

University of Alberta

**Personal Stories of the Fluidity of Sexuality
and Their Relevance to Theories of Human Sexual Orientation**

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
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Educational Psychology

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DEDICATION

*Once again, to my dear parents,
for all your love and support over the years.*

ABSTRACT

A narrative inquiry methodology was utilized to investigate experiences of fluidity of sexuality and the broader processes of sexuality and sexual identity development. Five adult co-researchers, all members of various sexual and gender minority groups, participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews centering on their experiences of changes in sexuality over time. The stories told were presented in the research text. Only one experience of a significant and lasting shift in sexual desire during adulthood was reported, occurring in the context of a transition from a male to a female gender identity. A thematic analysis of the co-researchers' narratives was undertaken, and 3 common and 14 important themes were identified. The co-researchers' stories and the common and important themes were brought together to form a partial model of sexuality and sexual identity development. Implications for counselling and for further research in this area were also considered.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

Research Conspectus

Drawing on theoretical discourses in psychology, queer theory, and post-structural thought, this research project constituted an effort to interrogate and build upon the leading, contending perspectives on human sexuality and the concept of sexual orientation. As part of this analysis, I used a qualitative research design to investigate peoples' experiences of changes in any personally significant aspects of their sexual orientations over the lifespan. This design incorporated a narrative method that was appropriate to this investigation because my intention was to conduct a study that would provide rich, in-depth accounts of people's lived experiences while remaining amenable to both social constructionist and more traditional qualitative psychological methods of data analysis. Additionally, a narrative format was chosen because of my desire to produce a broad, non-reductionistic inquiry that could help to address the existing lack of rigorous, interview-based studies of the phenomenon of fluidity in sexuality.

Inspiration

This was a research project focused primarily on issues of human sexuality, gender, sex, and sexual orientation; topics that have carried a strong sense of taboo in many sectors of our society and even in some branches of academia (refer to Appendix A for working definitions of some of these terms). While in any dissertation, especially one from a qualitative research perspective, the author will usually devote some time to a consideration of his or her own

motivations and interest in the study topic, when one is dealing with such currently topical and controversial issues as sexuality and its moral and political implications, this sort of reflection may seem to be particularly necessary. Why, then, did I decide to devote a large research project and a considerable amount of time and energy to these particular issues? In considering what drew me to this area of inquiry, I think that three crucial elements stood out.

First of all, I identified myself as a gay man, but I used this term without any strong sense of allegiance to any particular theoretical perspective on sexuality. My own phenomenal experience had been one of almost exclusive attraction to other members of my own sex and gender ever since childhood. However, my broader social and political experiences led me to agree with Bancroft's (2003) statement that

there are good grounds...for concluding that sexual orientation is not always fixed early and immutable. Whereas a large majority of us identify as homosexual or heterosexual at a relatively early age [and] never change..., there is a minority of unknown size whose sexual behaviour is less bound by an "orientation" or who are less certain about their sexual identity.... (p. 420)

As part of my own process of being, becoming, and belonging as a gay man, I have been deeply involved in my local gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (G/L/B/T/Q) community in many capacities over the course of many years. I've taken part in numerous marches and rallies, done HIV/AIDS outreach work, joined and participated in campus lesbian and gay groups, volunteered at our community centre, served a few years on its board of directors, and helped to facilitate one of the local youth groups. I came to identify with and take pride in my community and I felt that I had made a good effort to give back to it as best I could.

However, over the years of graduate school, my contact and involvement with the community had waned. The academic commitments and time constraints

had taken their toll and, while I still felt very much connected to my community, I was definitely no longer as involved in it as I would have liked. I saw this project as a sort of vehicle allowing me to renew my involvement with my local G/L/B/T/Q community while fulfilling my academic commitments and hopefully conducting a valuable and high quality scholarly inquiry. My earlier master's thesis research (Cey, 2000) was driven by a very similar motive, and I hoped that this project would prove to be as fascinating, absorbing, challenging, and ultimately as rewarding as it was.

The second crucial element that drew my interest to this research included my experiences with homophobia and heterosexism, both in society generally and within the psychological profession. Growing up, I experienced a few instances of the name calling and anti-gay slurs that survey statistics show most gay men encounter at one time or another. General cross-sectional surveys report that from 58 to 92% gay men have experienced such verbal abuse (Cey, 2000). I have been fortunate, however, never to have been subjected to any of the physical violence that has left its bodily and psychological scars on so many G/L/B/T/Q people. Survey data indicates that between 16 and 73% of gay men have experienced homophobic physical violence at some point in their lives (Cey, 2000; Janoff, 2005).

I remember when I was first applying for graduate school and doing an interview at what would be my university, one of the men on the two-person committee meeting with me suggested that I ought to consider branching out from my basis of experience as a volunteer counsellor working with a nearly exclusively G/L/B/T/Q clientele so as to avoid becoming "ghettoized." At the time I believe I agreed with him, wanting to pursue greater eclecticism and breadth of focus as a therapist and perhaps fearing that I might have difficulty finding employment if I allowed myself to become too identified as a queer counsellor.

I eventually found, though, that I'd returned to a desire to focus much of my psychological work on the queer context. My own experiences with heterosexism and homophobia had run the gamut from childhood name-calling

directed at both myself and at gender nonconforming friends and others, to personal relationships that were sadly constrained and diminished by my own and my partner's fear of allowing ourselves to show our affection in public. A lifetime of experiences situated in such a personal context and my own research and academic efforts had greatly increased my knowledge of how widespread and potentially harmful these instances of abuse could be (e.g., Cey, 2000). They fuelled my determination to contribute to the psychological understanding of G/L/B/T/Q lives. This determination had been particularly strengthened, unfortunately, by my encounters with the forces of homophobia and heterosexism within the psychological profession. The example that stood out most for me involved the occasion when a classmate, a fundamentalist Christian, decided, in response to a very sensitive and queer-positive lecture on counselling gay and lesbian youth, to circulate a large package of material explaining why G/L/B/T/Q people were, in fact, mentally ill and in need of treatment. While I was, initially, reluctant to be the only individual in a class of graduate students to challenge what I saw as discriminatory and professionally unethical behavior, I decided that I could not let it pass, and brought it to the attention of the instructors and the department where the course was taught. In retrospect, I think that the university faculty and administrators who dealt with the matter treated it seriously and with sensitivity to all perspectives involved, even if several of them seemed reluctant to have to address the situation formally.

As recently as 2007, I was engaged in a conversation with two other graduate students in my counselling program when one of them, apparently unaware of my sexuality, suddenly shifted to a lispng gay "accent" and proceeded to relate a joke with the punch line suggesting that gay men are sexual predators who target children. I eventually raised the matter with my colleague and with the administration of my department at the University, and I think the situation was dealt with satisfactorily, but I remained disturbed that this individual seemed primarily concerned throughout our discussions that her behavior might constitute a threat to her future earning power if she were sanctioned, giving much less attention to its ethical implications.

I have had other, less egregious experiences of this sort, and what they made me think of, more than anything, was the troubling likelihood that a significant number of my fellow psychological practitioners were shockingly ignorant of the realities of queer lives and communities, and that many subscribed to heterosexist if not outright homophobic beliefs and value systems. This belief was reinforced by such research findings as those of Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, and Peplau (1991), who found that 58% of surveyed psychologists knew of instances of “biased, inadequate, or inappropriate” (p. 970) treatment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients by a psychotherapeutic practitioner. With this state of affairs in the field, and with the resurgence in the prominence and availability of ethically and otherwise questionable therapies aimed at producing change in client sexual orientation (Grace, 2005; and see Chapter Two), I felt that it was urgently important for me as a gay man and student of psychology to contribute to the growth of the profession in this area. I wanted to do research that could help to educate my colleagues and that might do something to enable them to move beyond the rigid, stereotype-based practices I had seen that were so potentially harmful to their queer clients and that did my colleagues themselves so little credit.

Finally and perhaps most prosaically, I think I was drawn to this project by my readings in the general area of queer theory that first suggested to me the possibility of new and different ways of viewing sexualities. Queer theory, while notoriously difficult to define succinctly, generally denoted a theoretical tradition emerging since the early 1990’s.

Heavily influenced by post-structuralist theory, emerging primarily from humanities-based cultural studies, and tied somewhat loosely to confrontational, antinormative “queer” politics,...queer theory [has been] built on the insights of constructionism and Foucault, but [has] moved poststructuralist and postmodernist concerns to the forefront—critiques of identity and identity politics, an emphasis on discourse and its

deconstruction, a suspicion of “grand narratives.” (Gamson, 2003, pp. 551-552)

With a background in theoretical psychology, I had become very familiar with what I think were the classical, predominant models of that discipline related to the development of sexual identity and conceptualizations of “the coming-out process.” Usually based upon a structure of typically three to six stages, milestones, or growth points, these models presented a generally linear process of conflict resolution, development, and movement from initial stages of pre-coming out, sensitization, or identity confusion, to eventual integration, commitment, or identity synthesis (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; and Troiden, 1979, 1993). Once these developmental processes were initiated, it was thought that a generally self-accepting, inquisitive, and positive attitude would lead to a complete and healthy resolution. While atypical or even “retrograde” development was said to be possible, it was usually thought to be associated with trauma, self-rejection, or a negative and stigmatizing environment. Later research into and models of the process of sexual identity development (e.g., Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2004) added new insights into factors that have tended to support or impede identity development and gave increasing attention to the diversity of experiences among people of different ages, genders, and ethnic groups. This newer research has not, however, challenged the basic pattern of positive and progressive development, outlined in the earlier literature, from an initial awareness of same-sex desire to an eventual integration of homoerotic identity into a well-elaborated and congruent sense of self.

Given the educational background described above, when I happened upon Archer’s (1999) pop-cultural introduction to a queer theory approach to the “labels” of heterosexual and homosexual and the “essentialist/social constructionist controversy,” my previous learning was challenged. The ideas of the universality of fluid, flexible sexualities and that more polarized identities might simply be socially and culturally determined constructs, went powerfully against the grain of my existing understanding. I found this new perspective to be

provocative. I read more in the field and began to consider those people I had known who really didn't seem to fit the psychological models I knew very well. If someone could go from being an apparently out, proud, and healthy lesbian or gay man to being an apparently just as out, proud, and healthy bisexual or vice versa, maybe there was something potentially worth investigating here. This research project constituted an attempt to further illuminate the sometimes controversial ways that people experienced and came to conceptualize their own sexualities, and to work to resolve some of the tensions between competing models of human sexuality and identity.

Purpose of the Study

Foremost and at its heart, this study constituted an investigation of the phenomenon of fluidity of human sexuality, sometimes also referred to as *erotic plasticity* (Baumeister, 2000). “The term *fluidity* has been used to refer to longitudinal changes in sexual identity, attractions, and behavior as well as contemporaneous inconsistencies among these domains” (Diamond, 2000, p. 214). “...There are numerous cases—described in memoirs, media reports, and retrospective studies—of individuals who come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and then relinquish these identities later on...” (Diamond, 2003a, p. 354). However, despite the relative commonality of such reports, there have been very few attempts to date to conduct in depth, personalized, interview-based or longitudinal investigations of such phenomena and what they have meant to those experiencing them (e.g., Diamond, 2000, 2003). This study constituted an attempt to access the full depth and richness of these lived experiences, and to improve our insight into their definitively human character.

