I would like to take the time to address a unique situation that may afflict members of the "wise." As Goffman writes, the "wise" may acquire a "courtesy stigma" because of their association with the stigmatized and that may lessen the chances of a straight individual choosing to be an ally, whether they actually support sexual minorities or not.   But the specific circumstance I would like to address is something akin to the "burnout" of the "wise" or their hesitation to fight a battle that is not theirs to fight. Gertrude recalled,

> "Honestly, I got tired. It is exhausting always just being like, 'What do you by mean it's gay? Do you mean that it's homosexual? Because that is what it means.' That is what I would always do. But honestly, it got really exhausting being the wet blanket. There were times I would just be like…sigh…I'll fight another battle. Literally I would hear 20, 30 times in an hour, 'That's so gay.'"

Gertrude, a straight ally, would often feel tired having to correct all of the derogatory remarks made by her peers. Later in the conversation, she told me the story of an instance in which she stood up for a friend of hers that was presumed to be gay:

> "My friend had not come out, he didn't really talk about his sexuality. Everyone just kind of assumed. […] There is no use in people gossiping about it. There were a lot of reasons I was upset with that conversation, but the gist of it was that

he was making fun of the way my friend spoke. He was talking about it really close to me, and I was like, 'What are you doing? Just stop it. Why would you talk about him like this?' And he was like, 'Well you know he's gay. He's openly gay.' And I was like, 'No he's not, and you know it's really none of your business, so stop.' And he was like, 'No, my mom goes to church with his mom, and she has even admitted that he is.' And I was like, 'Okay, but that doesn't make a difference. You are still trash-talking him, and he is a friend of mine, so just shut up.' If you thought someone was ugly, you're not going to be standing there, next to their good friend, and say, 'That girl is so fucking ugly.' You know what I mean? If you think something is negative. you would never say that, even if you think this is negative, it's not okay."

She went on to tell me how he began to use his faith, Christianity, to argue that homosexuality is "not okay." She argued against his point, and it soon became "religiously charged." She continued,

"I got really angry. […] So then that teacher came over and was like, 'Woah, woah, woah, this conversation is not appropriate.' And he was like, 'Gertrude, if you want to talk about these things, you are going to have to take it outside of the classroom.' […] That was one of the few times I snapped, and I kind of wish that I would have snapped more. But at the same time, I'd feel weird because I felt that it wasn't my battle to fight sometimes. Like maybe I was, I don't know, I was afraid it was going to sound really self-righteous. Deep down inside, just because I'm not black, when someone says the 'N word,' it's not like I'm not going to say, 'Stop that.' But at the same time, […] I didn't want it to seem like I was doing this so I could seem like a moral crusader, because I wasn't. That's why in this instance I snapped, though, because he was saying something very specific about my friend."

It is important to point out that while Gertrude was defending a friend who was being bullied, in the end, she was punished by the teacher. The consequences of the "wise" defending the stigmatized is an area of study that might be of great value. The feelings of the "wise" regarding how far they would fight for their stigmatized friends is also a topic that might reveal some interesting nuances of the experiences of a straight ally, especially since peers play such a major role in the lives of youth. Although I do not have the data to address this, it could be a future area of study. As we have said, in the context in which Goffman was writing, the "wise" were also more likely to stay concealed because of the severity of stigma in the 1950s and 60s. However, today, more straight youth are

showing support for their sexual minority peers, and how their experiences affect destigmatization is of significance.

Finally, a fundamental premise Goffman puts forward is an essential one to keep in mind while studying stigma. He states, "We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands" (1963:2). Later, he writes, "The normal and stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives" (1963:138). Stigma is formed from the opinions, attitudes, and expectations of the greater society. And, as Goffman states, stigma is not an innate part of a person, but it is a perspective. Because of this, it is important to remember that attitudes can change. Perspectives can be altered. Therefore, there is hope that destigmatization can occur.

Section Two

Zachary Gussow and George S. Tracy in the 21ˢᵗ Century

The next section of this thesis will examine sexual minority youth experience through the stigma framework created by Zachary Gussow and George S. Tracy in *Status, Ideology, and Adaptation to Stigmatized Illness: A Study of Leprosy* (1968). Unlike Goffman, Gussow and Tracy argue for ways in which stigmatized individuals can create stigma theories and attempt to destigmatize themselves. A much less passive approach, this theory will be used as a helpful guide to demonstrate how destigmatization theories are a viable option for reducing stigma today. However, while the conditions are in place for these theories to develop, it must be noted that each condition must be supported or exposed further in order for destigmatization to flourish. The first chapter will discuss Gussow and Tracy's basic arguments and premises of destigmatization and how they are applicable to sexual minority youth. The next four chapters will explore each of the four conditions Gussow and Tracy state must be in existence in order for destigmatization theory to be successful. They include the inadequacy of the existing social model, a subculture of like others, agency of members, and the presence of "career patients." Finally, as Gussow and Tracy's studies were limited to the efforts of leprosy patients at a single hospital, there will be a discussion on how all aspects of destigmatization are also dependent on environment.

IV

Gussow and Tracy's Basic Premises: Ultimate Destigmatization

Less than ten years after Goffman published his work on stigma, Gussow and Tracy wrote their work on stigma in leprosy patients. However, Gussow and Tracy imagine a completely different framework for addressing stigma and criticize Goffman's approach to the subject. They critique the principle that stigmatized are trapped with inferior status, stating, "Goffman's people are both *other-* and *self*-stigmatized and forever doomed" (1968:317). They also comment on the way in which the stigmatized are not able to destigmatize themselves. They write,

> "Surely there are other feasible modes of adaptation. One is the development of stigma theories by the stigmatized – that is, ideologies to counter the ones that discredit them, theories that would explain or legitimize their social condition, that would attempt to disavow their imputed inferiority and danger and expose the real and alleged fallacies involved in the dominant perspective" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:317).

Gussow and Tracy take a much less submissive approach to being stigmatized, and one that I find is much more applicable to stigmatized sexual minorities of today's society. I

believe it will also be helpful in trying to find ways to reduce stigma towards this community as well.

In their work, Gussow and Tracy explore how patients with leprosy, as a group, create their own stigma theory to combat the stigmatization they encounter. There are basic concepts that they outline as parts of the patients' destigmatization efforts. Each of these concepts is pertinent to contemporary sexual minorities' attempts to destigmatize themselves. But before exploring how that is true, let us first discuss the ways the stigmatized attempt to create a destigmatization movement, as detailed by Gussow and Tracy. Gussow and Tracy state, "the theory focuses attention on a punitive and misunderstanding society whose views, it contends, can be altered if sufficient effort is made to bring the 'real' facts before the public and if the public makes an honest effort to replace their erroneous views with the idea that leprosy is 'just like any other illness" (1968:321). This is a major, and positive, difference from Goffman's theory. There is room for "normals" to change, and the complete burden is not placed on stigmatized individuals. There are ways to relieve oneself of their discredited status. Instead of focusing on how the stigmatized should adapt or hide, the focus is the faulty, greater society. The stigmatized are, in effect, saying, 'This is not *our* problem, this is *your* problem.'[15] They believe that "society has wrongly labeled them," and they do not succumb to the common belief that they are somehow inferior (Gussow and Tracy 1968:320). In conjunction with this, they criticize societal norms and attempt to substitute other standards. Again, they do not hold the same norms as others, but attempt to change them. One of the major ways of changing the standard is to "redefine the disease and remove it from its hitherto eminent position as the idealized maximal horrible

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[15] Credit goes to Dr. Holly Peters-Golden for this phrasing.

illness" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:320). The leprosy patients attempt to demonstrate to others the misconceptions about their illness and illustrate that they are not inferior. In this wave of stigma theory, the desired status change is from "inferior" to "different."[16] It should also be noted that Gussow and Tracy's patients' theory is much more rooted in social and historical problems, not just relational and interactional problems as is emphasized in Goffman. Overall, the leprosy patients believe that "the basic assumption is that ostracism and rejection will appreciably diminish and perhaps even totally disappear when social misconceptions are corrected" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:320). These patients focus on ways in which to rid themselves of their stigma and be incorporated into a society with more progressive norms in which "phantom acceptance" and "phantom normalcy"[17] are not the end goals any longer (Goffman 1963:122).

It may be clear how these ideas could easily be mapped upon the efforts of sexual minorities to reduce their stigma as well. Whether it is focusing on how to correct social misconceptions, placing the blame on "society's defective view," challenging stereotypes, or attempting to change the gender and sexuality norms of society, all of the above concepts have been embraced by the LGBTQ community. The creations of GSAs, pride marches, and activist organizations are tangible examples. Both Wexler et. al and DiFulvio discuss how social connectedness can lead to an "ideological commitment," much like Gussow and Tracy describe in their leprosy patients, that can provide positive outcomes for the marginalized community (DiFulvio 2011, Wexler et al 2009). A study

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[16] I will argue later that a new wave of stigma theory may have to analyze the desired status change from "different" to "normal" that I often heard in my narratives.
[17] Goffman describes that if the stigmatized "handle" their social situations with "normals" well, then they will be offered what feels to be acceptance, and they may feel a part of the normal. But both the acceptance and feeling of normalcy are neither true acceptance nor true normalcy (Goffman 1963:122).

was done talking with leaders from different GSAs and found the many ways that youth can feel empowered by their involvement and how that empowerment can be used to help youth become agents of social change (Russell et. al 2009). It will be helpful to look at how my participants responded to the question of what can or should be done to end bullying or stigmatization of sexual minority youth. Instead of incorporating analysis while I write the following narrative, I would first like to ask the reader to simply reflect upon the responses of my informants:

Knowing that they would be coming to talk to me about these issues and the life experiences of youth, Captain wanted to add, "I was thinking, and I talked to my dad. And he was saying, 'It's easy to convince an open-minded person of something but with a close-minded person, you first have to open, or at least try to crack it somehow.' So I feel like we have a lot of work to do." When I asked how they would begin to crack it, they continued by saying that a mass coming out and more "truthful" education, for example, teaching about sexuality without exploiting gay people, would be a great start. As reflected in their comment, Captain believes in working to open the minds of others. And with the use of "we," they clearly feel a sense of solidarity with their LGBTQ peers and supporters.

Leif expressed that if one is educated about the issues and cares about other individuals, then one would not be inclined to bully people. I then, in response, asked him what prevention measures would work to deal with the problem. He immediately stated,

> "Education from a young age and exposure and being taught gay is normal is something that is really important. I think we have made strides in general across generations. Seeing how quickly perceptions have changed shows that people can learn about issues. It snowballs. When more people feel comfortable coming out, then more people see that it is normal to be gay, then more people

[than] you would expect are gay, then you actually know a gay person, and it becomes easier for you to understand what it is and understand that we are real people and normal."

In relation to achieving understanding in others, Captain feels "like its just like, people need to know that we're here. Like how my parents started to pay attention to the gay going-ons, I guess you could say." Referencing the film *Milk*, they assert that if more people come out, more people will realize that they know many more sexual minorities and find that they have already been friends with them for quite some time. Therefore, being gay had nothing to do with the quality of the friendship or value of the person. On a similar note, Sonni states, "I think it has become much easier and I think that is because of education and more experiences and talking with people and realizing that they are people. Gay people are just people. Trans people are just people." She continues, "I think getting kids young is a big thing. You can have your mind changed as an adult based on your experiences. But I think, [concerning] exposure to people, like anything else, the earlier you get exposure to people, you get exposure to language, concepts, whatever it is, you are going to be more susceptible to it." Leif, Captain, and Sonni all demonstrate the knowledge of ways to lessen stigma in the community and the desire to do so.

Gertrude offered her opinions regarding the stigmatization of sexual minority youth:

"People need to start thinking about it as a spectrum. You can do other preventative things, but not until people start thinking about sexuality differently. I think it has a lot to do with gender roles. I think it has a lot to do with thinking that sexuality is a choice. Like it is a personal preference. […] But people need to understand it is a spectrum. When I was in high school, I just thought you are bisexual, gay, or straight, and that's great. My idea was that even if you are bi or gay, that's fine. It probably took me up until last year when I had a really good porch beer with one of my roommates that we are talking about this and I was like fuck it, it's a spectrum. I think people can be married and have a happy marriage for 20 years and then maybe, when they are 50, they meet someone of

> the same gender that they are really into. And I don't think that means they are gay or straight, they are just people. People meeting people that they like. […] For some reason in my life, I like boys. I think it would be really limiting to say in my life I would never be attracted to a woman. […] How about this? If I were to estimate, I would say I am heterosexual. To be accurate, you would have to have a spectrum and I would point to a spot on it. All I know now is that I really love Walter, and he happens to be a boy."

Cam also offered his reflection in beautiful prose, telling me, "Advocate. Tell them about what it is. Understand [who LGBTQ people are]. How they aren't different and how they are different." He later adds, "I think a person, when they are comfortable, can't truly grow. It's only when a person is uncomfortable they can truly grow." Jessica said, "It needs to be a more open topic. I think people are scared of it. I think people are like, 'We shouldn't talk about it. What if it offends them?' People need to know about it." Gertrude, Cam, and Jessica all discuss the uncomfortable taboo of sexuality and the need to confront it.