A second important aspect of this work, which was evident throughout the study, concerned the state of theoretical and epistemological approaches to sexuality in several different but related disciplines. For the purposes of the vast majority of existing social science research, human sexuality had been conceived in terms of the socially predominant categories of sexual orientation. This

concept and term was described by Diamond (2000) as “an individual's essential predisposition to experience sexual attractions for persons of the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes...sexual orientation is presumed to be early developing and stable...” (p. 141). Standing as one of the almost taken-for-granted foundations of sexology and sex-related research for most of the last several decades has been the belief that “sexual subjects share a sexual core (an orientation or a preference)” (Gamson, 2003, p. 548). This perspective has come to be labelled as an “essentialist” stance, referring to the stable, identifiable essence of sexual attractions that was presumed to be an aspect of each individual. This interpretation of sexuality has often, though not always, been linked (by its adherents or by their critics) with a positivist, rational-empirical philosophy of knowledge and inquiry (Gamson, 2003).

The last 25 years have seen the emergence of an entirely contradictory perspective on sexuality issues. Broadly referred to as “social constructionist” (and including also postmodern and “queer theory” approaches), this perspective involved the view of sexuality not as a quality or “sexual orientation...immutable and unchanged across time and culture...” (Dilley, 2002, p. 39), but as a fluid attribute. Social constructionists,

very broadly speaking,...have in common the view that ‘sexuality’ is an artifact or ‘construct’ of human society and therefore specific to any given social situation. Some would argue that there are no underlying... constants of human sexuality involved in this social construction, others that whatever underlying phenomena there may be are of much less importance than social overlay, or cannot be identified and should not be assumed. (Boswell, 1992, p. 135)

In the most expansive terms then, “social constructionists tend to argue that all that objectively exists are sexual acts and that identities are constructed by societies out of those acts” (Weinrich, 1987, p. 83). With respect to epistemology, social constructionists have tended to argue that “sexuality [is] not

a stable phenomenon of nature to be studied like plants or cells, but a set of meanings attached to bodies and desires by individuals, groups, and societies” (Gamson, 2003, p. 549). They have tended to possess a strong “scepticism about scientific knowledge as progress” and to make “category construction, discourse, meaning creation, and identity work...subjects for investigation” (Gamson, 2003, p. 551).

Throughout this study the tension between the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on sexuality was always near the surface, and a secondary aim of this project was to remain open to both of these approaches to the subject matter in all aspects of my work. I used these commonly perceived as competing viewpoints to critique and inform one another as I proceeded to investigate the experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of people who may have experienced the phenomena of fluidity in their sexuality.

The Need for the Study

I saw the research described here as being important for three main reasons. First, studies of fluidity of sexuality were still very few in number and most undertaken to this date have involved a primarily positivistic, often survey-based methodology (e.g., Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994; Diamond, 2000, 2003a). My aim in conducting this project has been to contribute to a significant expansion and deepening of the existing literature, and to bring a richer understanding of how “certain individuals experience diverse, changing, and conflicting patterns of sexual attraction, behavior, and identification over the life course” (Diamond, 2003a, p. 360).

The second significant aspect of this research was that it would be the first effort that had been reported to constructively, comparatively, and synergistically utilize both essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on the fluidity phenomenon. By using the strengths and tensions of both perspectives to inform and interrogate one another, I hoped to arrive at a better and more complete

understanding of human sexuality, while potentially advancing the ongoing debate between the advocates of essentialist and social constructionist theories.

Finally, this project was important because its results could have direct application in the field of Counselling Psychology. I hoped that my findings would be useful to informed and G/L/B/T/Q-affirmative therapists working with a sexual minority clientele to address issues of personal identity and community membership and to alleviate the distress that can accompany an experience of fluidity of sexuality. My discussion of the results of this project included some suggestions for psychological practice emerging from this work.

The Research Questions

The main questions used to direct this research project were as follows:

- (1) How do individuals understand the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality?
- (2) How do individuals experience the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality?
- (3) How adequate are the existing models of the development of human sexuality and sexual identity at conceptualizing and explaining these narratives?

Having completed a general introduction to this research project, what follows now is a brief enumeration of the main sections of the remainder of this dissertation. Chapter two of this work involved a consideration of the broad philosophical issues of relevance in this inquiry, a more in-depth consideration of each of the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on issues of human sexuality, and a review of the relevant literature bearing on this research. I examined the philosophical bases of some of the different theoretical perspectives prominent in the field of sexology as well as scholarly works from a range of different academic disciplines relevant to how individuals and groups have

described their romantic and erotic thoughts, feelings, behaviors, beliefs, and identities.

Chapter three consisted of a description of the methods that I employed in the completion of this project, and a presentation of why I believed the methodological choices I made are well justified. This included all aspects of the research process including selection of co-researchers, formulation of interview questions, interview and follow-up procedures, data analysis, and consideration of the concepts of reliability and validity and how they were relevant to this work.

Chapters four through eight each involved my presentation of and reflections on the story told by one of my five co-researchers. These chapters included the co-researchers' memories of how their sexuality developed and changed over their lifetime and what sorts of experiences they had of fluidity in their sexuality.

Chapter nine consisted of my reflections on how I approached narrative research, followed by a deeper analysis of my co-researchers' stories and of the interconnections, similarities, and differences among the stories told by my individual co-researchers. I returned to a consideration of my guiding research questions and included a proposed model of sexual identity development drawn from the stories my co-researchers had to tell. The chapter ended with some consideration of what I saw as the implications of my project for counselling practice and for future research endeavours.

Chapter 2

The Context of the Debate: Philosophical Issues and the History of Sexuality Studies

What sexuality is, how and why it develops the way it does, and what its significance may be, are questions that have engaged the human mind from time immemorial. What follows is a consideration of both some of the philosophical aspects of this line of inquiry, including the philosophical bases of selected theoretical perspectives prominent in the field of sexology, a more thorough consideration of essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on human sexuality and on the points of agreement and disagreement between these two paradigms, and a review of the empirical literature from a range of different academic disciplines relevant to how individuals and groups have described their romantic and erotic thoughts, feelings, behaviors, beliefs, and identities.

Philosophical Issues Relevant to Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

While some epistemological matters relevant to the conduct of research into human sexuality have already been touched upon, what I wished to consider briefly involved turning to another branch of philosophy: metaphysics. Generally considered the division of philosophy that concerns the underlying nature of the world, “philosophers typically understand metaphysics as the study of the kind of things that there are and the forms that their existence takes, whereas science is concerned with the details of the entities that exist and the laws that operate on them” (Stein, 1999, p. 5).

Metaphysics was relevant to the study of the concepts of sexual orientation and identity in that one of the most fundamental distinctions between

essentialist and social constructionist lines of thought concerned the central concept of sexual orientation and whether or not the term referred to an actual, deep, persistent, and transcontextual aspect of the human romantic/sexual experience. In metaphysical terms, such an issue concerned the arbitrariness or non-arbitrariness of a system of classification and grouping of human beings, and led to a consideration of a set of issues in the philosophy of metaphysics and science involving *natural kinds* (Hacking, 1991). This expression required further definition and examination, and led into the consideration of the related terms *nonnatural kind*, *artifactual kind*, *natural human kind*, and *social human kind*.

While any collection of things can be grouped together on arbitrary or non-arbitrary bases, a grouping is referred to as a natural kind if it coheres in nature independent of human intervention and...is governed by a common set of laws (by which I mean laws of nature, not laws in the legal sense). Such groups are the “real divisions” of the world. They play a role in explaining why the world is the way it is in terms of its structure and behavior. For example..., the group of all electrons is one such group. Certain scientific laws govern all electrons and have done so since before humans existed. Further, there are scientific laws that make use of electrons as a group and rely on the properties that all electrons have in order to explain, for example, why certain chemical elements interact in the way that they do.... Another metaphor for natural kinds—used by Plato and Aristotle, among others—is that they are the groups that enable us to “cut nature at its joints.” Here the idea is that natural kinds divide nature into the groups that provide its underlying structure, the way bones give bodies their underlying structure. (Stein, 1999, pp. 77-78)

Some other specific examples of natural kinds are apples, pine trees, water, hearts, and hemoglobin (Stein, 1999). Natural kinds are most clearly contrasted with non-natural or *nominal kinds*—these are groupings of things that play no role in scientific explanations and laws, whether they are completely random or have some non-scientific significance.

Another subset of kinds is the artifactual kind. This expression refers to “a group of things that have a common property only in virtue of human intentions” (Stein, 1999, p. 79). Diet soft drinks are proposed as an example of an artifactual kind because “what diet soft drinks have in common is a particular sort of connection to human intentional activity” (Stein, 1999, p. 79). The last group of kinds of importance for my purposes were the human kinds—natural human kinds and social human kinds. A natural human kind is simply a natural kind that applies to people. It is a non-arbitrary, rule-based division of human beings into classes or groups wherein the resulting groupings play a significant role in scientific explanations and laws. Some examples of natural human kinds would include people with specific blood types, people with particular sets of sex chromosomes, or color-blind people. To elaborate on the last of these cases, people with color-blindness exist in all human cultures and societies; their reduced ability to distinguish some or all colors is explicable in terms of a body of scientific laws including genetics, neurology, ophthalmology, and others; and the condition is real and measurable regardless of whether or not it is recognized or how it may be explained by the members of the surrounding society.

The groups defined by natural human kinds can be contrasted with the final type of kind: the social human kind. Stein (1999) defined these as groups that do not exist in nature. “Rather, these groups have a social existence—they are created and sustained by human intentions. Like artifactual kinds, social human kinds come into existence at particular moments; they did not exist before humans created them” (p. 85). Police officers, registered members of the New Democratic Party, and graduate students would be examples of social human kinds.

Returning to the concept of sexual orientation, foundationally “essentialism is the view that sexual orientations are natural human kinds and constructionism is the view that sexual orientations are merely social human kinds” (Stein, 1999, p. 84). The essentialist/social constructionist debate was founded upon metaphysical issues, and I believed that knowledge of the philosophical questions involved would help to clarify what was often a muddled and confusing exchange between proponents of different viewpoints who often scarcely seemed to speak the same language. This knowledge was also useful in conceptualizing and understanding the scholarly writing and research bearing on the concepts of sexual desire, behavior, and identity that are examined in the next section of this chapter.

Essentialist and Social Constructionist Perspectives on Human Sexuality

Having considered some of the broader, foundational distinctions between the essentialist and social constructionist camps, I wanted to give more attention to what, specifically, the adherents of each position had to say with respect to human sexuality and sexual identity, and to what I saw as the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. At the outset, I must acknowledge that the terms “essentialist” and “social constructionist” were themselves used rather loosely in the existing literature and these definitions were often contested, making it difficult to discuss them in general terms. My intention, therefore, was to begin each of the following sub-sections by briefly surveying some of the different theoretical positions that were subsumed within each of these broad paradigms, and to define how I would be using the terms throughout this work.

Essentialism

An immediate difficulty that one encountered when attempting to arrive at a satisfying definition of essentialism in a survey of the related literature was that

there were very few scholars who specifically identified themselves with the perspective. Some have gone so far as to assert that essentialism was largely a creation of social constructionists and that “as conceived by the SC [social constructionist] party, the essentialist is a straw man, an adversary necessary for symmetry’s sake...” (Dynes, 1992, pp. 216-217). While it appeared to be true that almost “no one deliberately involved in [the debate] defines himself as an ‘essentialist,’” (Boswell, 1992, p. 133), I attempted to demonstrate in the section that follows that, as Stein argues, “there is a viable position against which social constructionism can be contrasted that is appropriately called essentialism” (1992, p. 326).

What then were the core principles constituting this perspective? Further to what I have said in the first section of this chapter, an essentialist position generally seemed to involve an assertion “that sexual [desire] categories...represent fixed personal characteristics that are inherent, objective, transcultural and transhistorical” (Stein, 1996, p. 86). Current essentialist thought was often equated with traditional psychological perspectives that evolved out of the work of nineteenth-century sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing and from aspects of the work of Sigmund Freud (Epstein, 1987). Essentialism did not necessarily involve a deterministic approach to the etiology of sexuality (Stein, 1992). The now discredited “first encounter” theory (the idea that one’s sexual orientation is determined by the sex of the person with whom one has one’s first pleasurable sexual experience), the idea of sexuality being determined by one’s genetic endowment, the theory that it is established by prenatal exposure to different hormones, and psychoanalytic theory (with the belief that sexuality emerges from certain early childhood interactions with one’s primary caregivers) were all essentialist positions. This was the case because they relied on the idea that there were “transcultural law-like generalizations that can be made about the nature and origins of sexual orientation” (Stein, 1992, p. 330). It might also be noted that essentialism did not precisely correspond to the “nature” side of a nature/nurture debate. As was just noted, first encounter theory

was based on the idea of sexual orientation as a partly chosen and partly learned behaviour (not something innate), but it did constitute an essentialist position.

Most scholars who could probably best be described as essentialists were not so extreme in their thought as to deny any role to social forces in the shaping and expression of an innate and fixed state of desire for the members of one sex-gender or the other. As Norton expressed it,

I take the view that there is a core of queer desire that is transcultural, transnational, and transhistorical, a queer essence that is innate, congenital, constitutional, stable or fixed in its basic pattern. However, I distinguish between queer persons, queer sexual acts and behaviour, and queer social interactions, and try not to confuse the constancy of the desire with the variability of its expression. Personal queer identity arises from within, and is then consolidated along lines suggested by the collective identity of the queer (sub)culture. (1997, p. 12)

My usage of the term “essentialist,” therefore, encompassed the proposition that an innate core of queer desire was consistent with some socio-cultural influence over the ways in which desire was expressed through behaviour and identity categories in different times and at different places.

Social Constructionism

Self-identified social constructionists (who, in contrast to the scarce essentialists, were many) were a diverse group who espoused differing theoretical positions. Kitzinger (1995) had conceptually divided the field into “strong” or “radical” social constructionists and “weak” social constructionists. She described weak social constructionists as those who simply agreed that “socialization, conditioning, media, advertising, and social arrangements, which encourage heterosexuality and prohibit homosexuality make it impossible to begin to understand lesbian or gay existence without reference to its social,

historical, and political context” (p. 142). Very much like the moderate essentialists described in the preceding paragraph, weak social constructionists would endorse the position that the same sexual acts can have vastly different meanings and implications for identity in different cultural and historical contexts. Strong social constructionists, by contrast, were seen as those who went further and examined “the ways in which the taken-for-granted categories we use are themselves social constructions: the notions of ‘the homosexual’ and ‘sexual drive’ are seen as social categories or linguistic devices for ordering the world, which modern Western culture reifies as ‘natural,’ ‘universal,’ and ‘the way things have to be’” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 142). I took this latter, more well-differentiated, and theoretically distinctive group as that which best typified what I meant when I described social constructionism in this work.

The predominant social constructionist perspective had its roots in symbolic interactionism and the work of labelling theorists such as McIntosh (1968), in the cross-cultural work of constructionist anthropologists, and in the writings of the French cultural historian and philosopher Foucault (Epstein, 1987). This paradigm was in large part built upon feminist challenges, emerging in the mid to late 1970’s, to the idea that women or men had “an essential nature (e.g. nurturing and caring versus being aggressive and selfish), as opposed to differing by a variety of accidental or contingent features brought about by social forces” (“Essentialism”, 2008). Social constructionism was also strongly influenced by postmodernist theorists and their scepticism for such notions as scientific objectivity, truth, and social progress (Kitzinger, 1995), as well as post-structuralist conceptualizations of the idea of identity as “provisional and contingent” (Jagose, 1996, p. 77) and politically problematic. In summary, social constructionism was a perspective on human sexuality that involved the conception of all identities as “invented and shaped by social forces” (Lipkin, 1999, p. 16) and that characterized sexuality as “an artifact or ‘construct’ of human society and therefore specific to any given social situation” (Boswell, 1992, p. 135). An important goal of much social constructionist and queer theory was the deconstruction (examination of the operations of power and resistance

inherent in social constructs) of such culturally predominant concepts as sexual orientation, sex, gender, and desire (Jagose, 1996).

The positions taken by social constructionists with regard to whether or not sexual orientation or desire was generally fluid or determined within the scope of the individual lifetime were also diverse. Stein (1999) pointed out that social constructionist theory was logically compatible with both the proposition that sexual preference was set and determined by social forces and that it could be more voluntaristically chosen. While all social constructionists seemed to agree that the possible sexual identity categories, roles, or scripts available in any given context were derived from the language or discourse at play in that particular culture and the relationships of power within it (Kitzinger, 1995), there was somewhat more diversity with respect to ideas about the nature of the desire and sexuality of the individual. So-called “Foucault-style social constructionists” would agree that some people in present day western society could properly be described as lesbian or gay (in that they had an immutable, although socially determined, sexual orientation), but that this was not the case before the 18th or 19th century, when the category was variously argued to have come into existence (Stein, 1992). By contrast, the group that Stein names “empty category constructionists” asserted that “although we have the categories heterosexual and homosexual, there are no people who actually fit into these categories” (1992, p. 342). Members of this latter faction, much like the early American gay and lesbian liberationists of the 1970’s, asserted that “sexual typologies were social, rather than natural facts; that these categories were highly fluid; and [in many cases, at least] that they needed to be transcended” (Epstein, 1987, p. 19).

Comparative Strengths and Weaknesses of Essentialism and Social Constructionism

The numerous commentaries on the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives have included notations of the relative strengths and limitations of each, both theoretically and with respect to their implications for social policy and

activism. In this section I presented and considered some of these proposed points of value and deficiency for each paradigm.

One of the most basic commonly cited strengths of essentialism was that, for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, it simply felt genuine (Lipkin, 1999) and central to their identity (Broido, 2000). For those who had very early childhood memories of feelings of attraction to members of their own or both sexes, the essentialist perspective had an intuitive appeal. Social constructionists had countered this point by asserting that such inchoate memories could be considered the products of a sort of false consciousness generated by processes of acculturation (Lipkin, 1999). Halperin, for example, argued that this “is what it means to be acculturated into a sexual system: the conventions of the system acquire the self-confirming inner truth of ‘nature’” (1990, p. 53). The contentious value of self-reports of erotic attraction in attempts to settle the essentialist-social constructionist debate was of significant importance for studies in this field. As my chosen narrative approach to data analysis, which I have discussed at greater length in chapter nine, gives primacy to the individuals’ self-story and to their unique approach to giving meaning to experience, this was an aspect of the essentialist-social constructionist controversy that I did not believe I was able to resolve while working within the parameters and boundaries of narrative research.

An analogous commonly asserted strength of social constructionism was that the approach has produced some very useful methods for challenging exploitative power relationships and enabling progressive change. As Wilchins argued, the approach “has generated a powerful set of tools for dismantling arguments, revealing their hidden assumptions, and diminishing their power so that difference can emerge” (2004, p. 97). Even Norton, while generally very critical of most of the assertions made by social constructionists, allowed that the perspective “is politically useful for undermining mechanisms of social control and oppression” (1997, p. 31).

An often-asserted weakness of social constructionist approaches was the failure of the paradigm’s adherents to gather supportive historical evidence and the existence of several fairly clear inaccuracies in some of the historical claims

most commonly made by the social constructionists. Norton (1997), for instance, offered a lengthy and detailed critique of social constructionist historical arguments. He specifically argued that Halperin's (1993) constructionist interpretation of sexuality in classical Greece and Rome seems to have been imposed on the available data, rather than emerging from it. Norton documented that while Halperin cited fewer than 12 examples supporting the idea of fluidity of sexual object choice in classical societies, he acknowledged, in his notes, 30 cases from the same historical period that tended to establish the existence of immutable, essential sexualities. Norton further noted that in Plato's great dialogue on love, *the Symposium* (trans. 1999), written at some point in the late fourth century B.C.E., the characters' speeches clearly established that the ancient Greeks recognized the concepts of innate homosexuality and heterosexuality, although they had no specific terms for these constructs. Finally, Norton pointed out that the date of roughly 1800 claimed by McIntosh (McIntosh, 1968), and modified to 1869 or 1870 by Foucault and others (e.g., Foucault, 1979, as cited in Norton, 1997), as the point of inception for specifically gay subcultures and identities in the western world (and as part of a complex interaction of new family and economic structures and the medicalization of sexuality) could not be accurate. He provided evidence of a queer subculture that existed in Venice, Italy during the sixteenth century; another in London, England by approximately 1700 (Norton, 1992); and of married male couples living together during the early Roman Empire. Evidence of continuous gay male subcultures has also been identified in Spain in the late 16th century (Adam, 1995), and in France in the early 1700's and the Netherlands from as early as 1689 (Adam; Sibalis, 2006). Another example of a pre-19th century society that seemed to have included the recognition of homosexuality as a generally invariant personal status, rather than a mere pattern of behaviour that anyone could engage in, was documented in Scandinavia from at least 1200 CE (Conner, 1993; Sørensen, 1983). These are just a few of many examples of important exceptions to the late 19th century origin for gay identities proposed by the prominent social constructionists. More broadly, Norton identified several other historical inaccuracies in the social

constructionist account of how homosexuality was “invented” in the late nineteenth century. Some of these inaccuracies emerged from the fact that most evidence suggested queer subcultures were only slowly discovered (not invented) by middle and upper class scholars in the nineteenth century, despite their having been perfectly well known to members of the lower social strata for decades if not centuries. Additionally, he noted that early gay male communities were established by gay men for their own private enjoyment, not “created as a boundary by a dominant culture” (p. 84). Finally, Norton pointed out that even the term “homosexuality” itself (an adaptation of the German word *homosexualität*) was coined by the German-Hungarian homosexual social reformer Károly Mária Kertbeny (born Karl Maria Benkert) in 1868 as part of a campaign to promote tolerance for constitutional homosexuals.

Contrary to the labelling theory paradigm, the label clearly followed rather than preceded the identity; it was not something “constructed” by society in order to identify and thereby control a deviant group; on the contrary, it was for the sake of achieving public tolerance of the behaviour of an identifiable group that the label was invented, by that group themselves.

(p. 68)

Another fundamental difficulty with social constructionist theory involved potential weaknesses in the epistemology and ontology of claims regarding the social construction of social subjects and social reality. Kitching (2008) argued that social constructionist assertions that subjectivity and social reality were constructed through the operation of power relationships

combine portentousness and vagueness in almost equal parts.... It certainly sounds as if something important is being said.... The vagueness, however, emerges as soon as we inquire about what—precisely—this ‘something’ is. And when we seek an answer to this question through a close examination of the empirical examples...[provided] to support...the

generalizations, it pretty soon emerges that what is true in them is not original and what is original is not true. That is, to say that human beings give meaning to everything they see, hear, touch, use and experience, and that they do this predominantly through the language they use, is hardly an original insight. Nor does it follow from this that they can change or alter everything they see, hear, touch, use and experience just by changing the language they use in regard to it.... Moreover, although there may, at any given time, be socially and politically dominant ways of describing and explaining the social world, or some aspect of it, in language, these ways very often (always?) coexist with alternative ways even in the same human society at the same time. In addition, even socially dominant forms of understanding change over time, quickly or slowly, depending on the...example or case.... Thus, where the proposition reality is socially constructed is determinist (i.e., means “is constructed in one and only one way”) it is nearly always false. And where it is *not* determinist (i.e., means “is constructed in a variety of ways by a variety of people for a variety of purposes”) it is true, but both unoriginal and, largely, vacuous....