Finally, all of the high school students I talked with were members of their school's GSA, and most were community members of a local teen resource center, The Center.[18] More specifically, they are members of a youth activist group for LGBTQ issues called Advocate. An example of their work, as explained by Captain, is a program at The Center that involves gay teens putting on theatre. The group travels to local schools in order to perform, and they have also recently performed in front of a school board. Others told me that they take the time at Advocate to discuss ways to talk to the school system and confront rules on bullying. They put together a prom for sexual minorities and even have an event that invites adult members of the surrounding community to watch the youth present the activist work that they have done. In addition,

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[18] Just as with the name of my informants, all places, groups, and organizations have been given pseudonyms.

their GSA will go to a classroom, with students from all high school grades, and play an agree or disagree game. They will make a statement, such as, "I believe that gay marriage should be legal," and one side of the classroom will be designated for people who disagree with the statement and the other for those who agree. The students move to different parts of the classroom based upon their opinion (they are not required to, however), and, then, the dialogue will begin on why people may feel that way. Meanwhile, Katy Butler, a gay high school student from Ann Arbor, MI, recently fought to have the film "Bully," a documentary exploring the lives of victimized youth, including LGBTQ youth, downgraded from an "R" rating. With an "R" rating, anyone under the age of 17 would not be able to see the film without a parent. Katy argued that it is absurd that the people on whom it should have the greatest impact would not be able to be educated and moved by the messages the movie has to offer. She has gained national recognition, and the movie has been given a "PG-13" status, although it had to be edited (Berman 2012, Butler 2012, Cieply 2012).

Looking back at these narratives, it is evident that there are youth who are actively seeking ways to destigmatize themselves or their LGBTQ peers, either by educating others, changing norms, or actively protesting against injustices. There is an obvious need for destigmatization, and there are people, including the youth themselves, who are already putting forth a valiant effort. Gloria T. DiFulvio found many of her informants "working toward change" (DiFulvio 2011). She states, "Through forms of activism […] youth participants turned pain into action and gave them confidence and a sense of empowerment" (DiFulvio 2011:1615). Numerous others have found sexual minority youth to be resilient in the face of adversity (e.g. Diamond et. al 2011, Wexler

et. al 2009). Therefore, it is exceedingly important to explore the conditions that Gussow

and Tracy state must be in place for this population to come together and destigmatize

themselves and see if these conditions are already met or must be changed. A mere

twenty years ago, it would have been unlikely for youth to even have the opportunity to

speak about these issues or have opinions on them. Twenty years ago, it is unlikely that

youth would have felt comfortable enough to reveal themselves and push back against

their discrimination. But, now, youth are becoming more aware of the issues, and their

thoughts on stigma experienced by their community is more important than it has ever

been before.

V

Basic Inadequacy of the Existing Social Model: Finding the Flaws

The first, and most broad, of Gussow and Tracy's conditions for developing destigmatization theories requires individuals to tackle the issue of stigma at a structural level. Instead of simply exploring stigma as a purely individual, relational, or community position, they also propose that in order for destigmatization theories to be most successful, there must not be a social model in place to handle all of the difficulties. They phrase the condition as: "[T]here is a basic inadequacy of the existing social model to deal with the many and complex dimensions of the total problem" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:324). This seems like an obvious condition, at first. Of course, if there were already a successful social model to address stigma in marginalized populations, there may not be a need to develop ways to reduce stigma. And it is clear that there is a need for a better social model today, and, in effect, destigmatization theory. However, the important aspect of this condition to be analyzed is *how* our social model is inadequate, or conversely, adequate, in terms of dealing with the problems of sexual minority youth

stigma. It is essential to understand the ways in which it is inadequate to create an appropriate means of reducing stigma.

While this is neither a law or nor a policy project, it is important to bring attention to the inadequacies of the structural areas of our society that stigmatize sexual minorities. Emily says it best: "People don't do things that are explicitly really mean, but somehow [how] the whole thing is set up makes you feel really terrible about yourself." There are multiple concepts she could be touching upon here. She could be addressing topics such as religious beliefs, the inability of same-sex couples to marry, or the many other rights that are not afforded to gay couples. Until recently, students in Michigan were not protected from being bullied due to sexual orientation or gender (Bouffard 2011, Schulman 2011). Earlier, the absence of the law was legitimized because it would infringe upon the religious rights of others. Yet, only a short time after, benefits for domestic partners of public employees were rescinded (Landon 2011). Certain businesses may not have non-discrimination policies for sexual minorities. School and business policies, along with governmental law, often stigmatize sexual minorities by not extending the same treatment and rights they offer to heterosexual individuals. Through these rules, sexual minorities are treated as inferior. At a high level, there is a dire need to change these policies, as sexual minority youth are given a glimpse of an unjust future, whether in their relationships or job, and know that they are not protected in the present. It is unwise to analyze stigma as simply an individual affliction, divorced from the greater social and cultural structures. In 2003, Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton wrote a pivotal article called *HIV and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination: a conceptual framework and implications for action*. In the article, they question the extent to which

conceptualizations of stigma are useful in creating effective interventions. And although

Parker and Aggleton study stigma of individuals with HIV and AIDS, their arguments

apply to the conceptual frameworks of stigma of other marginalized populations. One of

their main arguments is as follows:

> "To move beyond the limitations of current thinking in this area, we need to reframe our understandings of stigmatization and discrimination to conceptualize them as social processes that can only be understood in relation to broader notions of *power* and *domination*. In our view, stigma plays a key role in producing and reproducing relations of power and control. It causes some groups to be devalued and others to feel that they are superior in some way. Ultimately, therefore, stigma is linked to the workings of *social inequality* and to properly understand issues of stigmatization and discrimination, whether in relation to HIV and AIDS or any other issue, requires us to think more broadly about how some individuals and groups come to be socially excluded, and about the forces that create and reinforce exclusion in different settings" (Parker and Aggleton 2003:16).

The conceptualization of stigma that Parker and Aggleton have put forward urges those

working with stigmatized populations to understand the consequences and sources of the

stigma not merely as individual or behavioral expressions, but as engrained in social,

economic, and political factors of the time and environment. In order to create effective

plans to reduce stigma, it must be understood as a social process. They argue that the

intersection of three areas, culture, power, and difference, are essential in the

understanding of stigmatization (Parker and Aggleton 2003:17). When creating solutions

to battle stigma, they advocate for programs with the goal of "unleashing resistance" of

the stigmatized and, also, attempting to create a tolerant social climate (Parker and

Aggleton 2003:21). "Unleashing resistance" correlates to the work by sexual minority

youth discussed in the last chapter. Parker and Aggleton's work emphasizes the

importance of upstream thinking in regards to the struggles of discriminated-against

individuals. It is not sufficient to simply save one drowning individual; the individual

must be saved while a solution is being formulated on how to stop others from floating downstream. Paul Farmer employs a similar conceptualization of stigma in his study of *structural violence,* which focuses on the forces that leave individuals vulnerable to victimization (Castro and Farmer 2005, Farmer 2003). In his HIV research, he categorizes these forces as "racism, sexism, political violence, poverty, and other social inequalities that are rooted in historical and economic processes that sculpt and distribution and outcome of HIV/AIDS" (Castro and Farmer 2005:54-55). There are a multitude of social factors, such as heterosexism, that are at the roots of sexual minority youth's discrimination. The source is far more upstream than, for instance, a fellow peer calling someone a "fag." Both Farmer's and Parker and Aggleton's recent conceptualizations of stigma are useful when thinking of the stigmatization of sexual minority youth and what can be done to create environments that are not accepting of its existence.

Returning to the Gussow and Tracy's condition, let us take a look at the inadequacies of the existing social model. As I talked to Wendy about inequality, she commented, "It's just like your culture is against you." I think one of the clearest examples of how society's attitude towards sexual minorities limits sexual minority expression is their stance regarding stereotypic behavior. Society's expectation of a gay individual has certain boundaries. The public, in a sense, may say that it is fine to be a gay individual, as long as one is a certain type of gay individual. It is especially relevant in regards to career patients[19] who reveal themselves in order to educate others. This particular phenomenon is not exclusive to the gay community. In Gussow and Tracy's

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[19] See Chapter Eight for a discussion on career patients.

work, they state, "His function decrees he present leprosy in a favorable light. […] The picture of the disease he presents must be carefully designed not to alarm. […] Emphasis is thus placed on correcting errors and misconceptions rather than on fully elaborating all the factual details of leprosy" (1968:323). They assert that often the people who looked the least diseased presented the best cases with which to contradict people's erroneous views. This is reminiscent of Goffman's discussion of expectations that "normals" place on the stigmatized. The stigmatized individuals are burdened with the responsibility of determining how much of themselves to reveal. And as much as I have argued that we are in an age that having stigmatized youth bear the burden of negotiating their identity is not pragmatic, it seems as if society still has expectations about the way sexual minorities should act. It is alright to be a gay man, as long as one is not too flamboyant. Or it is alright to be a lesbian, as long as one dresses like a woman. These expectations are also placed on individuals with a stigmatized illness. If someone is speaking to a crowd about their experience, they should show enough of the disease to create sympathy, but not enough to repel others. These sentiments may even be found within the LGBTQ community, as people may fear that their peers are "giving them a bad name." Again, this is a basic social inadequacy. The following narratives explore the existence of expectations regarding stereotype:

Captain made a statement that demonstrates the attitude that society would only like a certain part of the sexual minority lifestyle to be exposed. They stated,

> "I feel like it has a lot to do with religion. Because a lot of people in our class visits were like, 'I have nothing against gay people, it's just against my religion.' […] I think it is a funny answer because it doesn't really make sense. […] One of my friends in one of the clubs I'm in told me he wasn't against gay people, he was against their lifestyle. I think that is the same as the religion thing, because, eh, I don't know, it doesn't make sense to me."

Again, it seems that being gay is accepted, as long as the sexual act is not brought up or imagined. Furthermore, Leif wanted to briefly discuss with me gayness and effeminacy in men, because that was the quality he was most worried about tempering in high school. He told me that, in general, there is a hierarchy in the gay community in which effeminate men are not as attractive to other gay men while masculine men who break stereotypes are found more attractive. Earlier in the paper, I discussed how Leif was hesitant to show a more flamboyant side of his personality for fear of perpetuating a stereotype. Leif feared becoming a member of a stereotype because others viewed it as a "negative" stereotype of gay men.   Even as a member of the LGBTQ community, he feared being a stereotype. Especially in a society in which the hegemonic masculine ideal does not include any form of effeminacy, gender non-conformity is often a major issue in the sexual minority community. Yet Leif questions whether expressing certain characteristics that are often generalized to gay men, or deemed "negative" stereotypes of gay men, is something of which to be ashamed. Being slightly more flamboyant was not a character flaw, but just a part of his personality. It is unfortunate that youth, as I have written before, are expected to carry the weight of representing an entire population.

Similarly, Gertrude, reflected that the LGTBQ individuals in her high school were more outspoken and that the way in which one of her male friends dress and spoke, "unfortunately, […] reinforced everybody's ideas of the stereotype." She continues later, "It is still not okay because you are obviously associating gay with a personality, which is ridiculous, but at the same time, it didn't really help the situation." Again, there is an expectation that sexual minority youth not express themselves as a stereotype. Gertrude later said,

"It is so strongly tied to cultural norms about gender. I talked to some people about this and they were like, 'A girl is super butch and she is really into really pretty girls, I get that. But if they are both super butch, I don't get that. Why aren't they just with boys?' And it killed me. And I was like, 'Why does it have to be about the masculine and feminine?'"

Gender norms are still a very charged and relevant topic in youth interaction, and it seems that it may be the major expectation that others hold of sexual minorities. This is especially true among gay men due to the fact that hegemonic masculinity is very much tied to heterosexuality (Horn et. al 2008). The greater society is fine with others being of a different sexuality, as long as they fit gender roles in other ways. In her study, *Adolescents' Acceptance of Same-Sex Peers Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression* (2007), Horn found that adolescents, either sexual minorities or straight individuals, who were non-conventional in their appearance and mannerisms in regards to gender were rated as "less acceptable" than individuals who were gender conforming in appearance or activity selection[20] by their peers (Horn 2007). Perhaps most shocking is that straight boys who were gender non-conforming in looks were rated lower than gay boys who either gender-conformed or did not conform as far as choice of extracurricular activities, such as dance (Horn 2007). Furthermore, the notion that being flamboyant or bending gender boundaries is a "negative" stereotype must be explored. Gertrude stated, "A lot of people that were in high school fit the stereotype. Unfortunately, some of them fit the negative stereotype." However, it is questionable as to what constitutes a *negative* stereotype. Jessica reflects, "And there is just the stereotypical gay guy, the really feminine. That's not real. They can like whatever they want and still be gay." Obviously, characteristics of any kind should not be generalized to an entire community,

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[20] For instance, in her study, dance was considered a male gender-nonconforming activity as opposed to baseball. A complete list of her descriptions is on page 367 of her article (Horn 2007).

but the fact that society still has a negative attitude towards gender nonconformity places tremendous pressure upon sexual minority youth. There are many gay men, for instance, who do not wish to have the flamboyant stereotype placed upon them because that is not congruent with their personality. However, sexual minorities experience feelings of guilt due to the expectations held by society, as evidenced by Leif, if they happen to fit a stereotype.

To expand upon this idea, there are numerous other narratives in my study that discuss gender non-conformity. A common thread wove its way through the interviews: the connection between gender non-conformity and sexuality. Emily discussed a boy who would dress as the opposite gender at her high school. She said, "either no one would say anything about it or they would just sort of look at him funny." Mishka also shares, "This guy I met at school, he has a high-pitched voice, but I'm not sure of his sexuality, but he always wears tight clothes. People always make fun of him, but they talk about him, they don't go up and bully them. I just hear people say things about him like, 'He's gay.' It shouldn't really matter." Often, when people reflect on the gay community of their schools, they immediately refer to an individual who pushed gender boundaries in an extreme way. Because these students are more visible to others, their personality and behavior may be the only information from which other adolescents construct the personhood of the LGBTQ peers. While people of differing sexualities can bend gender boundaries, the two concepts are separate. Unfortunately, Horn et. al have stated that in studies of discrimination of sexuality, the analysis of attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender non-conformity are often not separate (2008:805). To compound that, Logie et. al say that gender non-conformity "may underlie and exacerbate

sexual stigma but is largely overlooked in sexual stigma analyses" (2012:1262). In their study of men with HIV in India, Logie et. al created an "adapted minority stress model" and added gender non-conformity stigma as distinct from sexual stigma (2012). Both hold their own stigma, and obviously, individuals who are both a sexual minority and do not conform to certain gender norms will be burdened with a double stigma. However, it seems that the double stigma may be generalized to all people of a non-normative sexuality because they inherently do not follow one of the most profound gender norms: being attracted to the opposite sex.

Along with the expectations based on stereotypes, another inadequacy of the social model that I have found in the narratives of my informants is the attitude towards the categorization of sexual orientation. This is especially dangerous and victimizing for questioning youth. At the time of his church group meeting on homosexuality, Leif said it was very clear to him that the people there thought that an individual was gay or straight, and "there is no middle ground." When Sonni's stepmom found out she was seeing another girl, after she had also seen boys, Sonni recalled,

> "She just said, 'Sonni, it's okay if you are a lesbian, and it's okay if you're straight, and it's okay if you are confused right now. But you are not bisexual.' And I was like, 'What?' And she was like, 'You just have to pick, you just have to pick. It's totally possible if you are going through a phase right now, and you are just confused, and you'll start dating men in a couple years. And it's possible that you are a lesbian, and if so, we'll adjust. It'll be okay. But there is no such thing as bisexual.'"

Even when tolerant of gay individuals, it seems that the greater society is uncomfortable with sexual identity as a spectrum, the system that Gertrude advocated earlier. People assume that sexual identity is an entity that must be defined at any given moment in time. This can add an extra burden for youth who are unsure of their sexual orientation. Numerous participants identified as questioning or attracted to both men and women.

Sonni does not like to define herself as bisexual, for instance, because "the way she feels about men and women are so different." The idea that bisexuality does not exist is also related to the stereotype that bisexual individuals are promiscuous. Sonni recognized this stigma, and when she began to talk about a bisexual man she knows, she stated, "I think it's people like him that give them that stereotype. Then, there are people like me who observe it in him and complain about it and perpetuate it as a bisexual thing and not as: 'He is just a slutty person that happens to like people of both genders.'" Again, personality traits associated with specific sexualities can victimize those who identify with that sexuality.

While negative attitudes of stereotypic behavior expose a cultural inadequacy that must be addressed by destigmatization theory, I would like to also provide examples of misunderstandings of sexual minorities that were discussed by my informants. If there is clear evidence that there are still misunderstandings of sexual minority youth, there are inherent holes in the social model that need to be fixed. The following narratives explore these misconceptions:

Jessica shared with me her thoughts on religious beliefs regarding sexual minorities and the idea that being a sexual minority is a choice. She stated,

> "I think there are good things in religions, such as believing in something. Then there are things religions say you can't do, such as gay people are wrong, two women together or two men together. I don't get how they say that. It just really bothers me. The thing that really annoys me more is that they say that it is their choice. It's like, I'm sure if it was a choice, I'm sure a lot of people would choose not to be gay. Who wants to be the odd one out or bullied throughout their life? First semester, I was in econ, and one of my friends is gay, and this girl was like, 'I'm not homophobic,' and I was like, 'Alright.' But she says, 'When I have kids, I will do everything in my power not to have them be gay.' And I was like, 'Well, you are a little homophobic.' And she was like, 'I think it is a choice.' And I was like, 'It isn't. They don't choose it.' I just don't get how people think that."

Jessica's narrative reveals the discourse of certain religions towards differing sexualities and family structures. It is quite clear that there are religious practices that hinder the ability for destigmatization to occur, because their beliefs are seen as "the written word."[21] Also, the discourse on whether being gay is a choice or a biological entity, or perhaps both, is a relevant part of the social model today. Research suggests that having the belief that sexual orientation is "biological or innate is related to more tolerant attitudes towards gay and lesbian people in general" (Horn et. al 2008). The misconception that emotional and sexual feelings for an individual of the same sex are a personal choice reinforces others' ideas that people choose the deviance. Therefore, the stigmatization is legitimate. The fact that there are youth who believe this as well is disheartening, especially since there is often the expectation that stigma decreases with each generation. Yet there are others, such as Jessica, who are attempting to change the misconceptions. She continued a heartfelt discussion of those who committed suicide in recent years: "They were just looking for somewhere they could be themselves, and no one accepted them, and they got teased and bullied. And I was so upset because I was like, 'Why are people doing this? They [gay kids] can't help it.'"

Another accepted norm in the youth community is the use of "gay" and "fag" as derogatory terms, whether they are directed at sexual minorities or not. Heterosexuals, especially males, may use it to insult one another (Burn 2000). An "ideology of 'fag'" has even been theorized (Smith 1998). Numerous participants in my study referenced the frequent use of the statements in their schools. Jessica states, "At [school] I heard a kid go, 'That presentation was so gay.' And I would never say something like that about

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[21] The topic of religion in relation to opinions of non-heterosexual identities will not be detailed in this paper.

something. I understand what other people are trying to say, but I think they need to find a new way to say that. You can't say that. Gay doesn't mean anything. It's just your sexual orientation." Leif described how "fag" and "gay" were frequently used around him because others did not know his identity, yet, others did not understand the consequences its use had on him. Equating the words with "stupid" demonstrates that they may believe that identity is inferior as well.

Unfortunately, transgender issues have not been illuminated as greatly as other sexual minority groups. In the social model, there is still a widespread misunderstanding of transgender and transsexual people that needs to be addressed. Jessica recalls,

> "With transgender people, people are so weird about that. They are like, 'That kid is a girl, why are they wearing guys clothes?' They don't actually understand it. One person said they don't understand transgender at all and said, 'Why aren't they just gay?' It's totally different. Some people just don't understand that. [There are] transgender people at [my school], maybe 5 or more, and I was listening to the radio and people were talking about things at school that people don't know, and someone called in and said, 'There is a rumor that there is a transgender person at our school,' and they were like, 'No!' They were like, 'That is not real,' and I was like, 'Wow, come to my school.'"

The difference between transgender and gay individuals, it seems, is still unclear to many. Leif recalled his mom reading the memoir of Chaz Bono, an individual who is a female-to-male transsexual, and telling him how fascinating it was.   Leif laughed as he recalled that he had to quickly stop her and say, "You know that has nothing to do with my identity, right?" Right after, he made sure to obtain more accurate books that discussed being a gay male. Also, the understanding that there are individuals who are born the wrong sex and/or gender is still very much questioned in the current social model. Therefore, it is even more difficult to destigmatize.

A last misunderstanding that helps to demonstrate the need for destigmatization theory in youth was revealed during my conversation with Captain. We discussed a time

when they had an "agree or disagree" session with their GSA in a classroom with other

students, and they recalled one of the comments made by a student. They reported,

> "The statement was, 'I would feel comfortable if my teacher came out.' The kid
> from the disagree side, one of the kids, said that I wouldn't be comfortable
> because somehow being gay is related to being a pedophile. And I feel like that
> is a popular opinion: He's gay, so he wants to be a pedophile."

These extreme opinions are somehow still a part of the social attitudes. Other

misunderstandings of being homosexual include contracting AIDS. Leif recalled that his

mother asked his father to talk to him about getting AIDS after he came out, but his father

said that if he needed to talk to one son about it, he had to talk to the others about it as

well. Even recently, Barb Anderson said kids were being "seduced into being a

homosexual and getting AIDS" (Erdely 2012:53). It is my hope that revealing these

misunderstandings demonstrates that there is still a basic inadequacy of the social model,

and Gussow and Tracy's first condition has been met. Therefore, the efforts by the

stigmatized to destigmatize themselves and create their own theory are welcomed.

VI

Subculture

The next condition that Gussow and Tracy provide regards subculture for the stigmatized. They require that "persons involved in the stigmatized condition are engaged in close and sufficiently prolonged interaction so that a subculture, with ideology and norms, may develop" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:324). Subcultures allow for a level of camaraderie that gives stigmatized individuals the opportunity to band together to fight injustice. It provides a level of comfort and feeling of belongingness as well. In Wexler et. al's article, *Resilience and marginalized youth* (2009), they suggest

> "that the significance of establishing an affiliation with a community that supports selfhood within a larger purpose (e.g. indigenous sovereignty or gay rights) is important for supporting resilience in both. Such group affiliations can provide young people with a sense of belonging, social norms and behavioral pathways of response, and can offer them a sustaining ideological commitment or sense of transcendent purpose" (567).

This is also reflected in DiFulvio's work. She touches upon the positive effects finding a social connection to a group has on resilience, both with "finding other people like you"

and "working toward change" (DiFulvio 2011). She touches upon many of the benefits that have been covered in regard to GSAs, such as the ability to share experiences, having a safe space, and feeling empowered to make structural changes (DiFulvio 2011). As discussed previously, Goffman proposed that a level of militancy, whether strong or civil, might be disastrous for stigmatized individuals because they may have no culture to fall back on for support. However, since the sixties, sexual minorities have become a much more visible group with numerous organizations in place to support their identity, such as the Human Rights Campaign. The sexual minority subculture is in place across the United States to allow for destigmatization theories to come to fruition and for them to be applied to the lives of millions. However, I would like to focus the issue on a smaller, community level, a level that youth must navigate on a day-to-day basis. Bigger organizations are not yet accessible or tangible to young adults, especially if they are not given agency.[22] Youth, either in middle school or high school, usually do not have a large group of sexual minorities to bond with, either because there are no resources for that to occur or because most sexual minorities are closeted. The presence of subcultures for sexual minority youth is usually predicated by the presence of organizations that allow them to come together. Two organizations that were brought up often in my talks include local teen resource centers and gay-straight alliances. The role of a GSA has already been discussed in this paper, so the majority of my focus will be on local resource centers. The comfort offered by other spaces will be touched upon as well.

A number of my participants go to the same teen resource center located in a liberal, southern Michigan city. The creation of a subculture of sexual minority youth, and their allies, in the community has been greatly supported by the resource center.

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[22] See Chapter Seven for a detailed discussion of agency.

Instead of isolated individuals who must fend for themselves in different schools across the area, The Center allows for teens to gather together and address issues together that they may feel uncomfortable tackling on their own. There is a sense of solidarity and comfort created. The following narratives reflect the youth's attitudes regarding The Center:

Captain began to tell me about going to concerts with friends when they bring up The Center. Without any prodding or further inquiry from me, they look away and say, "I love The Center. It's really cool." Captain originally decided to visit The Center to learn more about Advocate, a teen activist group for LGBTQ issues. After that, they began to meet "really cool people" and are now part of another group that creates art and meets to view tutorials of different art techniques. Every Wednesday and Friday after school, they go to the teen center. They report,

> "Advocate is really a safe space, and it's under 'leadership' in The Center groups, but I consider it more of a support group. Everyone is open when you are there, even if they aren't open outside of Advocate, so it's kind of just like unsaid that we all support each other. And it has been brought up that we are a big family."

In this passage, Captain reflects on the creation of a subculture that gives support to those who are sexual minorities or currently questioning their sexuality. Even if one is not comfortable with revealing one's identity elsewhere, a created subculture is available.

As described earlier, Captain told me about a program at The Center that involves gay teens putting on theatre. Captain believes that the program is going very well and is "working on getting a good bullying policy because the one right now just says don't bully, it's bad." Not only does the organization provide a subculture for those who need one, but, also, the existence of the subculture gives the youth others to work with in order to find ways to destigmatize themselves. It would be much more difficult and fear-

provoking on one's own to push back against the norm. The subculture gives the youth the agency they need in order to come together in solidarity. Goffman stated that militancy may not be helpful unless the individual had a separate culture to fall back upon. The youth can be slightly militant, knowing that they have a group of similar others that support and advocate for them.

Mishka shares the same sentiments as Captain, stating,

"The thing I go to, The Center's Advocate, the people are so nice and open and it makes me feel a lot better. Captain told me about it, and I started going. We just hang out and have art shows. We can just go there and chill a little. We talk about anything. I think it is safe and open. There is a lot of stuff to do there, and there is food, and they have board games, and you don't have to pay money for anything. It's really fun."

I think what is important about the creation of this subculture is that it is a space in which youth do not have to concern themselves with information or tension management. Instead, they know that they are among supporters and can simply be youth, not sexual minority youth. The subculture helps alleviate feelings of anxiety, and with the incorporation of other activities and opportunities that do not pertain to LGBTQ issues, there is room for these individuals to explore multiple identities and not simply focus on the one that is stigmatized. Mishka continues, "It can be for anybody: if you are questioning about yourself, if you need motivation. A lot of people tell stories when they share." This resource helps youth find others that are in similar situations and, in effect, create a subculture. Then, they may be able to use this subculture as a foundation to create destigmatization movements. The subculture gives those who are unsure of how to navigate their newfound sexual identity a group in which to find information. For instance, Mishka states, "At Advocate we have something [where] you can just ask questions. I put in a question saying, 'I'm bicurious, and I don't know what to do.' They

were like, "Don't choose who you like, just go and do it. If you like somebody and are attracted, just go for it.'" Without a group of people with whom she could identify or feel safe, Mishka could not even begin to think of ways to orient herself in the community or destigmatize her identity.[23]

Wendy, another member of The Center, discussed specific ways in which the organization acts to tackle LGBTQ issues and create events for sexual minority youth that they may not otherwise be able to attend. When we met, she told me, "Today, we talked about planning 'Queer Prom' which is coming up in April. [We] talked with the board of representatives about the bullying bills and [the public school system]." She says they usually "talk about issues, and mentors come. It's a really open environment." In these ways, the subculture provides the youth with the agency and support system needed to educate others and fight their stigma. As Gussow and Tracy assert, the subculture aids in groups of stigmatized people creating ideologies and different norms. Even the creation of a "Queer Prom" allows young adults to fully experience their relationships and friendships without the fear of retribution or anxiety of hiding themselves.