(pp. 34-36)

Social constructionist writers have also commonly been accused of inconsistent or self-contradictory applications of epistemology in that they often

begin by embracing general or rhetorical forms of “social constructivism” that certainly *sound* strongly unitary and determinist, but they almost always end up endorsing—in fact, if not in theory—a variety that is much more cautiously and conventionally pluralist. ...The authors generally do

this...through a species of self-contradiction. They write theses of the form “language [or discourse or power] constructs the social world in *this* way (singular) but I see through this construction and reject it”. But, of course, if they can see through the construction and reject it, why...can others not do so too? And if others *do* do so, then in what sense is the construction socially or politically dominant? ...Whatever one might choose to say about that dominance it is clear that it does *not* equate to unchallenged monopoly. (Kitching, 2008, pp. 36-37)

To date, I have seen no attempt by any social constructionist author to address these serious potential shortcomings in the philosophical bases of their ideas.

Turning from philosophical issues to more applied concerns, postmodernist and social constructionist writers tended to share the concern that “any interaction with the institutions of culture—with courts or civil rights groups...” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 100) could simply lead to the replacing of an existing oppressive system with that imposed by another group and, as a result, they commonly eschewed any program of constructive social engagement (Kirsch, 2000; Spargo, 1999; Eagleton, 2003). This stance has given rise to the commonly expressed practical critique of social constructionism that it may have a negative impact on activism and social reform. Nussbaum (1999), for instance, strongly argued that the position taken by leading postmodernist feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler amounted to the encouragement of a “hip defeatism” (p. 37) and preoccupation with “symbolic gestures” (p. 45) over often difficult but necessary political action in the material world. In response to Butler’s assertion that parodic performance of the social roles forced upon us by assumedly inescapable oppressive structures constituted the best means of resistance (e.g., Butler, 1997, as cited in Nussbaum), Nussbaum countered that such a strategy in fact amounts to a posture of “dangerous quietism” (p. 43) and “moral passivity” (p. 42). Murray (1997) similarly argued that

the “queer” perspective...romanticizes ineffective substitutes for politics.... Along with [a] fascination with idiosyncratic readings of texts not demonstrated to have any effect on anyone is a sentimental romanticizing of what seems to be more juvenile acting out than serious attempts to change anything in the world,...in particular [the idea] that “playing with” or “playing at” gender erodes gendered social organization of domination. Variant performances and discursive practices do not change societies. (p. 1)

Other authors expressed a similar concern over the potential impact of social constructionist theory on whether or not identity categories were experienced as personally meaningful, and what this might mean for activism and social change. Wolfe and Penelope (as cited in Jagose, 1996), for example, with respect to lesbian identity argued that

we [cannot] afford to allow privileged patriarchal discourse (of which poststructuralism is but a new variant) to erase the collective identity lesbians have only recently begun to establish...for what has in fact resulted from the incorporation of deconstructive discourse, in academic “feminist” discourse at least, is that the word *Lesbian* has been placed in quotation marks, whether used or mentioned, and the existence of real lesbians has been denied, once again. (pp. 101-102)

Although social constructionists such as Butler (1990) responded that “the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics” (p. 148), for many the concern remained that “a coherent and unified identity was a prerequisite for effective political action” (Jagose, p. 103), and that social constructionism and queer theory directly undermined such identities. As Bersani (1995) put it,

the discrediting of a specific gay identity...can have assimilative rather than subversive consequences; having de-gayed themselves, gays melt into the culture they like to think of themselves as undermining.... De-gayng gayness can only fortify homophobic oppression; it accomplishes in its own way the principal aim of homophobia: the elimination of gays. (pp. 4-5)

Both essentialist and social constructionist perspectives could be critiqued for their treatment of the phenomenon of bisexuality. Historically, essentialist researchers have tended to hold rather polarized conceptualizations of sexuality, generally portraying it in terms of a discrete heterosexual/homosexual variable (Fox, 1995). Many early essentialist models of sexual identity development and the coming-out process portrayed bisexuality as a transitional state or “foreclosure” in the process of developing a healthy gay or lesbian identity. More recent models of this type, however, have almost universally taken “a more inclusive perspective in which bisexuality is regarded as a distinct sexual orientation and identity” (Fox, p. 53). Social constructionists, on the other hand, have usually been very critical of approaches to gender and sexuality cast in terms of rigid male-female, heterosexual/homosexual oppositional dichotomies (Dilley, 2002; Grace, 2004; Wilchins, 2004). Perhaps paradoxically, however, the social constructionist concept of “queer” as a loose “term to name and describe sex, sexual, and gender differences in the...intersections of identities...that lie inside and outside a pervasive, conservative heterosexualizing discourse...” (Grace, p. 176) could tend to immerse bisexual individuals (if one allows for the possibility of essentialist identities) within an agglomeration dominated by more well-organized and politically powerful gays and lesbians. Although social constructionists would apparently be opposed to such an outcome, this immersion could only tend to silence and render invisible distinctly bisexual people while, perhaps, tending to serve the strategic function of concealing that most instances of what social constructionists would describe as fluidity of sexuality could be

explained in essentialist terms as simple examples of an individual's innate bisexual sexual orientation.

An additional and related problem with the social constructionist usage of the term queer is that it seemed to constitute the replacement of a binarism asserted to be unacceptable, heterosexual vs. homosexual, with another, queer vs. normative, without any clarification of why the later pair of concepts would be any less constraining or oppressive. As Murray (1997) phrased this argument,

I find it difficult to take seriously an alternative to “binarism” built on a contrast of “normative” and amorphous contra-normativity. Rather than destroying binarism, replacing “gay” with “queer” merely further subordinates sexuality to gender — which is a more deeply entrenched dichotomy — in a continuing binary of domination. (p. 1)

Social constructionists have failed to explain why what appears to be a simple act of semantic substitution has been presented as a means to sweeping social and perhaps individual psychological change.

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) critique of postmodernist approaches to the conduct of inquiries within the social sciences focused on what they saw as the perspective's reductionistic treatment of human experience. They argued that within what they refer to as a “formalistic” (postmodernist) view,

things are never what they are but are rather what our framework or point of view or perspective or outlook makes of them. Further, because nothing is as it seems, the only things worth noticing are the terms, the formal structures, by which things are perceived....for the formalist, experience is something to be ignored. For the formalist, there is in the end no agency in experience but only in form. For the formalist, a person merely plays out the hegemonies of politics, culture, gender, and framework. (pp. 39-40)

Wilchins (2004) echoed this concern with the social constructionists' treatment of human agency. She noted that "postmodernist theorists clearly want us to understand that discourse is a force to be reckoned with, producing everything from binary thought and docile bodies to...the homosexual" (p. 103). The paradoxical concomitant of these assertions, however, was that freedom became impossible and "although postmodernists clearly intend for us to fight back, if discourse is so all-powerful, it's hard to explain why we should bother" (p. 103). This tendency to undermine the concept of agency seemed to constitute both a significant inconsistency within social constructionist theory and another derogation from efforts to organize for activism and progressive social change.

Another common criticism of social constructionist perspectives on human sexuality involved their potentially negative impacts on counselling practices and individual mental health. As Broido (2000) pointed out, a social constructionist position asserting the complete fluidity of sexual identity, "can feed into the idea that same-gender desire is a chosen behavior, a voluntary transgression of social norms, and is therefore deserving of condemnation" (p. 28). Whisman (1996) also noted that population survey data suggested there was a "correlation between the belief that homosexuality is a choice and [the tendency to report holding] a range of homophobic opinions" (p. 4). Individual experiences of guilt and shame and a resultant desire to alter one's sexual orientation through psychological interventions could be a dangerous potential outcome of the reasoning contained in much queer theory, and therapists should be aware of this possibility and approach social constructionist perspectives with caution (Stein, 1996).

Another potentially very serious weakness of social constructionist theories related to human sexuality that has been identified by many commentators is the approach's asserted incompleteness and lack of explanatory and predictive power (De Lamater & Hyde, 1998). Constructionism had no theory of the intrapsychic; it was unable to specify the ways in which desire came to be structured over the course of people's lives. While it asserted that people were social products, it had no way of explaining how it was that social meanings came to resonate with the core of who people were (Epstein, 1987, p. 24). As

someone most interested in the psychological implications of social constructionist theory, this deficiency in the perspective was particularly important. It was a limitation that social constructionists and queer theorists needed to resolve if they were to go beyond the deconstruction of power relationships and other social forces to grapple with questions of subjective lived experience (Wilchins, 2004) and personal meanings.

What some have referred to as “the standard criticism” (Jagose, 1996, p. 110) of queer theory had to do with both the contents of the approach and the style with which it was commonly communicated. Postmodernist, poststructuralist, and queer theorists have all been taken to task for employing writing styles that seemed to many to be unnecessarily verbose, ponderous, obscure, and laden with unexplained “allusions to other theorists, drawn from a wide range of different theoretical traditions” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 38). In discussing the writings of the feminist, postmodernist author, Judith Butler, Nussbaum noted that Butler won first prize in the journal *Philosophy and Literature's* Bad Writing Contest of 1998 for the wordiness and obscurity of her prose. Noam Chomsky, the eminent linguist, cognitive scientist, and social activist, in commenting on the writings of the leaders of what he referred to as the “postmodernist cults” (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and others) stated that

I've dipped into what they write out of curiosity, but not very far... what I find is extremely pretentious, but on examination, a lot of it is simply illiterate, based on extraordinary misreading of texts that I know well (sometimes, that I have written), argument that is appalling in its casual lack of elementary self-criticism, lots of statements that are trivial (though dressed up in complicated verbiage) or false; and a good deal of plain gibberish. (Chomsky, as cited in Shalizi, 2007; N. A. Chomsky, personal communication, January 31, 2008)

Beyond merely criticizing queer theorists for the quality of their writing, the accessibility or inaccessibility of their ideas was important when one considered that a non-academic audience would almost certainly “be baffled by the thick soup of [the] prose, by its air of in-group knowingness, by its extremely high ratio of names to explanations” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 38). While not all postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists acknowledged the importance of maintaining connections between their work and the queer communities they discussed, it has been asserted by numerous commentators that such a dialogue needed to be maintained “if queer theory is to avoid becoming ‘unrepresentative and intellectually narrow’” (Jagose, 1996, p. 111).

What impressed me as one of the more devastating critiques of queer theorists’ ideas of sexual identity as socially constructed was the existence of numerous very clear examples in the historical record of individuals who identified themselves as being exclusively attracted to members of their own sex-gender, without ever having had contact with other such individuals or with any sort of queer community, and without any knowledge that such individuals and communities even existed (Dynes, 1990). Norton concluded that given the literally hundreds of testimonies from people who on hearing “lesbian” or “homosexual” for the first time rushed to their local library to find out about themselves, to confirm and make greater sense of an identity that they already possessed, . . . the social constructionist position that sexuality could not have become a defining characteristic of identity until the medical/sexological discourse of modern times is simply incorrect. (1997, p. 36)

To be fair to the position espoused by queer theorists however, it should be noted that there was at least some evidence from the biographical accounts of women of experiences more in accord with what social constructionist theory would predict. It appeared that, in some cases, homoerotic “feelings came up only after these women discovered the possibility of lesbianism” (Whisman, 1996, p. 88). This

potential disparity in the ways that women and men experienced their sexualities raised intriguing questions for theorists attempting to produce a unified developmental model of human sexuality, a point to which I returned in a later chapter.