Sonni, a college student reflecting on a different community center of which she was a member in high school, stated,

> "Being in that environment, there is something so supportive about having a group of people with who[m] you can relate and identify and feel a sense of like, a word I can't think of, in a way, not just community. It is community, but it's something more. I feel like it is the same thing if you are black and there is a black person being picked on. Even if it's not something to do with their race, you want to protect them."

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[23] See DiFulvio 2011 for a description on "finding others like you."

In this reflection, Sonni explicitly states that the environment creates a sense of solidarity. But the latter part of her comment underscores the fact that youth can feel more "militant" about their identity if they have a group of people who will support them. The comfort, safety, and motivation provided by these created cultures are essential for youth to find the agency to fight discrimination. What is problematic is that these subcultures are not easily visible, or non-existent, in certain arenas, such as school. Sonni continues by saying, "[A]t the community center, we banded together because we were queer." This explicitly shows that they came together because of a stigmatized status and created a subculture. Sonni also expresses her appreciation of having a group of people with which she immediately made friendships:

> "I felt I had an in. […] People would automatically entertain the idea of being friends with you because you were there. Which was a relatively new thing for me. Or maybe I was open to it because I knew they were all gay, so I knew they must all be alternatively thinking in some way. […] I think for a lot of high school and middle school, I put up walls to other people as much as they did to me, if not more, not necessarily based on sexuality at all. But with my gay friends, I was in the norm."

With the existence of the community center she went to, and the subculture of youth in the center, new norms outside those of society were able to come to fruition. As I have addressed before, new ideologies and norms can be generated. She did not feel deviant in any way when with the subculture, and she did not need to address her identity as so. Instead, she was a youth, not a sexual minority youth. Others, such as Jessica and Mishka talk about the comfort their GSAs or queer-straight alliances (QSAs) provide for talking about subjects related to sexuality. Overall, the decreased level of anxiety and fear in youth increase their quality of life. How these subcultures can be accessible to all youth who feel as if they need it must be addressed.

VII

Agency of Members

Gussow and Tracy's third requirement for the development of destigmatization theories involves the agency of the stigmatized. They describe this condition as, "the stigmatized are sufficiently free of daily encroachment on their lives by dissonant public views" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:324). I believe the requirement to be especially essential in the destigmatization of sexual minority youth. In efforts to reduce stigma, I find that whether this condition is met or not parallels the successful destigmatization or devastating disappointment. In the case of sexual minority youth, this stipulation describes both the state of being free from daily victimization and the ability to fight for oneself. In other words, the youth must have agency, and that agency cannot be heavily impeded. I would like to reiterate that this paper is focusing on youth, not the entire sexual minority population. Therefore, there are numerous aspects of agency that are distinctive for youth and important to discern in order to understand the troubles that these youth experience. In this chapter, I will illustrate the ways in which youth are and

are not given agency, and when they are given agency, how it can contribute to destigmatization efforts.

The first set of narratives in this chapter will explore exposure to discussions of sexuality. Without the availability of accurate information regarding sexuality, youth will not be given the agency to reflect upon their own identity or other's identity. Also, without exposure to LGBTQ individuals or issues, youth are forced to create an opinion or image based upon outside views, not their own. In relation to developing a sexual identity-justifying curriculum that is gay-sensitive, Susan Talburt quotes Lipkin stating,

> "All of the researchers who have studied homosexual identity formation have
> described a developmental stage in which these people consider what they know
> about gayness in order to see if the label is congruent with what they know about
> themselves. … If they are aware of a limited number of features of gay life, they
> may have difficulty in this process of identification. Since many conceptions of
> homosexuality in our society are inaccurate and stigmatizing, gay youth may
> rightfully fear the burden that they are taking upon themselves" (Lipkin 1995:35
> in Talburt 2004:119).

Not giving young adults the opportunity to think about these topics inhibits sexual minority youth, including those who are questioning, from navigating their identity and pushing back against the norms, while also inhibiting straight youth from understanding their peers. It is difficult for youth to obtain this information on their own, so they are often at the mercy of what the media, their parents, schools provide. More specifically referring to sex education, there are arguments that abstinence-only education has helped to create a "bully generation" (Chemaly 2012). The author that created this argument writes that there are three ways that the programs support and create a bullying culture: (1) They perpetuate sexist stereotypes and legitimize them by using biology. (2) They stigmatize LGBTQ youth by saying that sex between a man and woman is the only normal and safe behavior model. (3) They teach youth to "slut-shame" and victimize

peers using blame (Chemaly 2012). The problems related to the absence of education or exposure to varying sexualities is reflected in the following narratives:

Emily emphasized that adolescents should be made more aware of issues of sexuality while they are "starting to come in tune with their sexuality and explore it." Emily continued to discuss exposure of teens to information on LGBTQ issues, and stated, "the stuff you hear about sexuality in the media is not very refined. And that is all you hear when you are in high school. You should learn more about the world." After gaining more exposure to the LGBTQ community in college, Emily began to question and challenge her own sexuality. Regarding sexual identity, she stated, "I feel like after making those friends, I started questioning my own sexuality a little bit more. Basically, I was just thinking more about it and why I assume I only like guys." She mentioned that she had never considered other options. She found herself listening to her friends recount the times in their lives when they realized the sexual orientation with which they identify, wondering if she could possibly have a more fluid sexual identity. In the United States, this very much has to do with the heterosexual paradigm (Ginsberg 2000). Without exposure to discourse on sexuality, many youth may not only assume themselves part of the paradigm, but instill those values upon others as well. In relation, when I asked Sarah, a heterosexual college student, about whether or not LGBTQ issues were discussed in her high school, she responded with a quick "no." I pushed further by asking about her personal views. She stated, "I don't even think I started thinking about it until I took a women's studies class. I don't think I really had a viewpoint on it until I came to college. In high school, I don't know if I ever really thought about it." Like Emily, Sarah was not introduced to matters regarding sexual identity until coming to

college. As evidenced by their narratives, youth are not given the opportunity to educate themselves on these matters. Therefore, adolescents may have difficulty creating their own theory on stigma and finding ways to reduce their discrimination. If they are not made conscious of an identity, it is be difficult to fight for that identity.

Much of adolescence is spent in school, and students are often under the influence of their teachers or advisors. Teachers are given the power to disseminate specific information to students and protect those students from what they believe to be harm. A number of my participants, especially those still attending high school, expressed their feelings on how teachers either help or hurt students who feel discriminated for their sexuality. Again, this is an important topic to discuss regarding youth because of its unique applicability to young adults. There can most likely be parallels made between this discussion and employers of sexual minority adults, but I would like to focus on how agency of youth, especially in an environment in which they spend a great deal of time, is determined by their teachers. For instance, as Jessica and I began to discuss bullying of sexual minority youth, she described to me a specific story about how teachers address bullying:

> "So actually, in middle school, I went back and visited a friend there, and we were talking to the health teacher, and she was asking us about ways to bring awareness but not to say anything against religion at the same time. Like how to say it is okay to be gay but not to say religion is bad. We were helping her, and then my friend, who said he had an openly gay friend in eighth grade, [told us that] this kid came up to [his friend] and started to make fun of him for all this stuff. […] But [the school has] a thing, 'you email us and we will respond,' but his friend emailed them three times, and they never responded. Once he told [the health teacher] that, she went down and checked it, and she said there were no emails from him. But I don't know."

This account brings to light two ways that teachers affect the agency of sexual minority youth. In the first part, a teacher is attempting to find ways to create dialogue about

sexuality. Yet, in the latter part, one can see that while there may be a system to protect youth from being ostracized, the system may not be effective, especially if teachers only respond to certain instances of bullying. Without protection and support from those who have power at the school, kids may not feel comfortable revealing themselves and creating efforts to reduce stigma.

Jessica also discussed with me the ways teachers communicate with students about sexuality:

> "[Teachers] try to talk about it, but don't really talk about it. […] I think the best way to learn about it is to go out and learn about it outside the classroom. Your teacher can't teach you everything about being gay. Then there are the kids [who] are awkwardly laughing and stuff because they are uncomfortable with it because they don't know about it, and it's weird for them."

Later in the conversation, she added, "Teachers try their best to explain it, but they try without saying what it is. I think it gives people the wrong ideas." The matters discussed with Emily and Sarah's high school experiences are mirrored in Jessica's comments. With school usually being the main environment in which adolescents learn, teachers hold the authority to choose which information to communicate to their students. And if school is the only arena in which students are exposed to LGBTQ affairs, teachers are responsible for the opinions that may be disseminated to students regarding stigmatized individuals. As Jessica commented, teachers can contribute to the stigma. In relation to teachers discussing sexuality, Wendy said, "It's not really talked about at all at this point. We talk about contraceptives and STDS [sexually transmitted diseases] and that is about it." Again, there is often an absence of dialogue surrounding sexuality.

Indifference in the teaching population towards discriminatory remarks may also have a negative impact on the agency of the students. If they witness indifference, such as Jessica when she recalled, "[A student] made a racist joke to the teacher and she didn't

care," it may demonstrate to youth that they do not have adult figures at school that would be supportive of their efforts to reveal themselves or destigmatize their identity. Marginalized youth may feel that they must fend for themselves. When I inquired about how to solve the problem of bullying, Mishka, another high school student, responded, "Teachers should express their feelings and stand up against bullying." For her GSA, they have stickers that teachers can publicly display in their classrooms or on their classroom doors to show support for students of all identities, but she recalled that some teachers refused the stickers. Gussow and Tracy state that the stigmatized group must be "free of daily encroachment," and teachers have the ability to contribute. Sonni also commented that teachers should not allow "the subtle things" to occur in order to help sexual minority youth.

These narratives are not an attempt to place blame on teachers or reflect negatively on their efforts to help students. It is understood that there are numerous underlying reasons why teachers may not discuss sexuality or show outward support for sexual minority students. Teachers may be fearful of the "courtesy stigma" associated with supporting students or the retributions of talking about LGBTQ issues at school. In their environment, it may be realistic that their job could be put into jeopardy, whether legally or from being ostracized by parents or colleagues. Instead, these narratives are to demonstrate ethnographically that the ability of youth to create their own stigma theory is often at the mercy of those who have authority over them. Teachers not only have the power to inhibit progress in schools, but they also are vital for helping students. For instance, Jessica stated, "There is one teacher, and she is the leader of the QSA, and she's not straight. I don't know if she is bi or gay, but she told me she is not straight. And I

would feel comfortable going to see her." Leaders of GSAs and teachers who show support for the community are resources for destigmatization efforts.

Another significant set of individuals who influence the agency of sexual minority youth, and young adults in general, are parents or guardians. Parents have a tremendous amount of contact with their children, and also a great deal of authority, either emotionally or financially. Children are dependent on their parents. As with teachers, parents' attitudes toward and support of their child's identity can greatly affect the well-being of the child. Parents can either contribute to the fear and stigma, or they may provide a supportive environment for their children (D'Augelli et. al 1998). There have been instances of extreme harassment from parents which have led to suicides, and thousands of youth are homeless because they reveal their identity to their parents (Ruth Ellis Center). For instance, Eric James Borges, a gay man who was an intern at The Trevor Project, a video contributor to It Gets Better, and a young filmmaker, was raised in an extremist Christian household. His mother even attempted to do an exorcism on him. He was kicked out of his home, but, later, became a gay rights and anti-suicide activist. Unfortunately, he killed himself, unexpectedly, at the age of nineteen (NG 2012). Obviously, feeling unsafe in one's home or being homeless diminishes the agency of LGBTQ youth. Many of the people I talked with discussed their relationship to their parents or how parents affect the opinions of their children. The following excerpts from my interviews will illuminate how parents affect the agency of LGBTQ youth and their allies:

Leif and Captain both had positive coming out experiences with their parents. When Leif discussed why he became comfortable with his identity in the past year, he

stated he owes a great deal of his comfort to his family. He felt lucky that they were so supportive and "not having to worry about that was a huge thing for me." However, while Sonni had a generally positive reaction from her mom, her experiences with her dad and her girlfriend's parents were unfavorable. After Sonni's girlfriend, Hope, revealed herself and Sonni to her mom after being upset by a bully at school, Hope's parents told her that she could not see Sonni again. Afterwards, Sonni recalls,

> "So Hope's mom ended up calling my stepmom and telling her. And my stepmom's a bitch. Seriously, I can't stand the woman. And she told my dad, and of course, this all happened without telling me. So my dad locked himself in our barn/garage and drank for three days. Did not go to work and talked about sending me to Catholic school, that my mom was corrupting me with her liberal lifestyle and making me into a vegetarian lesbian, blah blah blah, that he was going to win custody of me. All of this when I was probably 12 or 13."

Later, Sonni's stepmom sat her down to tell her that she either had to be a lesbian or straight (this instance was discussed earlier in the paper), but bisexuality did not exist. And while Hope and Sonni persevered for over a year afterwards, Hope's parents' punishments and threats became more severe as time passed. They threatened to send Hope to boarding school. In one of her most powerful statements, she reveals, "Most of the bullying I experienced was [from] Hope's parents. It wasn't kids." Unlike adults, who usually have the independence to separate themselves from their parents, it is difficult for youth to escape their parent's authority. The way in which Hope's parents bullied the girls demonstrates that daily encroachments on these youths' lives can take place right at home. Also, since Gussow and Tracy's condition regarding agency may not be met, it is difficult for youth to destigmatize themselves.

Cam also shared negative memories of telling his parents about his past attraction to men. He states, "My father, oh, if I told him I used to be [attracted to men], I don't know if he would disown me. I hope not. I would be scared to tell him. My mom didn't

believe me when I told her. She just said, 'Don't tell grandma, don't tell grandma.'"

Captain can also recall a time when a peer said that his parents would "ship him off to Africa if he came out." These sentiments force youth to stay closeted and fear the consequences of revealing their identity. They must struggle with hiding their identity because if their parents become aware of their sexuality, youth have a legitimate fear of losing their parent's support. Sonni wanted to talk about her friend, Jamie, who is a female-to-male transgender individual. She recalled,

> "The first discrimination he faced was as a child from his parents. He hated girly, fluffy, pink things and wanted to dress like a boy, and they wouldn't let him. And he couldn't understand why he wasn't a boy yet and when he would become a boy. And they were really mean to him, and they still are, and they aren't understanding and supportive of him as someone who is not a girl, not their daughter 'Jamie.' I really, really hate his mom, mostly for that reason. The way she is with that is consistent of how she is with other things."

Jamie's experience of victimization, literally being forced to portray himself as the gender he did not believe himself to be, is a direct violation of his ability to destigmatize himself.

While parents can have a direct impact on the life experiences of their children, there are other ways that parents can be instrumental in the dissemination of information regarding sexual minorities, whether or not their child is a member of that group. Captain put it concisely as I asked them how teens acquire discriminatory views: "I think at our age, I think our views mostly reflect our parents' views. So if someone grew up in a homophobic household, they'd assume that that is right." If Captain's reflection is accurate, one can assume that the attitudes that kids have towards their peers is a reflection of what their parents have taught them. Youth do not often find their own opinions until they are given the agency to do so, like in college classes, as Sarah reported. Both Sonni and Mishka made remarks of a similar nature:

"I don't know, in my experience, the people who were most critical or the most mean to gay people are the ones who have been literally told it's evil or it's bad from a young age. […] I just feel like I don't think hatred doesn't come from within, is my point. I don't think that it is natural to hate gay people. […] I don't know what it is, but it doesn't make sense to me how someone could feel that hatred in their heart and that it could come from within them. It just doesn't seem right." - Sonni

"Their parents probably taught them that way, and they don't think for themselves. That it's not normal." – Mishka

These are both examples of how parents can bluntly tell youth to believe that being a sexual minority is wrong. But there are other, subtle ways that parents do not allow their children the opportunity to learn about LGBTQ individuals. Either it is promoted as a taboo topic, or without it ever being mentioned, youth have to create an abstract concept of what it means to be a sexual minority from pieces of information to which they may accidentally be exposed. Jessica discussed with me people she knew who were shielded from social issues. She stated,

"My mom's cousin's daughter, I used to hang out with her, but she is really protected. [Her] dad is something religious, and they don't let her watch kissing scenes in movies, and [she] doesn't have any black friends. [S]o she actually has a gay grandma, and she isn't allowed to know about that. I don't agree with what her parents are saying about it. They are keeping her so protected that when she goes out into the real world, she isn't going to know anything. She is just going to know what she learned when she was protected. […] I think a lot of people are sheltered now because parents don't want them knowing anything real."

The idea of being too sheltered was reflected in the section discussing Goffman's basic premise. Sonni felt that because her mother wanted to show her an ideal world, she was shocked when she experienced discrimination due to her sexuality. Also, Jessica's former friend will not have an educated opinion of LGBTQ people when she attends school or hangs out with friends and will inadvertently increase the stigma inflicted upon her peers. In school, it is evidenced to be a taboo subject that may increase its "otherness." This is reflected when Jessica told me, "There are forms you have to sign

even if we are going to start talking about gay topics and our parents have to sign, and I don't like that, but if that's what we have to do [we should do it]. Some parents may say no, and I feel bad for their kids because they don't get to see the real thing." Again, Jessica reiterates that her peers will not see the "real thing." Jessica is concerned that exploitative information will be the only kind disseminated to children who are prevented from exposure to topics of sexuality.

Mishka presented an interesting solution to youth holding homophobic opinions: "I don't know how people would change. I think parents, too, they shouldn't guess who they should like and should let their kids choose who they like. I think gender neutral names and stuff would make the kid feel more comfortable and let them figure out who they were meant to be." In this way, Mishka states that youth would have more agency if parents gave children the independence to explore their gender and sexual identity. Still, I would like to mention that a parent imposing positive views of sexual minorities has a tremendous impact on the openness of youth as they grow. We saw it in how Sonni's mother brought Sonni to parties with gay individuals and she recalls,

> "As a child, I really, I remember the first time I saw a gay couple. They were men, and they had a child. I was very confused because I was young, and you don't see that very often when just walking around. […] They were very affectionate also, so it was obvious. You may not realize it when you are young. And I remember asking my mom about it, not in a judgmental way. I was just really confused. She was like, oh they are just two daddies with a kid, and she just gave the very open explanation for how different people love different ways. And I still thought it was a little strange because I hadn't seen it that much. But then I started going around that group of people more and seeing it more, and, then, I started noticing it at other places. This happened so young that it just became naturalized to me I think."

Sonni's mother and her open explanation of the gay couple educated Sonni in a way that she did not believe sexual minorities to be unacceptable deviants. Wendy also said that if she were to ever have a relationship with another woman, her parents would not care

because "they are the most open people in the world and are super liberal. A lot of their friends are gay. It doesn't even matter." Wendy has gone on to be a tremendous "straight" ally in her work at Advocate, the youth activist group at The Center.

Subcultures, discussed in the last chapter, are another great means of providing agency to youth who are not given it on a daily basis. But, as I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, the third condition Gussow and Tracy believe to be pertinent to successful destigmatization efforts requires two components. First, members must have agency, but, also, those members must not be ostracized to a point that they may not utilize that agency. It is clear that bullying must be addressed in this discussion. There is a significant amount of evidence that LGBTQ youth experience a great deal of bullying and harassment and that these actions often have horrific consequences (e.g. e.g. Diamond et. al 2011, DiFulvio 2011, Eisenberg et. al 2006, Hong et. al 2011). Therefore, programs and rules to prevent and punish bullying are essential.

It is key that in order for the stigma that is placed upon sexual minority youth to be reduced, the third condition of Gussow and Tracy's postulate must be met. There are many ways that individuals are given agency, but relationships with and responses by teachers and parents, along with bullying, are unique aspects of youth experience. It is with great optimism that exploring the impact that these areas have on sexual minority youth will give rise to a greater understanding of stigma in the population.

VIII

Existence of Career Patients: Educating Others

In Zachary Gussow and George S. Tracy's work, *Status, Ideology, and Adaptation to Stigmatized Illness: A Study of Leprosy* (1968), they introduce the concept of "career patients" (322-4). Again, Gussow and Tracy critique Goffman's theory, writing, "The theory as stated offers no possibility of any serious attempt by stigmatized individuals to destigmatize themselves" (1968:317). One of these conditions includes the existence of career patients. These career patients use their stigma in order to destigmatize themselves. To describe career patients, they state,

> "A number of patients, apparently independently of severity or visibility of symptoms, reveal their condition to society in quite open ways. In the interest of altering the public image of leprosy, which they hold as bearing the major responsibility for their discredited status and predicament in life, these patients assume the stance of educators bringing specialized information about leprosy to the public. Such *career patients* engage in a number of activities which are legitimized through the elements of the stigma theory and carry the approval of the majority of other patients" (Gussow and Tracy 1968:322).

Career patients expose their stigmatized identity in order to educate the public so that the stigma may lessen. They attempt to change the negative stereotypes and norms held by society that fuel stigma and try to relieve themselves of their discredited status. Many conditions have well-known career patients, including Magic Johnson, who has Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and Michael J. Fox, who has Parkinson's Disease.[24] Numerous career patients take the literal role of educators, giving lectures and writing books on their stigmatized identity. However, I would like to argue that I believe all people who reveal their sexual minority identity act as career patients, whether known by many or few. In my dialogues with the young adults, it is evident that a single person can affect the way another views a stigmatized population. Heinze and Horn's study on sexual minority youth's interactions with peers supported the intergroup contact theory which "suggests that contact with members of an outgroup can reduce negative attitudes and beliefs toward members of that outgroup. The hypothesis further posits that interaction between groups leads to a reduction of biased beliefs and prejudicial behavior" (Heinze and Horn 2009:938). In the study, having a lesbian or gay friend, especially if it was an intimate friend, correlated with having more positive attitudes regarding homosexuality and less tolerance towards discrimination of their identity (Heinze and Horn 2009). And, often, it does not have to be by way of directly educating them, but by revealing themselves and demonstrating that the stigma is wrongfully placed. The following instances expose the ways in which sexual minorities act as career patients in subtle ways:

Like many others, Leif described coming to college as a time of transition and growth. In his high school, there were few people who were out of the closet, but they

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[24] This is by no means a way of paralleling non-normative sexualities to a disease or condition, but, instead, to spark discussion on destigmatization.

were socially ostracized for their identity. He remembered thinking, "It's clear I do not want to come out in this town. Power to the people that did, but I just didn't have the guts to do that." Once he arrived at college, he started to wonder whether coming out and living openly gay was an option, and he began to feel that Bentonville was a place he could do that. When he was being trained to be a resident advisor for the dorm in which he lives, there was a required class about social values and identity for which he said he is still extremely grateful. His facilitator at the class was an openly gay, young man, and when the participants had to write a personal narrative on a part of their identity and share it with the rest of the group, the facilitator discussed his experience with coming out. Leif said, "Having him there, and seeing him openly talk about it and not care and see he is a good person and normal [was important to me]. I guess normalizing it was a big thing for me. My church wanted me to see that they are all social deviants, which wasn't true." It is clear that if an individual, such as Leif, is told throughout their childhood by others, such as members of a church, that being gay is a choice and one which should never be acted upon, it would be difficult to create a positive gay identity. Without exposure to other LGBTQ teens, Leif's only experiences with discussions of sexuality were through others that had demeaning and ostracizing views of gay individuals. They painted a picture in which homosexuals were seen as deviant, an identity with which he did not desire to be associated. However, encountering another male who had created a positive gay identity and did not seem to deviate greatly from social norms or differ from straight individuals in other aspects of his life gave Leif the confidence that, perhaps, he could live as an openly gay man. The exposure to this one individual influenced his thoughts on coming out.

Around the time of this training, Leif's roommate came out as well, which was a complete surprise to Leif. Regarding his roommate, he stated, "He was the last person I thought would be gay. I saw him as a really normal, boring guy. There was nothing to [my roommate] that was complex or out there." Again, although Leif had already come out to himself as a gay man, he had not had exposure to many other gay teens except through media or by word of mouth. The openly gay teens at his high school were very outspoken and flamboyant, which was most likely needed in a hostile environment, yet, he did not associate himself with that identity. Having gay friends with whom he could identify made a significant difference. Leif felt that he could not relate to many of the media representations of gay individuals, so when he met these people, he thought,

> "Wow, I could actually be gay and be comfortable with who I am, and, wow, this could be me. Before, I couldn't be an openly gay man because there are [gay] people I'd see and think 'that's not me.' End of sophomore year, shoot, I could actually do this and come out before the time I graduate college. Before, I was like, geeze, maybe I'll just never come out."

In these special cases, the career patients, each homosexual men, did not act as educators of the general public. Instead, they acted as educators of Leif, an individual with a stigmatized identity who had not gained a great deal of exposure to the diverse group of people within that identity. Gussow and Tracy do not bring attention to career patients as resources for people with leprosy, but I believe that career patients can act as comforters and educators of their own population as much as they can act as positive examples for the "normals." Populations, such as sexual minority youth, that often have an invisible stigma and use techniques such as "passing" to avoid being stigmatized are especially in need of their "own" to become career patients (Goffman 1963). With invisible stigma, one may have construed views of oneself and not have any exposure to one's own community. Career patients are needed to help their "own" recognize that there are

people they can relate to and use for support systems. As Wexler et. al state, "Negotiating the self without access to others who share similar constructions of identity is often an isolating experience" (2009:568). And what is also needed are different career patients from the same population that represent the diversity of that group.[25]

Meanwhile, career patients, specifically people who are open with their minority sexuality, help to educate "others" as well. Gertrude talked about her ex-boyfriend, someone she knew from her high school and college. She reflected, "I want to be angry with him for his attitudes, but with his upbringing and all the religious aspects of it, it would be very hard not to think the way he does given the way he grew up." In high school, he would often avoid saying anything about homosexuality because he knew it upset Gertrude. He did not approve of homosexuality in high school and was still struggling in college with his acceptance. However, one day in college, he told Gertrude that he wanted to apologize for being so hard on her in high school. In high school, he would tease her about making such a big deal about fighting for gay individuals. But, in college, he met a fellow male student that he got along with really well and, while they were both discussing relationships they had been involved in, her ex-boyfriend found out that the man was gay. She stated,

> "It was the first time he really thought about the fact that gay couples go through the same things as straight couples. They were both going through the same things but one happened to be with a boy and the other with a girl. He just said that he still doesn't quite understand how it fits in with his faith. But at the same time, he realized that [their hometown] was a terrible place for him to think about that stuff."