One of several lines of criticism of queer theory involving an assertion of some form of lack of internal consistency was the argument that while most proponents of queer theory voiced a strong opposition to hegemonic social power structures and “grand narratives”, queer theory has in fact become established as the new, dominant status quo in many academic areas. Jagose (1996) noted several authors who have commented on the rapid rise and institutionalization of queer theory within the academy and who argued that “the professionalisation of queer has mostly benefited those relatively few individuals who are making academic careers as queer scholars” (p. 110). Morton (1996) elaborated on this line of thinking by arguing that these ambitious junior academics

show their credentials by learning to speak the various queer idioms and vernaculars. The result is that in the process of acquiring this inside knowledge and learning to speak and write queerly about the queer, these critics and scholars become what might be called the technocrats of queer studies. They take on the task of refining queer knowledge-in-itself and rendering it...ever more sophisticated and subtle. (p. 26)

The queer theory in-group dialog “occurs within an already agreed-upon framework; it therefore begins and continues *indefinitely* by following the established rules of the game, which can never be changed. The only change that can be registered is the increasing virtuosity of the players” (p. 7). This asserted preference for jargon-laden speech of course also related back to the earlier stated point regarding the quality and accessibility of the writing of most queer theorists.

Some commentators have linked the social constructionists’ alleged use of deliberately-obscuring jargon to what they see as a failure to produce any appreciable body of either qualitative or quantitative scholarly research to support

the postulates of queer theory. Norton (1997) argued that the initial premises of social constructionist thought “have been consistently reinforced by restatement and incestuous quotation among constructionist colleagues rather than supported by scholarly research” and that even after more than 20 years of “increasing abstruseness [constructionist theories regarding human sexuality are] still no more than unsupported working hypotheses” (p. 9). Marwick, commenting specifically on the works of those elaborating on Foucault’s ideas, asserted that “there has been the production of ever more complex, more abstract, and more uncompromising theory in which anything so mundane as what actually happens in real human societies seems to become less and less relevant” (as cited in Norton, 1997, p. 9). Finally, Plummer (1998) has noted a similar trend toward “the overtaxation of lesbian and gay experiences,’ in which ‘analyses of discourse overtake the analysis of real world events’” (as cited in Gamson, 2003, p. 555) and queer theorists “play more and more fancifully with a wide array of poems, novels, and films...[while producing]...little research...on what is going on in lesbian and gay worlds right now” (Plummer, 1998, p. 611).

Another relatively common critique of queer theory held that the practitioners of the perspective simply failed to address the phenomena of sexual orientation and homosexuality, as they were properly understood. Numerous authors (e.g., Bailey, 1995; Harry, 1984; and Savin-Williams, 1998) contended that social constructionists had confounded the concept of sexual orientation or, more properly, sexual desire with that of sexual identity.

The essentialism-constructionist debate is fuelled, in part, by the different ways in which the two sides use “homosexuality”. Social-constructionists emphasize cultural variation in incidence of homosexual behavior and in the way sexuality is treated linguistically. These issues are actually more pertinent to the social construction of sexual identity and sexual behavior than that of sexual orientation [or desire]. (Bailey, p. 106)

Relatedly, the members of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) noted that many studies of sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE)

do not adequately distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual orientation identity. ...The failure to distinguish these aspects of human sexuality has led SOCE research to obscure what actually can or cannot change in human sexuality. The available evidence...suggests that although sexual orientation [defined as “patterns of erotic, sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire for other persons based on those persons’ gender and sex characteristics” {2009, p. 30}] is unlikely to change, some individuals modified their sexual orientation identity (i.e., individual or group membership and affiliation, self-labeling) and other aspects of sexuality (i.e., values and behavior). (p. 3)

Norton (1997) asserted a similar linguistic and definitional confusion on the part of social constructionists between the concepts of homosexuality and homophobia. He argued that

far too often homosexuality and homophobia are discussed in the same breath, which either fails to note that they are separate entities or all too easily assumes that there is a direct and inevitable link between the two... homophobia has a direct link to heterosexual needs, fears and ideology; social constructionists have quite properly turned their attention to this subject, and have concluded that the image of the homosexual that is projected by homophobia is a silhouette originating in heterosexual ideology. The deconstruction of this subject has proved so interesting, and so useful for undermining heterosexual hegemony, that they...have simply

posited the nonexistence of homosexuals as an independent entity. (p. 135)

Given the preceding discussion of the concepts of sexual orientation and sexual identity, homosexuality and homophobia, it seemed clear that these constructs differed in crucial respects definitionally, and it seemed vital not to allow them to become conflated in any study examining the ways in which they may or may not be realized in the life stories of individuals.

Empirical Studies of Human Sexuality

The remainder of this chapter involved a consideration of the empirical research literature. That is, literature “based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic” (Pearsall, 2002, p. 467) related to human sexual desire, behaviour, and identity. For organizational purposes, I will divide these materials into the general categories of survey-based studies of aspects of human sexuality from the psychological and sexological fields; anthropological, cross-cultural, and historical studies of sexuality; and psychological and cultural research specifically investigating fluidity and change in sexuality over the lifespan.

Survey-based literature on aspects of human sexuality.

In a study of individuals’ perceptions of various aspects of their own sexualities and how they may or may not have changed over time, I believed it was appropriate to begin a review of the literature with a consideration of what was known regarding population-wide trends in erotic attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity. Through the use of standardized interview protocols and questionnaires presented to more or less representative samples of defined populations, survey research has been purported to generate clearly generalizable and cost-efficient portrayals of the characteristics of the members of a group. While problems regarding the representativeness of sample groups, and

conceptualization of terms (such as “homosexual”) have affected some of the works in this category, the more recent studies have generally been very good at avoiding such pitfalls and providing the clearest information possible, given the methods employed (Michaels, 1996).

The first major piece of population research in the Western world to give particular attention to aspects of human sexual behaviour and identity was the now famous two-volume work by Kinsey and colleagues, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Institute for Sex Research, 1953). Kinsey’s work gave rise to the often-cited notion that 10% of the North American population is homosexual, although the authors never made such an assertion and even argued against such categorization of individuals by virtue of their behaviour. Kinsey and his colleagues (1948) did report that 37% of men and 13% of women interviewed had “at least some overt homosexual experience to the point of orgasm between adolescence and old age,” and that 10% of men (and roughly half as many women) were “more or less exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55, while 4% of men and again approximately half as many women reported being “exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, after the onset of adolescence” (pp. 650-651). Kinsey and his associates also proposed their now widely utilized heterosexual-homosexual continuum of “psychologic reactions and overt experience” (Kinsey et al., p. 638), ranging from 0 to 6. Interestingly, Kinsey and his colleagues foreshadowed much social constructionist thought in cautioning that people

do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual.

The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. (p. 639)

While the survey research of Kinsey and his colleagues (1948; Institute for Sex Research, 1953) has had an enormous impact on Western thought regarding same-sex desire and has significantly furthered the drive to end official psychiatric labelling of homosexuality as a form of pathology (Michaels, 1996), the research did not explicitly address the issue of people's sense of their sexuality as an aspect of identity nor were longitudinal changes in individuals' sexual behaviour and desire clearly described, limiting the usefulness of the research for the purposes of this study. Additionally, a number of methodological flaws have been identified that rendered Kinsey and colleagues' findings problematic. Kinsey and associates' respondents clearly did not constitute a random sample of the American population, and it has been argued that many of the design features of the study served to exaggerate the amount of homosexual behaviour found. These features include participation of large numbers of men from all-male institutional settings and from gay social networks, and by virtue of the potential effects of volunteerism on the results (Michaels, 1996).

Given that the alleged design flaws in the work of Kinsey and his colleagues were well identified within a few years of the publication of their findings (Cochran, Mosteller, & Take, 1954), it was perhaps surprising that many years passed before any further large-scale survey-based research into human sexual behaviour was undertaken in North America. It was only with the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the continent that major efforts were made to gain more information regarding sexuality and sexual practices, particularly information concerning sex among men (Michaels, 1996). More recent efforts at large scale sexuality research have often been able to incorporate a representative sampling method of the population under study, addressing one of the chief shortcomings of Kinsey and colleagues' original survey work. A 1970 study conducted by the Kinsey institute obtained results quite similar to those of Kinsey and his colleagues in 1948 and 1953. They found that 20% of randomly selected American men reported sexual contact to the point of orgasm with another man at some point in their lives (Fay, Turner, Klassen, & Gagnon, 1970). In their 1991 review of the literature to that date, Rogers and Turner concluded that

roughly 5 to 7% of American men *report* some same-gender sexual contact in adulthood...that reported prevalence is somewhat higher for men living in urbanized areas.... These survey estimates...are best treated as lower bounds on the actual prevalence of such contact. (pp. 513-514)

Other recent research in the United States, Britain, France, and Denmark has given attention to erotic desire and self-identification as a lesbian or gay man as well as examining sexual behaviour. Overall, these surveys revealed that approximately 3% of men and 2% of women who were contacted identified themselves as gay or lesbian (Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu, & Pattatucci, 1993; Janus & Janus, 1993; Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Studies conducted in the U.S., U.K., and France found that 2 to 4% of women and 5 to 11% of men reported sexual contact with a member of the same gender within the preceding five years (Sell, Wells, & Wypij, 1995). Sell and his colleagues also reported that 8 to 12% of women and 8 to 9% of men indicated that they had experienced some erotic attraction to members of the same gender, without any sexual contact, since the age of 15. Finally, a study of a stratified random sample of Canadian males aged 18 to 27 found that 14% reported voluntary, same-gender sexual contact between the ages of 12 and 27, and 11% self-identified as gay or bisexual (Bagley and Tremblay, 1998).

Overall, the survey-based literature revealed that a large portion of Western populations were willing to report (although they arguably under-reported) feelings of same-gender attraction, same-gender sexual contacts, and self-identification as a gay man, lesbian, or bisexual. While almost none of the reports included a longitudinal component that would have given insight into lifetime changes in aspects of individual sexuality, it was clear that homoeroticism was a part of the lives of a significant number of adults in the Western world and, perhaps more interestingly, that there were notable differences among the numbers of people reporting same-gender sexual desire, sexual contact, and those embracing a queer identity (see also Diamond, 2003b).

Cross-cultural and historical studies of sexuality.

Cross-cultural and historical information regarding patterns of human sexuality and the meanings attached to sexual activities have been of interest to the proponents of both sides of the essentialist-social constructionist debate. While the anthropological and historical research into sexuality in non-Western societies has been very unevenly developed, it carried the promise of adding a vitally important new dimension to the larger fields of lesbian and gay and queer studies. By examining and taking into account the immense variations that existed in different local roles, practices, and forms of knowledge relating to sexuality (especially as they were prior to contact with Europeans), we could gain valuable insights into the commonality and extent of same-sex desire and the roles and meanings attached to it across different cultures and historical eras. Anthropological and historical data could be relevant to the essentialist-social constructionist controversy in many ways, and in particular, in the degree to which forms of expression of human sexuality actually varied across widely divergent societies and periods of history, and whether some evidence of same-sex eroticism existed in every human culture (Norton, 1997).