Gertrude described the openly gay people in her high school as extreme personalities who could be very rude, but she attributed this to their marginalized status. However, most

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[25] Again, this is not to say that all individuals should come out immediately. It is understandable that this is not a viable option for people in certain environments.

students associated their attitudes and appearances with the gay identity. If one individual fit the stereotype, she reflected, then they all did. Therefore, having exposure to a gay male who did not fit the common stereotypes found in the media or in high school helped Gertrude's former boyfriend to critically think about the issues in a more open way. Also, the fact that romantic relationships were also discussed and there were similarities found in the relationships supports the reasoning that the only significant difference between the groups is which gender and/or sex they are attracted to. Other superfluous personality traits and stereotypes may not apply to all gay individuals.

In conjunction, Leif described a student he knows through his dorm community as a "homophobic", white "jerk" from northern Michigan. He is friends with Leif's previous roommate who, I had discussed earlier, came out as gay. When that occurred, the friend was incredibly shocked, to say the least. But since he had gotten to know Leif and his roommate, Leif recalled that, "he has said that he feels completely opposite on the issue than what he used to [feel]. He's still Republican, but he is a huge ally for gay rights. Just knowing [gay] people can change your opinion." The personhood and identity that the friend had created for gay people was challenged with the knowledge of Leif's roommate's sexual identity. Instead, he was able to discern sexual identity as one of the identities of his friend and recognize that his previous views on homosexuality did not correspond with the personhood of his friend.

High-school freshman Jessica also talked with me about a gay individual that helped her to become open minded as she grew up, but, in this instance, the person happened to be a close relative: her uncle. She described how her dad's side is Catholic and "no one on that side of the family accepts him. Well, [they] don't accept that he's

gay. They'll accept him, but they don't accept that he is gay." She said her immediate family is the only portion of the family that is accepting of him. She told a story of when her extended family members sent out a mass email for an upcoming family reunion. When she did not see the uncle and his partner on the email list, her mother assumed they must have forgotten, so she sent it back, adding his email. But, later, her family members deleted it again. Jessica reflected, "When we have our reunions, they [her uncle and his partner] stop by for only a really short period of time because you know you don't want to be somewhere where you aren't accepted." She discussed her openness to me and stated,

> "A lot of it was [because of] my uncle. Just seeing the way my family would treat him, I didn't get that. And my parents were always so open about it, and my mom, she can usually tell if someone is gay, and she initially asked my dad if he was gay the first time they met and he was like 'No! Why would you say that?' But he actually is. And it was really interesting. She didn't care if he was or not. And I don't care if he is or not. I love him. He's my uncle."

The rest of her extended family does not think about the issue or express their feelings on it. Her grandmother will acknowledge his partner, for instance, but will not acknowledge who he is. She simply sees him as Jessica's uncle's friend.

Finally, when Captain came out to their parents recently, they said that their parents already had a suspicion of their identity. Captain described them as not surprised. They just responded without any intense reaction and "went on to other things." However, when I asked about why they believed their parents were so accepting of their identity, which was my first impression as they described their reaction, Captain responded,

> "They haven't really talked about it. They haven't really discussed it with me. […It happened] really recent, actually. So they will probably bring it up eventually. I know that when they watch the news and something about gay rights on, they just get silent and watch it intently when before, they were just

like, oh, it doesn't pertain to me. I think it kind of hit them, like this is important."

Captain's identity, both as an agender individual attracted to females and as their parent's child, forced their parents to pay attention more closely to issues of equality with which they may not have familiarized themselves before.

In each of these narratives, "out" sexual minorities did not need to write novels, give lectures, or even take the time to teach their peers. Being open with their identity challenged others to question their current norms and misunderstandings, already beginning the destigmatization process. As Gussow and Tracy state, these career patients can use their position to "effect a transformation in society's attitudes toward their deviant groups" (1968:324). And while there are famous celebrities, such as Ellen Degeneres or Elton John, who can act as career patients for this population, I believe being able to relate to another person and have face-to-face interactions with them can help greatly, even if on a small scale.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that another type of career patient must be in existence in order for destigmatization theories to develop, specifically for sexual minority youth. We have discussed career patients as members of the LGBTQ community that expose their identities, but there must also be members of the "wise" to act as career patients. These members can also be fearful, as mentioned previously, of exposing themselves because they may obtain a "courtesy stigma" due to their association with the stigmatized (Goffman 1963:30). These individuals may not be able to truly understand the plight of the victimized, but because of their inclusivity with the "normals," their great number, and their ability to lend support to sexual minorities, I believe it is important for straight individuals who support LGBTQ persons to act as

career patients as well. Instead of being a career patient for LGBTQ persons, they act as career patients for straight allies. Instances of their positive effect are reflected in the subsequent narratives:

Gertrude attributed her openness and acceptance of gay individuals to her very liberal brother, who is "much older and much wiser." Her parents would never discuss sexuality and since they embodied traditional, Chinese values, she would not have been comfortable coming out to them, if that was the case. She stated, "When they heard that people were gay, they weren't rude about it and say, 'That's disgusting,' but they were clearly uncomfortable and would think, 'That's a shame that would happen.' Maybe the tolerance was from them, but straight-up tolerance is a little different than embracing. Embracing came from my brother." She is still not sure of how her brother became a "rabid" liberal in such a small, conservative town, but she said she "was conditioned by him and his rambling." She described herself as inherently conscious of using certain words or phrases to describe individuals, but it took her an extended period of time to figure out why and reason with it. She told me,

> "I personally in high school was never attracted to any girls so it wasn't a personal conflict, but I was really adamant about it, but didn't really piece together why. I think it was the same with sexism or racism. I had a feeling why it was upsetting to me or why it was wrong but it took me a really long time to articulate it, and I'm still trying to figure it out now."

Yet Gertrude went on to tell the story of a close friend of hers in high school that might have helped to ignite her passion on the subject. Through high school, they were close friends, and she described him as a very flamboyant male who was one of the very few openly gay individuals in the high school. At first, he was not out, but did not necessarily correct people if they assumed his homosexual identity. One day, she recalled, he finally

began to say it himself. While discussing why she would get upset with derogatory terms

or feel the need to fight against discrimination based on sexuality, she reflected,

> "For me, it was fueled a lot by the fact that I felt I like I had to personally defend
> my friend. Because I would feel that they were personally attacking him
> whenever they were saying those things. I didn't even know some of the stuff he
> went through though until later on, like therapy and I heard some pretty nasty
> comments about what the boys would say, but I never actually knew the extent of
> it until he began to talk about it."

This unique example brings to light of the "snowball effect" of career patients. At first,

Gertrude's brother acted as a career patient for the "wise," effectively opening Gertrude's

mind and changing her norms from that of her surrounding public. Then, once she had

exposure to a friend, who could be considered a career patient for the LGBTQ

community, she became another career patient for the "wise." I believe that this

contagion effect could contribute greatly to widespread destigmatization.

When I inquired about Mishka's openness, she responded nonchalantly saying, "I

don't know, I just thought, who cares really?" Then, when I asked about her family, she

told a story about how she once called her dad during "acceptance week" and asked him

what he would think if she was a lesbian as she cried on the phone. She described herself

as bicurious, and at the time of the call, she had just begun to feel that she may have

feelings for women. He said that it would be alright and that "whatever [she] is, he still

loves [her]." She said that he felt this way even though he is "a Christian, a hard core

Christian" who lives in a very small town in Kentucky.   She credited his openness to the

fact that he has a best friend from Ohio who is gay. She described him as "a really nice

guy and like any other guy." She had been around him several times during her

childhood and remembered going on a trip to Cedar Point with him and his ex-partner.

She believed that this exposure allowed her father to create a positive attitude towards her

sexuality. Wendy and Sonni also shared sentiments about how their parents helped them in their acceptance of sexual minorities at a young age. Wendy described her parents as "super liberal." and in regards to her ever having a relationship with another woman, they would not care. When many of her friends happened to be gay, Wendy discussed their coming out as not even phasing her. In addition, Sonni remembered the distinct moment when her mom influenced her attitude towards gay individuals by explaining the loving relationship of the two gay men. Sonni detailed the ways in which her mom exposed her to many different types of people during her childhood. She often credited her mother for her openness to all different forms of love. Sonni's childhood experiences helped to naturalize the concept of sexualities and personalities outside of the heterosexual norm.

Meanwhile, Captain's experience with coming out was greatly influenced by exposure to a supportive heterosexual friend, not a member of the LGBTQ community. Captain recalled a close friend who had noticed that in GSA meetings, Captain would never refer to themselves as an ally. Therefore, one day, out of curiosity, the friend asked Captain if they are gay. Captain recalled,

> "She was the first person I came out to, and she has been really supportive. And she kind of gave me the strength to come out to my other friends. I knew, she told me, if they don't accept you for who you are, you might as well not be friends with them, [and] same thing with my family. They are your family, and they should love you no matter what."

In their case, Captain was supported by a heterosexual friend that allowed them to feel comfortable with their identity. This example demonstrates that not only having contact with other sexual minorities, but also encouraging heterosexual teens who surround these individuals to be supportive can have a great impact on a person's coming out experience.

Whether it is a formerly closeted gay man being exposed to another gay man with whom he can identify, an agender individual supported by a heterosexual friend, or a woman with fluid sexuality experiencing a childhood of diversity with her mother, these narratives demonstrate the ability of single individuals to shape and influence the outlooks and future of sexual minorities. It needs to be understood that, often, it does not take great numbers of people or millions of dollars in resources to help sexual minority youth create a positive identity for themselves. The narratives regarding career patients, both of the LGBTQ and "wise" variety, support Gussow and Tracy's proposition that their existence must be in place to create a movement of destigmatization.

IX

Environment: Dependent on Context

Gussow and Tracy studied stigma among a group of individuals with leprosy in a facility in Carville, Louisiana. While their analysis of stigma can be broadly applied to many populations, I would like to add to their theory how stigma operates in different environments.[26] In the paper, I have examined the difficulties of sexual minority youth through the frameworks of two major, extant stigma theories. I would like to propose that all aspects of sexual minority youth experience that have been discussed thus far are dependent upon environment. The essential factor that affects all facets of the complex problem is environment. Whether it is the existence of a subculture of like others, giving a discredited individual agency, the presence of feelings of inferiority, or any other concept I have mentioned previously, there is a spectrum along which they all affect

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[26] The fact that Gussow and Tracy only study one population in one place is not meant to discredit their work. Most research, including mine, looks at limited populations but creates theories that can be applied to other individuals. It is my goal to bring attention to how their conditions work in various environments. (Credit to Dr. Holly Peters-Golden for clarifying this.)

these individuals based upon their surroundings and context. However, environment is a generic and vague term. Instead, differing micro, meso, and macro environments in an individual's life must be considered. This concept is reflected in Jun Sung Hong et. al's article *Understanding suicide among sexual minority youth in America: An ecological systems analysis* (2011). In the article, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which "conceptualizes the ecological environment or the context in which a social phenomenon occurs, as a set of 'nested structures,'" is used by Hong et. al to understand the risk factors of suicide for sexual minority youth (Hong et al. 2011:2; Bronfenbrenner 1994). However, instead of environments, they look at different systems, ranging from micro-systems, which includes parental support, for example, to macro-systems, such as societal homophobia (Hong et. al 2011). Similarly, I contend that micro-environments might include the home, for instance, while a macro-environment could include the city in which one lives. In order for a young adult to be able to destigmatize their identity, most of the environments of which they are part must be supportive of their identity. The discrepancy between negative and positive environments hinders their ability to live a happy life and destigmatize their sexual identity. This concept will be explored in this chapter, which largely focuses on the comparison between the liberal area near which the participants live and other places where they have either grown up or visited.

In Leif's new, more liberal college town, he feels safe and open, and he "wasn't used to that growing up." In high school, he did not feel comfortable revealing his sexual identity. He had heard some of the derogatory language used by his classmates, especially fellow members of the swim team, and knew that he was not ready to reveal that particular part of himself. He would hear the comments of his peers regarding the

few out people in his school, and he did not want the same remarks to be said about him, so he chose to stay closeted. Back at home, a next-door neighbor once told him that "if any of my friends are gay, I'm going to kill them." While at the moment, Leif just accepted that they would never be friends, he recalled that "sometimes it was a scary place to grow up and be gay." Coming to college, he felt that he could be comfortable coming out. The differing levels of stigma in different towns or cities represent the variance in macroenvironments. In more liberal towns, people may be more open to revealing themselves, there may be more resource centers, and the general public may be much more accepting of sexual minorities. Captain reaffirmed this as they discussed living in the same town as Leif. Captain stated that they enjoy living in Bentonville,[27] especially because it is considered one of the most liberal, if not the most liberal, cities in the Midwest. When talking about Bentonville's environment, Captain revealed, "I heard from people in Advocate, because there are people from Arrington [a town approximately 30 minutes away from Bentonville], and they confirmed that Bentonville is a little bubble and once you leave, it's bad." Later in the conversation, they added that they felt comfortable coming out because of their environment: "Bentonville is really cool. And my friends are all really liberal and cool and everything. But I feel that if I lived in Arrington, I wouldn't come out." Wendy, also a member of Advocate, discussed the same phenomenon: "I always forget how different Bentonville is. When I see kids from other places, it's just so different. No one knows what's going on." Growing up 25 minutes away from Bentonville, I understand how little distance can make a significant difference as far as openness about sexual minority groups. When I asked Cam whether he has a relationship with the sexual minority community, he responded, "I do, but I

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[27] All towns and schools have pseudonyms, as mentioned earlier.

always forget that they are [sexual minorities]. In Bentonville, people are more accepted." It seems as if the open environment also aids in lessening the idea of deviance. And while the macroenvironment that someone lives in may be accepting, we must remember that other environments, such as their school or home environment may not be as welcoming, and vice versa. Also, towns and cities cannot be treated as a homogeneous group, of course. Wendy points out that although Bentonville is a liberal town, it has conservative citizens as well: "Obviously, Bentonville is a high-income city, so there are quite a bit of rich conservatives, and a lot of [their] kids go to Waters [High School]. So there are a lot of conservatives." This is reflected in the school population, she stated, as well.

High school is another environment that sexual minorities need to navigate on a daily basis. While I do not have narratives from high school students outside of Bentonville, even the differences between high schools in the town are significant. For instance, Jessica attends a high school called Robertson, which is known for its open curriculum and environment. The QSA is prominent there, they have a gender studies class that is always in high demand, and there are numerous people who are openly gay or transgender. Jessica stated, "High school is a lot better than I thought it would be. In the movies, everything bad happens in high school. But I think, especially since I go to Robertson, the bad stuff is a lot less [prevalent] here. There isn't really as much bullying or stuff like that. And there are less people. The […] teachers really respect you, and the kids respect each other." She continued, "I think Robertson is like that, it's safer and people are more open. […] And I don't think people are scared to talk about [sexuality] here. Some people might be, but I think it is a more talked about subject than it would be

at other schools." Jessica is an expert on the differences between the schools because although Robertson is her main school, she also attends two other high schools in the area for other classes and extracurricular activities. At one of the other schools, she said she would hear "gay" used in a derogatory manner much more often, and at the other, she says that the kids were "horrible." She finds a significant difference regarding the respect the teachers give the students as well. Wendy and Mishka, both students at one of the high schools, reported that teachers are not very open about the issues, and Mishka could only recall one or two students who are completely out. In conjunction with her earlier comment, Wendy stated, "Well, there is a large part of the school that is really conservative, and they are the really kind of popular kids, and everyone is afraid of them." Furthermore, when I asked Mishka whether she would feel comfortable going out with someone of the same sex, she stated, "I'm not sure. Maybe with friends but not at school." I inquired further and asked if she attended Robertson, would she feel more comfortable. She responded, "Yeah, I would be a lot more open." Therefore, even within a more accepting macroenvironment, such as Bentonville, the high schools within it can differ greatly. Thus, while it may seem that a sexual minority youth in Bentonville would feel comfortable destigmatizing themselves, their microenvironments may not allow themselves to do so. Additionally, school has more microenvironments embedded within it. A study found that peers were more comfortable with gay and lesbian students on student council, for instance, but were less comfortable having a gay student in their gym class or as a roommate on an overnight trip (Horn and Nucci 2003). The less personal the context, the more comfort the other students felt. Therefore, sexual minority students may feel more victimized in different contexts within one environment.

Furthermore, extracurricular environments also seem to play a major role in the agency of sexual minority youth. If one environment is not as welcoming, there are other environments in which youth find solidarity. For instance, as I have discussed in previous chapters, resource centers, specifically the activist groups within them, and GSAs act as microenvironments that are highly supportive of differing sexual identities. Captain, Jessica, Mishka, Wendy, Cam, and Sonni all expressed their positive feelings towards the organizations and groups of which they have been a part. These microenvironments provide an escape from other environments in which they feel stigmatized, and, also, the organizations give them the opportunity to destigmatize their identity. Jessica discussed with me a fine arts camp that she attends during the summer, and stated, "The people at [camp] are really accepting. There are a lot of gay kids that go there, and they are really accepting. So I've talked to some friends up there about it." She continued to tell me how much she enjoys the camp because of its welcoming environment and the open friends she has made there.

Reflecting on environment, when I inquired how to make the bullying situation non-existent for sexual minority youths, Wendy responded, "If you were in an environment with a lot of people that don't relate to who you are, I guess one of the best things to do is to find a new environment. Switch schools to where it is more accepting. That's what I would do in that situation." However, this is very much a downstream solution to the problem. Of course, if the harassment was significant, it is wise to move to a different environment. Nevertheless, there is a need for a combination of upstream and downstream solutions. Youth must be saved immediately if they are in danger, but the environments must be changed as well. It is the difference between finding a Band-

Aid for the problem or finding the source of the problem so that it does not occur again. Both are beneficial. An example of this includes schools having policies that state, for instance, "If bullying happens again, we will stop it" versus trying to create a more open environment so that bullying will not occur at all. It takes great effort, but changing the attitudes of individuals will help the overall fight for reducing stigma. A *Time* magazine article from October 24, 2011 sparks discussion on this predicament. In the article, *A Separate Peace?*, the Alliance School in Milwaukee is featured. An "overtly gay-friendly charter school," the Alliance School is a progressive program where bullied adolescents find comfort. In the article, it states, "While only about half of Alliance's 165-member student body identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), nearly all were bullied or harassed at their previous schools" (Webley 2011:42).[28] Ritch Savin-Williams, a researcher at Cornell University who has a great deal of experience studying gay youth, was quoted in the article as stating, "Being segregated doesn't help gay kids learn, it doesn't help bullies learn. […] All it does is relieve the school and the teachers of responsibility. It's a lose-lose situation all around" (Webley 2012:44). Even the gay community itself has shown resistance to creating other unique schools, stating that the programs would shelter the students and leave them unprepared to face some of the stigmatization from the outside world when they graduate (Webley 2012:46). Of course, the health and well-being of a teenager must be placed above all other priorities, and it is understood that if many of the students did not move, the consequences could have been tragic. However, the argument stands that for long-term change, environments must change as well. Kelby, a 16-year-old woman who identifies as lesbian, is one of the

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[28] It would be interesting to see how the LGBTQ youth and straight youth in this community interact. Perhaps there is solidarity found in being bullied or stigmatized, no matter the cause.

youth featured in the new documentary "Bully." A resident of a small town, Tuttle, Oklahoma, she has faced horrible discrimination and abuse, even being forced to leave her sports teams. Although her parents have offered to leave the town, she has decided to stay, with the support of her girlfriend and friends, in order to make a change (The Bully Project).

Gussow and Tracy did not explore how their population navigated their stigma in multiple environments. The patients were in close proximity to each other for great periods of time, and this collective movement could have aided in destigmatization. Therefore, I would like to add to their conditions that in order for destigmatization to occur, most of the multiple environments of which one is a member must be supportive of their identity. Environment is the key variable that affects all other variables we have discussed. In open environments, subcultures are more likely to arise, more career patients exist and feel comfortable revealing themselves, members can be more militant without great ramifications, and sexual minorities have more agency. Whether it is in the home, at school, or in the middle of a town, the environment affects the intensity of stigma a person experiences and their ability to push back against it.

Section Three

The Future

While I have tried to bring prominent stigma theories into the 21st century in the context of sexual minority youth, I want to advocate for the progression of stigma theory. Two of the first major waves of stigma theory have been explored, and hopefully my analysis may lead to a new, third wave of stigma theory that is applicable to the present, while building on the old theory. This section will focus on the future of this research topic. There are numerous subjects that I wish to address, but do not have the time to give justice and explore to their deserved depth. There are also other questions which I do not have the resources to answer at this time, and I would like to offer these open-ended concepts for further examination. The hope is that there are others who will be able to conduct future research on these issues. Before I conclude, I would like to take the time to propose the topics that I believe will contribute greatly to the understanding of stigma in sexual minority youth today. As an example, in Chapter Three, I describe how further research on the support of straight allies could benefit destigmatization efforts greatly. This section will contain a single chapter with different subsections including media and Internet, new categories and norms, romantic relationships, difference to normalcy, and, finally, activism and change of self.

X

Third Wave of Stigma Theory

The following are ways that a "third wave of stigma theory" could be expanded upon:

Media and Internet

When Goffman and Gussow and Tracy were creating their stigma theory, the Internet was not even in existence. It is hard to imagine life without the Internet during this day and age. The rise of mass media and the Internet has completely changed the way we communicate and disseminate ideas. It surely has had an impact on the ways sexual minorities have communicated with each other and the ways they try to create destigmatization movements. Resources can now reach massive numbers of people. There are now gay characters and celebrities on television. It seems as if the media could be used as a great tool for reducing the discrimination of sexual minority youth, or it could lead to further stigma. The following narratives expose experiences that the young adults in my study have had with the media:

Emily discussed exposure of teens to information on LGBTQ issues, and states, "the stuff you hear about sexuality in the media is not very refined. And that is all you hear when you are in high school. You should learn more about the world." The media can play a crucial role, either negative or positive, in teens' understanding of sexual minorities. For instance, if one lives in a conservative town that does not have any "out" gay people, one of the only ways for that person to construct an opinion of an LGBTQ individual is what they view in the media. Without healthy representation of such individuals, the member of the conservative town may create an identity for the gay community that can be destructive or discriminatory. Gertrude reflected on this:

> "But the thing is, like people in [my hometown], the media is the only exposure they have to this, and they [the media] don't do it right, which, let's be real, they don't most of the time. Then, they [people from her hometown] are not going to get it. As much as I roll my eyes that shows like Glee have gay characters, I think it might actually be impacting the youth because it conditions them to think about it."

Exposure to gay individuals who have stable friendships and relationships on television or in the press can open numerous minds. Organizations such as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) work towards this goal. Yet a number of my participants also discussed how television shows poorly reflect on the sexual minority community. They describe how television only shows "stereotypical" gay characters. While I believe we need to challenge the idea that certain characteristics are "negative" stereotypes in the sexual minority community, I understand the need for the portrayal of the diversity of sexual minorities so that the "stereotypical" behavior is not the only exposure that straight individuals have to their sexual minority peers. It can also provide a greater sense of comfort if the media represents an individual with whom one can identify. For instance, Leif said that meeting gay individuals who he could relate to had a

significant influence in his coming out process. He felt that he could not identify with many of the media representations of gay individuals. He would often think, "That's not me." The sexual minority community is very diverse; sexual orientation is only one of their many identities.

The media has a great impact on the exposure of the public to the LGBTQ community, but it also needs to be used as an accurate resource to depict the type of bullying that occurs in schools and other environments. Many of my informants told me that bullying in their school was different than that which was portrayed in the media:

> "It was not openly hostile in the sense that anybody would…I guess I don't know because the situation never occurred, but I would be shocked if someone attacked someone violently. There wasn't gay bashing in the very outward sense that you always see dramatized in T.V. shows. It was the day-to-day, 'Oh wow that's so gay,' and 'What a fag," and reinforcing gender roles and tying it into sexuality. 'Way to carry a purse you fag.' [It was] very much that kind of hostile environment, not angry, outward hostility." – Gertrude

> "It wasn't really ever talked about. I don't have much to go off of because I went to one high school, so I don't have an actual other experience. But from what I see in the movies, which I know aren't always accurate, they [her peers] were a lot more accepting. But still, some people got made fun of." – Sarah

> "Not in-your-face kind of bullying that you see on T.V. I don't think I've seen that kind of bullying ever. But more of like behind-your-back [bullying], just talking about them." - Wendy

This is not to diminish the importance of exposing people to the ramifications of physical bullying against sexual minority youth, as that, of course, occurs. But there are other, much more subtle, ways that youth feel stigmatized, and it seems as if the ways in which they are bullied are not wholly accurate in media representations. As previously mentioned, a new documentary, "Bully," follows the lives of youth, and family of youth, who have been severely bullied. With the help of Katy Butler, the hope is that it will give a more accurate portrayal of the plight of a diverse group of teens, including those who

are sexual minorities. Furthermore, music and music artists are another aspect of the media that were discussed in regards to activism. Jessica stated,

> "Lady Gaga, I'm not a big fan of her music, but she is a huge activist for gay rights. That's what I like about her. I like that. Not all musicians are going to do that. For instance, Eminem uses fag in a lot of his songs. He says that is because of how he grew up, and he doesn't have anything against gay people. But he still shouldn't use that or say it, even if that he was raised thinking it is an okay word. It is not something that is okay. […] The more popular stuff, there is nothing 'gay' in it."

In the last sentence, Jessica is commenting on the fact that there is often little language in music that depicts people declaring love for someone of the same sex. Music as a media outlet can also contribute to the stigma that is felt by marginalized communities, or, as Jessica stated regarding Lady Gaga, the artists behind the music can use their celebrity to destigmatize marginalized populations.

Additionally, the Internet may play a major role in the stigmatization of sexual minority youth. Of course, the Internet has allowed for the mass dissemination of information and resources for the sexual minority community. Large organizations, such as the HRC, GLAAD, The Trevor Project, and various other resource centers, have information on benefits, coming out, politics, religion, etc. One can donate to a cause or find numbers for support hotlines. There are support systems and groups for teens to express themselves and ask questions. People can also navigate these without revealing themselves. If used positively, the Internet can be a major resource for the education of others about the LGBT community. It can also be of great use to create destigmatization movements. However, the ease with which individuals can be stigmatized and ostracized has also increased via the Internet. While there are greater sanctions against public humiliation of sexual minorities today, there are ways that people can stigmatize others without dire consequences. The role of the Internet, and specifically, social networking

sites, is a new area of study that could contribute to the third wave of stigma theory.