With respect to the broad trends revealed to date in the cross-cultural literature, Ford and Beach (1951) found that homoerotic sexual contact was considered socially acceptable for at least certain people in 64% of 76 societies under study. Writers in the area of the cross-cultural aspects of sexuality have inevitably acknowledged that

any single set of cultural institutions never completely contains the full range of human experience and innovation. Social coding practices may be uneven, incomplete, or in transition. Even if sexuality has a culturally specific and internally coherent complex of meanings...there remains a larger universe of experience, maladjustment, and emigration from prescribed interpretive frameworks. Moreover, the dominant sexual codes

of one place take on subterranean aspects elsewhere as a “little tradition.”

(Adam, 1985, p. 20)

It has also been acknowledged that “even one person may understand the same behavior differently on different occasions with different partners, or even with the same partner” (Murray, 2000, p. 3). With that being said, various authors have clustered the known forms of homoerotic sexuality from across all social and temporal contexts into typologies of three (Murray, 2000) or four (Herdt 1987, 1996) general categories of expression. These classification systems have had a great many commonalities, but I preferred Herdt’s slightly less homogenizing four-category model, which included the following groupings: age-structured same-sex practice, gender-transformed same-sex practice, class-specialized same-sex practice, and egalitarian same-sex practice.

Culturally institutionalized sexual contacts among males of unequal ages have been relatively common but irregularly distributed around the world. These age-structured same-sex practices might be permissible or obligatory; monoandrous or plural; might involve only relatively young, unmarried men, or could potentially include an older partner of any age so long as the other participant was at or had yet to attain young adulthood; were typically associated with the transition from childhood to adult status; involved an educative exchange between the older teacher and younger novice; and might be believed to be necessary for the youth’s normative gender development. Age-structured same-sex contacts have occurred in ancient Japan, China, Africa, the Middle East, lowland South America, New Guinea, the Pacific, and in some Indo-European cultures, and were most well-known among the ancient Greeks. This form of homoeroticism was often associated with military organizations and other exclusively male situations, such as monastic settings (Adam, 1985; Herdt, 1996).

In some other cultural contexts, same-sex eroticism was acceptable only when one partner adopted the gender role of the other sex as expressed in that society. Such gender transformations often began in childhood; typically involved occupational roles associated with the other gender; sometimes entailed

a ritual mimicry of the other sex's biological characteristics, such as menstruation and childbirth; may have involved mandatory castration for males; and were usually recognized and institutionally supported in the society (Callender & Kochems, 1985; Herdt, 1996; Roscoe, 1997). The "berdache" of the North American Aboriginal peoples (actually a term applied by Europeans to gender-variant members of different First Nations cultures) constituted the most well-known example of gender-transformed same-sex practice, and roughly 115 different tribes recognized such a role and form of expression. These persons were not stigmatized and were in fact often highly valued for their special spiritual qualities, industriousness, and other skills (Herdt, 1996). The Hijra of the Indian subcontinent, a class of cross-dressing castrated males with special roles as singers and dancers at traditional ceremonies and also often as beggars and prostitutes, were another example of this form of role and same-sex erotic practice (Carrier, 1980; Roscoe, 1997).

A third category of same-sex eroticism identified by Herdt (1987, 1996) was that of class or role-based practice. Not infrequently overlapping to a greater or lesser extent with the two preceding categories, this form of sexual contact took place in societies where homoerotic contact was engaged in by virtue of a particular status not held by many individuals in the culture. An example of this form would include the divine bisexuality practiced by shamans of the Siberian Chukchi tribe. While homosexual contacts are generally disapproved of in the society, the Chukchi shamans were entitled by their supernatural power to engage in same-sex sexuality. In another case, the subculture of female factory workers in the Canton delta area of China in the 19th century may be seen to have represented an illustration of this category of expression. These young women who lived and worked together often formed romantic and economic unions and did not marry, in defiance of the predominant patriarchal culture which did not accept female homosexuality (Herdt, 1996). Male and female temple prostitutes in ancient Mesopotamia and Canaan also fit into this category of sexual behavior, as they were able to engage in same-sex erotic contacts under the protection of well-established religious cults (Herdt, 1987).

The final category of homosexual erotic expression was the familiar 20th and 21st century Western model of egalitarian gay and lesbian relationships. Social constructionists have argued that these non-age-structured, non-gender-transformed relationships emerged only from the social and political circumstances of the late 19th century in Europe (Herdt, 1996). Essentialists have countered by pointing out that egalitarian relationships could be found in distinct subcultures long before the 19th century and in at least isolated cases in societies where other models predominated (as in classical Athens) (Norton, 1997; Nussbaum, 2002). However, this egalitarian expression has been most clearly linked in commonly accepted thought with a distinct sexual orientation, personal and social identity, and political movement (Herdt, 1996).

While societies have varied immensely in the degree to which same-sex eroticism was considered acceptable, the evidence suggested that “homosexual acts are probably universal in humans, but institutionalized forms of homosexual activity are not” (Herdt, 1996, p. 71). The historical, socio-cultural, and economic forces that were believed to influence patterns of erotic expression and stigmatization or acceptance of same-sex expression were still only beginning to be understood and remained largely conjectural.

Studies of Fluidity and Change in Sexuality Over the Lifespan

In this final section of chapter two, I turned my attention to those elements of the research literature involving a specific examination of whether and to what extent human romantic and sexual orientations were subject to change over the lifespan. This segment consisted of three main divisions: first, a consideration of the empirical evidence drawn from the context of “reparative” or sexual re-orientation therapies and the debates surrounding these controversial interventions; second, an examination of the phenomenon of consciously chosen sexualities and accounts of such choices, particularly those associated with feminist and other political convictions; finally, I reviewed the research evidence

from all other contexts that shed light on the concept of fluidity of sexuality and how it may have been expressed in the lives of research participants.

Research from the context of sexual re-orientation

therapies.

Since the inception of psychology as a distinct discipline, there have been records of attempts being made by clinicians to assist (or to help compel) individuals to change their long-standing and persistent sexual desires. These re-orientation therapies (or “reparative” therapies, as their proponents often name them) have been controversial for just as long, with both the efficacy of the procedures and their ethical appropriateness often the subject of heated debate. The therapeutic methods utilized in these procedures over the years have included feedback and modelling designed to produce gender-“appropriate” behavior patterns, heterosocial skills training, fantasy training, fading (the gradual replacement of homoerotic with heteroerotic visual stimuli), aversion therapy (involving both electroshock and chemical aversion treatments), and orgasmic conditioning (the pairing of heterosexual fantasies with masturbation in the laboratory) (Barlow, Abel, & Blanchard, 1979); “affection training” (consisting of instruction, modelling, and communication and assertiveness training) (Binder, 1977); and training in anticipatory avoidance of situations that may involve homoerotic arousal, desensitization to heteroerotic stimuli, operant conditioning shaping processes, and biofeedback (Adams & Sturgis, 1977). Martin (1984) cited treatment approaches as widely varied as individual and group insight-oriented therapies and Christian support techniques, and the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) identified a broad variety of interventions that have been used over the past 50 years including shame, nausea, paralysis, and electric shock-based aversion treatments; covert sensitization and systematic desensitization; and redirecting thoughts, reframing desires, and using hypnosis to attempt to alter erotic arousal, behaviour, and identity.

Soon after the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official manual of mental disorders in 1973, the ethical status of re-orientation treatments began to be seriously called into question, particularly in a series of papers by Davison (e.g., 1976, 1978). In the years that followed, the consensus of professional opinion had clearly turned against the proponents of change of orientation therapies, and all of the major North American mental health organizations issued position statements warning of the possibility of harm resulting from such treatments and stating that there was no evidence that such therapies could actually alter an individual's sexual orientation (e.g., American Counselling Association, 1998; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; American Psychological Association, 1997, 2008). More gay and lesbian-affirmative models of counselling and psychotherapy had begun to predominate (Division 44/Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force on Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients, 2000). However, after more recent efforts by North American right wing religious and political groups to use the purported results of re-orientation therapies, and the argument that sexuality was freely chosen and changeable, to limit the legal rights of gays and lesbians, re-orientation treatments experienced renewed prominence (Grace, 2005; Haldeman, 2002). In this new atmosphere, the debates over the ethical appropriateness and efficacy of re-orientation therapies reignited, particularly with regard to the research of Spitzer (2003) and his conclusion that re-orientation therapies were effective at changing the sexual orientations of some clients. Overall however, reports of long-term and substantial changes in sexual orientation through psychotherapy were justifiably criticized for serious methodological shortcomings (e.g., Beckstead, 2003; Carlson, 2003). On the basis of their review of the entire peer-reviewed literature related to the efficacy of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) published between 1960 and 2009, the APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation found that the majority of the studies had serious methodological deficiencies. They concluded that those meeting a reasonable standard of scholarly rigor demonstrated that

enduring change to an individual's sexual orientation is uncommon and...[only] a very small minority of people...showed any credible evidence of reduced same-sex sexual attraction, though some show lessened physiological arousal to all sexual stimuli. Compelling evidence of decreased same-sex sexual behavior and increased attraction to and engagement in sexual behavior with the other sex was rare. Few studies provided strong evidence that any changes produced in laboratory conditions translated to daily life. (2009, p. 43)

The APA task force also found evidence that both aversive and non-aversive forms of SOCE “may cause or exacerbate distress and poor mental health in some individuals, including depression and suicidal thoughts” (2009, p. 42).

Research regarding conscious choice of sexual orientation.

The idea that an individual could choose their sexual orientation was highly controversial, first because agreement with the proposition had tended to be correlated with the holding of a range of homophobic opinions (Whisman, 1996), with antigay advocates historically arguing the position “that homosexuality is a chosen behaviour which does not qualify individuals for either civil rights protection or the benefits of marriage” (Smith & Windes, 1999, p. 28). Additionally, many community-building efforts and arguments in favour of lesbian and gay civil rights protections were profoundly indebted to a basically essentialist, “ethnic” characterization of G/L/B/T/Q people (Epstein, 1987). Indeed, our Supreme Court's first (and unanimous) determination that the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) forbids discrimination on the basis of same-sex desire and behaviour was clearly made on the basis of the supposed immutability of sexual orientation and its asserted analogousness to ethnicity, religion, sex, age, and disability (*Egan and Nesbit v. Canada*, 1995).

Outside of the re-orientation therapy literature, the idea that an individual could exercise any significant degree of choice with regard to determining their sexuality was found primarily among discussions of so-called “political lesbians”. This characterization referred to women who presented their lesbianism as inextricably linked to a context of strong feminist ideology; who believed they played a very active role in the construction of their own sexuality; and who tended to see their lesbianism more as a means to challenge the asserted patriarchal exploitation of women than as an avenue to romantic love, personal fulfillment, or self-actualization (Kitzinger, 1987). While such accounts of personal sexual orientation and identity have sometimes been distinguished as “pseudohomosexual” (Defries, 1976) or as describing “bisexual” or “non-primary lesbians” (Burch, 1993), others have rejected such conceptualizations. Card (1995), for example (working from a clearly social constructionist perspective), asserted that at least some women could go from a situation of having a genuine and personally congruent choice of sexualities (which others might refer to as being bisexual) to, after an initial selection of a lesbian relationship, the consolidation of an immutable identity, because the original options of heterosexuality or bisexuality were no longer morally or politically acceptable.