Jessica reflected,

> "I think in some ways, media is helping. You see stories about people saying
> something and a teacher saying, 'You can't say that about gay people.' And,
> then, that gets a lot of attention and stuff, and I think that is good. But it can also
> be bad, like on Facebook, people say whatever they want, and they have no
> censorship. 'That was really gay,' or 'I don't like that.' I think that's bad."

She continued, "They put teachers in the halls to stop bullying, but it doesn't happen in

the halls. It happens a lot outside of school and online. A lot of stuff happens online.

They won't say a person's name, but they might be like, 'They are so gay, I hate this

person.' It's so horrible." The defamation of youth, as Jessica stated, could be quite

heavy on social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr. Tyler Clementi,

a former student at Rutgers, committed suicide after his roommate posted a video online

of Tyler being intimate with another man (New York Times 2012). Justin Aaberg,

another young man who committed suicide, received horrible messages on his Facebook

after coming out, even from people he did not know, "telling him he was a fag who didn't

deserve to live" (Webley 2012:55). Obviously, the new ways information can be

disseminated, such as through the Internet, needs to be analyzed in the field of stigma

theory.

New Categories and Norms

Next, new categories that have been created in the sexual minority community

and new norms in the greater public should be explored further. One unique case in my

study is that of Captain. For their gender identity, they described themselves as agender.

"I don't really feel like I belong to any gender category," they stated. Meanwhile, for

their sexual identity they said, "I would say I'm [attracted to] females." When I asked

about whether or not they define themselves as having a certain sexuality, they reflected,

"I don't know. I'm fine with 'gay.' If I had to, I would say that." Born biologically female, their name given to them at birth was one that is often associated with females; therefore, they chose to change their name to sound more gender neutral. Furthermore, while Captain had stated that they were aware of their sexual identity in the eighth grade, I asked when they began to realize that their gender identity was different from the one that they had been assumed to have at birth. Captain said that they began to have the realization "probably near the end of last year [sophomore year]. I joined Advocate then. And they have this thing when you introduce yourself. You say your name, your school, and your preferred gender pronouns. And I just kind of thought I don't really identify with a 'she,' so I have been using 'they.'" Surprisingly, when I asked if Captain had anything to add to the issue that they hoped would be included in the study, they said, "Just that gender-neutral bathrooms need to become a thing. I know [the university] has a couple, but in public places, I'm kind of like, 'Which one do I go in?'" I inquired whether once they began to question their gender identity, had they ever felt transgender, and they responded, "There was like a time where I considered starting to be 'he,' but it is kind of like with the 'she:' eh, this doesn't really fit." As Captain exemplifies, youth today are feeling more comfortable with living their lives in the sexual and gender categories in which they believe they are meant to be. They feel the freedom to not define their sexuality and allow themselves to discover it in due time. As Gertrude pointed out, both sexuality and gender as spectrums is the new norm that many youth feel needs to be in place. Newer categories such as agender or questioning are often unrecognizable to the greater public, but perhaps their exposure is the next step to destigmatizing the fluidity of sexuality. In addition, new norms in society must be taken

into context when creating innovative stigma theory. The norms that Goffman was working with are much different than those today. For instance, the formation of family has changed over the past half-century. Neither Leif nor I recall growing up with any friends with gay parents. Yet much has changed, even in one generation. Gay parents with young children today have become much more visible.

Romantic Relationships

As an invisible stigma, non-heterosexual orientations could be concealed an individual's entire life. Yet it has been found that many youth are starting to come out in late middle school (Poteat et. al 2009). The ability to express love and live an emotionally satisfying life is of fundamental importance to people. While sexual identity is only a part of the self, it is an essential part of the self. People must deal with their sexuality on a daily basis. It is a basic characteristic that helps to shape our interaction and feeling towards others. If attacked, a fundamental part of the self is attacked. The consequences of doing so are, as evidenced, tragic. And it is not only attraction that is at stake, but also the whole basis of who one loves, a critical part of life, is burdened. There are many youth who desire to be in relationships, but may not be able to be if they have not revealed their identity. I believe it is important to examine how sexual minority youth develop relationships and how their relationships are affected by stigma. Unfortunately, "romantic problems have been found to be among the most common triggers for suicide attempts by sexual minority youths" (Diamond and Lucus 2004:316). Today, more young people are in open, same-sex relationships and the positive affects of being in a loving relationship, and the repercussions of being in a same-sex relationship

at a young age in this society, need to be explored further. The following narratives are ways that the young adults discussed their relationships:

Leif's mood seemed to lift as he talked about Christmas break when he brought his boyfriend home for the first time, and he went to see his boyfriend's family for the first time as well. He had dated his boyfriend for five months before coming out to his parents, so the level of comfort had not always been so high. Yet, during break, both families received them with open arms. Recalling the experience, he said, "It feels nice to be able to talk about it now and not the first thing that comes to mind is 'what are you hiding from your parents?'" On another note, Leif met his boyfriend in his dorm, and both were resident advisors of the same house. They immediately became good friends, but both wanted more than friendship. When he began to come out in the fall, his boyfriend was the fifth person he told, and, soon after, they began to date. Leif's boyfriend's coming out story was almost identical, but occurred one year before, so Leif felt he had a model which he could follow. They have been dating for a year and three months, and "it has gone really well."

Captain is also currently in a relationship with another person from a different local high school. They met at The Center, and it is the first relationship for both. When they described their significant other, Captain said, "They are also gender neutral. So it's kind of cool. […] Our one month anniversary is coming up." Captain actually utilized their relationship to aid with coming out to their parents. They broached the subject by asking if their parents knew their partner and told them that they are now together. Most of Captain's friends know, as well. They began their relationship shortly after sitting by each other at Advocate one Friday night. Their friends had been talking about them from

a distance away and both groups of friends had commented to each of them that they thought they were "cute together." The next time they saw each other, Captain's significant other asked them out for coffee. Discussing how it can often be difficult to find another person to be in a relationship with as a sexual and/or gender minority youth, Captain said, "It was definitely easier because of Advocate. I think if I just had high school, it would be really, really hard because you never want to assume someone's sexuality. And it would be kind of awkward if you asked someone out and they didn't [feel that way]."

When I asked Mishka if she would be open to being in a relationship with someone of the same sex, she stated, "I would actually like to explore. There is a girl that I actually kind of like right now, but I'm not sure. [It's] difficult to tell if they are bi or like you back. I'm not sure. Sometimes they act like they like me back, so I don't know. I'm sort of in a friendship and stuck in the friend zone right now." Emily discussed this concept as well. She said sexuality is a very "basic" thing, and that if an individual is severely rejected by someone who they like, and perhaps even distanced themselves from that person, it can have "a really strong impact on someone. You are really putting yourself out there. And being rejected in that way and knowing it is just because of your sexuality would have a really strong impact."

In the first two narratives, both Leif and Captain had relationships before coming out to their parents. This is an interesting point, as sexual minority youth may feel comfort in having a supportive significant other before undergoing the coming out process. Also, it may make them feel more secure in trying to reveal their stigmatized identity and fight against prejudice. Next, both Captain and Mishka explore the difficulty

of determining someone's sexuality. This is a possible struggle for sexual minority youth who desire to be in relationships. Heterosexuality is often assumed, and because it is a majority identity, it is much easier for heterosexual youth to begin a relationship with an individual they care about. However, sexual minority youth may not be able to control who they like or love, but the person's sexuality must be compatible with their own. Because it is an invisible identity, it can be difficult to ascertain. And, as Emily remarked, it can be extremely painful to be rejected on the basis of one's sexuality.

Sonni's past relationships, specifically her relationship with Hope in middle school, is one that depicts many of the difficulties of being in a romantic relationship as a sexual minority youth. She has had healthy relationships with people of both genders since then, but her relationship with Hope had many of the nuances that relate to stigma and are important to underscore in sexual minority youth relationships. The struggles of hiding a relationship and receiving significant discrimination from parents are extra hardships that may be placed on sexual minority youth. Some specific aspects of stigma regarding being in relationships with a person of the same sex are unique to sexual minority youth and need to be explored further.

Different to Normal?

Another area of study that could contribute to the third wave of stigma theory is the shift of how minority sexual status is categorized. In Goffman's work, it was seen as inferior. In Gussow and Tracy's work, the stigmatized desired to change their identity from inferior to different. Now, it seems that youth may long to change sexual minority orientation from different to normal. It should be noted that there is backlash from individuals who do not consider normality an adequate goal (Warner 1999).

Destigmatization does not necessarily imply being absorbed into the main. Yet, in my narratives, there is a great deal of evidence that points to a shift from being considered "different" to "normal." It seems that their greatest destigmatization strategy is to not even include it as a difference of value, although it is a difference from the majority. Perhaps it is a difference that should not be considered outside of the norm. It is hard to ignore the numerous accounts in my narratives in which my informants desire for sexual minorities, or their behavior, to be viewed as normal:

Earlier, Leif reflected on the desire to have his mother reach a point where she understood that his identity was something that he embraced and found unique. It would seem that Leif was cherishing his sexual orientation as an identity that is different, not necessarily normalizing it. Yet, numerous times during our conversation, he brought up the concept of normalizing sexual minority identity. He said it was important to him to "normalize" it after he had been taught it was a deviance by his church, and when he described educating others on LGBTQ issues, he stated that it was important to teach them that "we are real people and normal." Sonni shared the same sentiments, stating,

> "I know for me personally, I mean I don't know this, but I think the fact that I was exposed to all different types of people at a young age helped me know that it was okay and that is was normal. It really affected my thinking about all different types of people. Okay, we're all normal. And I really think those people who are taught from a young age that this is not normal and this is not okay are much more likely to believe it is not normal and it is not okay."

Captain discussed when they first came to terms with their sexuality, revealing, "I guess at first, I was just like, why can't I be normal? This is really difficult." Sexual minority youths feel that if they were considered normal, then their stigma would be reduced, just as passing people reap the benefits of being considered normal. Mishka and others felt that bullying occurs because sexual minorities are not considered "normal." Jessica even

related this to relationships, saying, "They don't actually know what it's like. It's just the same as a guy and girl together." Thinking of same-sex relationships in a frame of difference is how Jessica explained others' misconceptions. Gertrude, a straight ally, stated her reason behind victimization of sexual minorities as, "Because they're different. Because they are a minority. Why is any minority bullied or terrorized or marginalized? Because they are in the minority." Meanwhile, Cam also stated that in order for the situation to get better, people should "tell them about what it is. Understand who they are. How they aren't different and how they are different." Therefore, there is a slight discrepancy between the opinion of whether showing difference and uniqueness or attempting normalcy is the correct mode of destigmatization. After all, stigma is defined as "undesired difference," or, as I would like to say, invalid difference. It seems that to rid oneself of stigma, people are choosing either to change it into a valid difference, or get rid of the difference completely.

However, perhaps youth do not hope to be part of the "normal," because as we have explored, there are many attempts to change the norm. Instead, youth may just desire to expand the norm so that they may be included. Sonni said this best:

> "I think it's becoming better. I think it's slowly becoming better. I think our generation, just like with racism or anything else, I think our generation, our generation of normal, straight, white people – the group of normal is growing and becoming more of an inclusive category. Fifty years ago, maybe longer, it was much harder than it is now. I think it has become much easier, and I think that is because of education and more experiences and talking with people and realizing that they are people. Gay people are just people. Trans people are just people. They are just people with different experiences based on how they feel. That is how we all are."

Again, it may not be that there is a desire to be absorbed into the main, but, instead, a desire to change the norm so that minority sexuality will not be considered a deviance. If we are to agree with Gussow and Tracy, and we have shown that their theory is very

applicable to sexual minority youth today, it is not that marginalized communities simply fight to be accepted as a member of the "normal"; they fight to change norms and attitudes. The distinction is important.

Other: Activism and Change of Self

Finally, there are two other, brief ideas I would like to propose. First, how youth are a part of activism and what types of activism in which they participate to destigmatize themselves should be explored. While Internet and mass media have helped reach millions of people, they may have also decreased the amount of direct action demonstrations groups perform. One of the main types of activism today involves online petitions, for instance. No longer are there many direct action events, such as the ones that were conducted by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), one of the pioneers of the concept. Yet, again, youth may not have the agency or independence to be a part of such acts. Furthermore, while stigma is in no way positive for a marginalized community, I would like to bring to light another premise put forward by Gussow and Tracy. Gussow and Tracy discuss how certain leprosy patients who do not look as if they have the disease may be the best individuals to present information. But they state, "At the same time, there is a paradox in that these individuals are the very ones who could most easily 'pass' and thereby minimize social rejection. That they do not choose this path is a comment on the fact that stigma may provide the basis for a total self-conception" (1968:323). In the face of stigma, especially when sexual minority youth choose to reveal themselves when they do not need to, there is a possibility that a person's perception of their "self" is created from or influenced by their fight against stigma. It may make them believe that they are a stronger, more independent individual,

for instance. Their sexual identity may become a more prominent part of themselves. Whichever way this premise works, it would be interesting to examine how stigma affects the youth's perceptions of themselves and if, because of their plight, they have become a so-called "new" or "better" person.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the stigmatization of sexual minority youth in order to contribute to progressive ideas on how to reduce it. And it is with great hope that this paper exposed narratives and analysis that will provoke new thinking towards extant and future theories on stigma. I have put forward the numerous ways in which sexual minority youth experience their stigma and fight against it as well. Both Erving Goffman and Zachary Gussow and George Tracy's works were used to conceptualize stigma of LGBTQ adolescents in current context, and from these arguments one can see how they apply, or not, to the experiences of the population today. From this analysis, and the other possible research areas put forward, appropriate stigma theory can be constructed that aids youth in destigmatizing their identity.

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