Empirical investigations of the possibility of choice of sexuality have tended to support the genuineness of the phenomenon. Rosenbluth (1997) found that 58% of women in lesbian couples (and 32 % of women in heterosexual couples) believed “that they had chosen the sexual orientation of their current relationship” (p. 603), and Whisman (1996) also encountered numerous accounts of choice of sexuality. Unfortunately, both studies suffered from what seem to have been very unclear or over-inclusive definitions of “choice”. Whisman, for example, categorized cases of people who described themselves as bisexual and who selected a partner of one gender or the other as having made a choice of sexual orientation.

Overall, while the research evidence in support of the concept of choice of sexuality seemed equivocal, it did point to the possibility of such processes in at least some cases, and underscored the important points (elaborated by Baumeister,

2000; and Peplau & Garnets, 2000) that the development of men's and women's sexualities might be best described as proceeding according to quite different models, and that fluidity of sexuality might be somewhat more common among women than among men.

Research on fluidity of sexuality from all other contexts.

The remaining literature to be considered included empirical studies of experiences of fluidity of sexuality that were unrelated to the context of sexual orientation change efforts or to the idea of conscious choice of sexuality. As was mentioned in Chapter One, most of the empirical literature clearly dealing with the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality (which was discussed later in this chapter) could be characterized as involving a positivist epistemology (Stokes, Damon, & McKirnan, 1997), a survey-based or highly structured interview format (Diamond, 2000; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994), or a multimethod approach where narrative or thematic materials were given significantly less attention than were quantitative measures (Diamond, 2003a). Somewhat surprisingly, given what may have been a preponderance of material dealing with the experiences of gay men in the field of gay and lesbian studies, the majority of the research in this area was focused on lesbian women's accounts of their lives.

What this literature revealed overall was a strong level of agreement that there is tremendous variability "in the developmental trajectories of sexual minorities, especially sexual-minority women" (Diamond, & Savin-Williams, 2000, p. 310), and that experiences of short or long-term fluidity in sexuality were not at all uncommon among adults. Stokes (1997) and colleagues, in their study of fluidity of sexuality among behaviourally bisexual men found that 51% of their subjects experienced a notable change in their self described "overall sexual feelings" (p. 306) (i.e., one point or more on the Kinsey continuum) over a period of one year. Diamond (2000) found that 30% of her sexual-minority women interviewees reported a change in sexual identity over a span of two years. Finally, in a subsequent follow up with the same group three years later, Diamond

(2003a) reported that 49% of her sample had experienced a change in the way that they labelled their sexual identity to themselves (as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, or unlabeled) since the beginning of the study, and that sexual behaviour and (to a lesser extent) erotic desire tended to vary along with self-reports of identity.

With the preceding review of the relevant philosophical issues and the existing literature in the area of fluidity of sexuality completed, it was now appropriate to consider the specific research methodology that was utilized in this study.

Chapter 3

Method

In selecting a methodological framework from and within which to conduct this project, it seemed apparent that I had to give consideration to my guiding research questions, the theoretical background in this area of study, and my own stylistic and expressive preferences. As Patton (1990) has remarked, the researcher's best choice for a method of inquiry is typically that form which enables one most completely to answer the question or questions guiding the study. Given the three main research questions I laid out at the end of Chapter One, I believed that a narrative approach was epistemologically and practically most well suited to the inquiry thus constituted. An effort to gain insight into how people experienced and understood a complex psychological and cultural phenomenon and to construct and improve theory in that area should, I thought, seek access to the most unconstrained, holistic expressions of individuals' life worlds. As argued by Polkinghorne (1988), narrative is "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (p. 1). Stuhlmiller (2001) further stated that,

stories provide direct access to the richness of an encounter, including the situations, perceptions, and feelings that guided that person. Stories also serve to relate individual experience to the explanatory constructs of society and culture. The study of multiple stories allows the discovery of connections that link people together and accounts for the differences between people. (p. 64)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the characteristics and assumptions involved in narrative inquiry by saying that

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants.... An enquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p. 20)

The life stories that people tell organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes. They produced stories and histories that were as close to the subjectivity of living as possible and were suitable for analysis by a variety of different means. Narrative concepts and methods have also been closely linked to identity and processes of identity development, and therefore seemed even more appropriate for this project. Polkinghorne (1988), for example, describes how people conceive of themselves in terms of stories. Their personal stories are always some version of the general cultural stock of stories about how life proceeds. As narrative forms, these stories draw together and configure the events of one's life into a coherent and basic theme. (p. 107)

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) similarly proposed a powerful connection between narrative and identity and characterized human beings as "storytelling organisms who, individually and socially lead storied lives" (p. 2).

Beyond my perception of a narrative inquiry approach as well suited to the exploration of my research questions, I believed that it also offered a most appropriate methodological perspective, given the predominant theoretical positions associated with most of the literature in the area of plasticity or fluidity of sexuality. This field of inquiry was largely overshadowed by the ongoing debate between those perspectives commonly characterized as essentialist and social constructionist. One of my main goals in designing this study was to attempt to draw on both of these traditions as I pursued my subject matter. I wanted my research method to be, as much as was possible, amenable to both the

essentialist and social constructionist perspectives, and to draw on the insights offered by each for methodological design. Essentialism, a problematic term in recent decades, originated with modernism and the notion of the autonomous subject. The social constructionist perspective was somewhat more clearly identified with a postmodernist research paradigm. As was noted by Boswell (1992), “one of many ironies about the [essentialist/social constructionist] controversy is that [almost] no one deliberately involved in it identifies himself as an ‘essentialist’, although constructionists (of whom, in contrast, there are many) sometimes so label other writers” (p. 133). I took it as uncontroversial to state, however, that narrative research methods were well accepted and well utilized (albeit in different ways) within both the postmodernist tradition and those branches of qualitative psychology which were based in a postpositivist or critical paradigm (those divisions of psychological research with which I was most familiar) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Riessman, 2003). It was my intention to make use of this coming together of paradigms under the broad rubric of narrative research methods in order to draw upon the particular strengths and insights of each as I examined the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality.

Finally, as directed by the narrative methodological literature growing out of postpositivist, critical, and postmodernist epistemologies, I had to acknowledge my own personal presence in the design of this project and the roles that my values and interests would inevitably play (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988; Tierney, 2000). Having conducted nearly all of my previous research work within a phenomenological, thematic-analytic approach (e.g., Cey, 2000), I felt very familiar with such perspectives on the investigative endeavour, but now felt driven to make use of a new method as I continued to grow as a researcher. I wanted to remain within the broad confines of a qualitative approach while moving away from the very systematic, somewhat iterative character of a hierarchical thematic analysis as used in Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1975), and Osborne (1990; 1994). The final aspect, therefore, of my decision to adopt a narrative methodology emerged from my personal interest in an approach that I saw as rich, in depth, and respectful of people’s unique contexts and experiences,

and, as a consequence, particularly well-suited to a researcher who was also training as a counselling psychologist. The use of narrative inquiry enabled and encouraged me to be more creative and expressive than might be the case with other qualitative methodologies.

Selection of Co-Researchers

I recruited study participants through a process of purposive sampling. This was an approach involving my own deliberate choice of a group of people who, together, could provide the best and most thorough descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon under study (Osborne, 1990; Wertz, 1984). As suggested by Polkinghorne (1983), I wanted to emphasize the nature of my co-researchers' relevant experiences, not any thoughts about population characteristics or sampling, and I clearly agreed that "the point in subject selection [in this type of research] is to obtain richly varied descriptions, not to achieve statistical generalization" (p. 48).

Becker (1986) and Polkinghorne (1983) suggested two general criteria for the selection of good participants for interview-based studies in the human sciences. The individual must both have had salient experience of the phenomenon under study and have been able to relate their experiences and personal stories in a full and sensitive way. Van Kamm (1969, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1983) proposed six factors necessary for co-researchers to fulfill the latter of these requirements. They included

- (a) the ability to express themselves linguistically with relative ease, (b) the ability to sense and to express inner feelings and emotions without shame and inhibition, (c) the ability to sense and to express the organic experiences that accompany these feelings, (d) the experience of the situation under investigation at a relatively recent date, (e) a spontaneous

interest in their experience, and (f) the ability to report or write what was going on within themselves. (pp. 47-48)

As I proceeded with the selection of co-researchers, I bore in mind both these guidelines and my desire to select for a good range of variation in individuals' descriptions of their experiences. Additionally, I abided by the following delimiting criteria:

- (a) The person must be aged 18 or older at the time he or she agrees to participate in the project.
- (b) The individual must have experienced, within the preceding 10 years, a self-described change in their sexual desire, behaviour, and/or identity.

The first of these conditions was in place both in order to avoid the necessity of additional ethical safeguards to protect minors who might agree to serve as research participants and to escape, as much as was possible, the potential for confusion between an instance of fluidity of sexuality and what have been described by some as the more typical developmental changes in sexuality and sexual orientation that were most commonly experienced during adolescence (e.g., Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979; and Cass, 1979).

Five co-researchers were contacted via postings at G/L/T/B/Q community centres, local bookstores, nightclubs, and other businesses; through notices posted in regional queer-focused on-line news services; with visits to local queer social groups to discuss the research and invite participation; and by means of personal referral or "snowball" sampling. Each participant was asked to select a pseudonym by which he and his narrative could be identified in this work. This was in order to better protect the privacy and confidentiality of the co-researchers.

Interview and Follow-Up Procedures

As I progressed through the research process, I wanted to be guided by the principle of emergent or flexible design (Borg & Gall, 1989; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) as much as possible. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued, researchers from other perspectives often "...begin inquiry in theory, whereas narrative inquirers tend to begin with experience as lived and told in stories. ...For narrative inquiry, it is more productive to begin with explorations of the phenomena of experience...." (p. 128). I hoped that this approach would allow for the best possible inclusion of unanticipated issues and questions and for the expression of the unique, dynamic nature of the work and the stories that my co-researchers and I lived and told. Throughout the research process, I wanted to follow Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) lead as they stated that "in our work, we keep in the foreground of our writing a narrative view of experience, with the participants' and researchers' narratives of experience situated and lived out on storied landscapes as our theoretical and methodological frame" (p. 128).

Another general principle that guided my research procedure was the importance of creating the best possible rapport between myself and my co-researchers (Osborne, 1994) and of cultivating an atmosphere for interviewing that was conducive to deep, rich, verbal expressiveness (Becker, 1986). I attempted to ensure that interview settings were quiet, private, and comfortable, and I made every effort to treat the co-researchers with respectful informality, mutuality, and authenticity (Osborne, 1994).

The overall structure for data gathering in this study involved three interviews. The initial interview was fairly brief and was intended to begin the establishment of rapport with potential co-researchers and to inform them of the nature and purpose of the project. I conducted my first-stage interviews beginning in the late summer of 2006 and had completed them by the autumn of that year. The broad objectives of the study were discussed, as well as co-researchers' rights as research participants, and the structure and purpose of the three interviews. Co-researchers who agreed to continue participating in the study were given an information letter and consent form presenting this material in

summary form. They were encouraged to ask any questions they had regarding the study, and these inquiries were promptly answered. Individuals who wished to proceed were asked to sign their information and consent forms and were also given a research participant's hand-out to read before our second meeting. This hand-out explained the minimally-structured format envisioned for the second, data-gathering interviews and reassured them of the importance and appropriateness of their experiences, however they choose to describe them (Becker, 1986).

The second interview served as our primary forum for obtaining information about co-researchers' experiences of fluidity of sexuality. These open-ended dialogal encounters were intended to allow co-researchers fully and spontaneously to describe their experiences before any effort on my part to prompt them with questions about particular aspects of their experiences (Osborne, 1990). As with the initial meetings, these second-stage interviews took place throughout the late summer and fall of 2006. Once the co-researchers had told their stories and described their experiences to their satisfaction, I prompted them toward the consideration of some general themes derived from the literature and my own prior understanding of the study topic (Osborne, 1994) (see Appendix B, Interview Guide). These second interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

Before conducting the third and final interview, the transcript of the each co-researcher's second interview as well as an initial analysis were completed and sent to the co-researcher for his consideration. During the third interview, the co-researchers were asked to confirm the accuracy of their transcripts and to comment on any changes or reactions they experienced after reading their transcript and my tentative analysis. These conversations were also audio-taped for transcription and analysis, and took place from October of 2008 until September of 2009. Four of the five third interviews were actually completed by late December of 2008, but the final one was delayed by difficulties in both transcription and in making contact with the co-researcher, who had moved to another province since our second interview. To help deepen my understanding

of the co-researchers' experiences and to obtain more rigorous and triangulated perspectives, the co-researchers were also invited to consider their experiences of fluidity of sexuality and the reflection upon these experiences they had done throughout the research process. In addition, they were invited to provide any artwork, written reflections, or other similar representations they felt might help to convey other aspects of their overall experience.

Data Analysis

My own process of narrative meaning-making was an ongoing one, beginning with my first interviews with my co-researchers. As described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative analysis was fundamentally about interpretations drawn from and supported by the richly detailed interviews (or field texts) and my own reflexive work, such as research journal entries and notes to myself that I made throughout the progression of the study. I wanted carefully to document my own experiences of conducting the interviews and thinking about people's stories of fluidity of sexuality. This allowed me to make clear to readers my own context and perspective on the phenomenon and on the research process. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued, such steps were necessary in order to illuminate and support the meanings and interpretations I have offered in my completed research text. The process of narrative "coding" of my interview transcripts was essentially one of seeking important meanings in the co-researchers' stories—reading and re-reading them, searching for "...names of the characters,... places where actions and events occurred, story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear..." (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). The interview transcript field texts were further transformed through the reflexive process of collaboration with my co-researchers to determine whether my interpretations felt accurate to them and did justice to their experiences. A final aspect of the move from field texts to research texts involved my search for "patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes"

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132) that got at the deeper meanings and personal and social significance of the co-researchers' experiences. The process of analysis was an open and flexible one, with continual revision and consultation going on while each new field text was added to my pool of available information. Data analysis continued throughout my process of interviewing and re-interviewing the co-researchers, and ended with my completion of a first draft of this dissertation in August of 2010. Several revisions to that text were made both before and after my dissertation defense in March of 2011, bringing this document to its current and final form.

Establishing That the Study Has Been Well Conducted

A consensus among narrative researchers regarding what makes for a well conducted narrative inquiry had not been reached at the time of the writing this document (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, 2000; Lincoln, 2002; Maxwell, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Narrative inquirers were generally encouraged to seek out and apply the criteria of merit that best fit their research questions, particular methods, and personal and theoretical perspectives. As Clandinin and Connelly (1990) stated,

Like other qualitative methods, narrative inquiry relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research. The language and criteria for the conduct of narrative inquiry are under development in the research community.... It is currently the case that each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work. (p. 7)

In general, I viewed this research project as an effort to illuminate, in as much depth and with as much richness of detail as is possible, the lived experience of fluidity of sexuality, and the ways that such experiences become a

part of peoples' narratives of personal identity. With this in mind, I believed that one of my primary criteria for judging the quality of this work should be whether or not and to what extent it had *empathic generalizability* or *resonance*. By empathic generalizability I meant the sense, similar to that by which a work of art or literature could appeal to one's sense of a shared, human means of "making meaning in the world" (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1993, p. 1). It was a transcontextual recognition of the deep structure or pattern of a lived experience (Osborne, 1994). Resonance, similarly, was a process described by Conle (1996) by which one accessed one's own memories and experience in order to connect with and gain a better understanding of a foreign experience which had been described in a rich and detailed manner. Empathic generalizability and resonance among readers of my final report would allow them to come closer to an intuitive sense of the co-researchers' experiences and would help to demonstrate the quality and value of my research.

A second and more general means of establishing the merit of a piece of qualitative research involved supporting one's interpretations and conclusions with "coherent and convincing arguments" (Osborne, 1990, p. 88). By striving to support my interpretations with clear references to my interview transcripts and other materials provided by the co-researchers (Wertz, 1984), and by carefully describing the processes of data analysis used, I was able to justify and defend all of the decisions I made throughout the research process. Through a rhetorical and juridical process, I did all that I could to convince my readers that my inferences and conclusions were reasonable, appropriate, comprehensive, and honest (Girden, 2001; Kvale, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1983; Stiles, 1993).

As was mentioned earlier, a process of triangulation was utilized in the study in asking the co-researchers to consider providing written or artistic impressions of their experiences. This would strengthen and contribute to the overall rigor of the study by helping to clarify meanings and by bringing in different perspectives on the phenomena (Patton, 1990; Stiles, 1993). This triangulation procedure (or the related, qualitative postmodern deconstruction of triangulation referred to by some as *crystallization* [Richardson, 2000]) would

provide different ways of seeing and of organizing and conceptualizing experiences than was available through narratives alone, and would allow a deepened, more complex, but still (inevitably) partial understanding of the co-researchers' experiences (Richardson, 2000).

Finally, I strove to ensure the quality and persuasiveness of my work through attention to authority and authorship, two factors particularly associated with postmodernist inquiry (Richardson, 1990). By bearing in mind that I, as the narrator/researcher, was speaking on behalf of the co-researchers and presenting their words, ideas, and experiences, I strove always to remain aware of the social and power relationships between us and how they might affect my finished work. By choosing to act and to write, I know that I was deploying power, but, in this project, I was also striving to give voice to those who might otherwise not be heard. I acknowledged that I was “an embodied, historically and culturally situated speaker” (Richardson, p. 27) with my own inevitable biases, but I remained responsible for my words and work to represent my co-researchers' experiences with honesty and completeness. Overall, as Richardson described, I would attempt “to tell collective stories as *both true and partial*” (p. 28).

A Note Regarding My Quotations from Interview Transcripts

In my presentation of the co-researchers' stories in the following five chapters, I used two styles of quotation. The first style presented an initial text, which synthesized my analysis of the co-researcher's comments related to the question and/or questions I asked. Following the synthesis, the co-researcher's most salient quotes were included. The second style of presentation captured the conversational tone of our interview and, in addition, served to acknowledge specifics in the co-researcher's story. This second style includes the question/s that I asked and these were followed by the co-researcher's response.

Having discussed the method I employed in this project, I proceeded to my presentation of the narratives I had gathered. In order to protect the co-

researchers' anonymity, identifying personal information was not included in the data collection. The stories were presented in a non-systematic order, beginning with Rupert, and followed by Neil, Tom, Chris, and Luke.

Chapter 4

Rupert's Story

During our interviews, Rupert related several wide-ranging narratives including those of some very challenging experiences and social interactions related to his sexuality, transformations in his sense of self, and evolving personal meanings and expectations for the future. In the pages that follow, I have grouped the stories that Rupert told and my reflections on them into five loose thematic divisions: stories of relationships; stories about teasing, stereotypes, roles, role models, and community connections; stories of experiences of counselling; stories of sense of sexuality and identity, identity labels, the process of change, and choice; and reflections on implications for the future and overall meanings.

Stories of Relationships

Rupert's story of his evolving sense of his own sexuality included many reflections on how, for him, the process touched upon and was touched by the full range of important interpersonal relationships in his life. He spoke of how his changing sexuality had tremendous social relevance for him, not only in his interactions with romantic or sexual partners, but also in his relationships with immediate and extended family members and with friends. Rupert began our interview with some reflection on his earliest romantic experiences.

Well, I'm kind of a late bloomer. I didn't have any relationships until I was in grade 12 or so. And then I had my first girlfriend....

He related how this first relationship, while it was very important to him and emotionally and socially rewarding, seemed in some ways limited and lacking in intensity.

... And so I had this girlfriend and we were friendly and... kissing was great but it never progressed beyond that, during like...it went on for like eight months.

Now it's simple to say [laughs] but at the time it was...it wasn't easy to wrap my head around. It was just kind of something where I was like... "Well, I like my girlfriend but...I don't like her enough."

I always liked her in a...in a getting along really well and having a lot of fun together [way] and...having someone special because I've never actually even dated anyone before that, even in a very young, high school sense. And so just that feeling of having someone you look out for, someone special and that was really great and I really value it still. But I just wasn't attracted to her in a "let's have sex" type of way, during the whole relationship. And so I think that was maybe part of how I realized it.

It seems that the lack of passion in Rupert's earliest romantic relationship was the first of several salient cues (I return to others later) that eventually lead him to realize that a heterosexual identity label did not feel accurate or genuine for him.

Having engaged in a process of beginning to accept this profound new realization about himself, Rupert described a series of situations where he reflected on, planned, and carried through with discussions with the important people in his life to share this newly-discovered aspect of his identity with them. Approaching these conversations was clearly a momentous task for Rupert, and

one that repeatedly provoked a great deal of anxiety and some fearful, or at the least disconcerting, expectations for him.

It was kind of scary when I was realizing at first...like trying to...I think the very first thing I did was tell one really close friend of mine that I thought I was gay and...it was just before I decided...and while I was deciding and telling my...at that time girlfriend and family, I was really...it was just a big change and a big shift to go through.

I told both my girlfriend and my family all in one weekend because I just felt like I needed to just do it. It was sort of pulling off a Band-Aid, and it needed to be fast and really sudden.

[I was] scared of such a change. Scared of how...everyone around me would react, or that I'm making a mistake...that was the fear. ...I don't think it was being scared of just being gay. I think that it's not...it still didn't feel like it was so widely accepted.... Just kind of scared of something different, something new.

I was definitely worried about...if I am going to have a family with children it's going to be different...I am unsure of what I want or what I expect from the future. That was definitely part of the whole concern over everything.

I think changing my mindset or my expectations to being gay has meant that I have more seriously considered being single all the rest of my life and being happy. Or finding someone but never having children. ...I think that's maybe also just part of growing up. When you're younger you think "I'm going to get married and have children" because that's what you see around you and you think that's the thing to do. So now I'm just more seriously considering the fact that that might not happen. But I'm not upset about that in any way. I just think it's going to be fine no matter what. I have uncles and aunts, like my father's uncles and aunts that have lived all their lives single and they don't seem to be too upset about anything. They seem pretty happy.

Despite these challenges however, Rupert made clear that he felt a strong drive to be both honest with others and forthright about what he experienced as a fundamentally important aspect of who he was.

And I felt like it was...easier and better for the people around me and myself to...I don't know, just kind of prepare for the fact that I was going to be dating guys. ...Somehow that was...what I was going to be doing, "get ready everyone" or something. [Laughs] I don't know. And get ready for me too, just to get used to the idea. I was just shifting what my identity was for myself and for the people around me.

...It was better to do that rather than to just keep it a secret and break up with my girlfriend and just keep thinking about it myself. And then when my close friends or family would ask "why did you break up with your

girlfriend?” that was why. And so then it was just kind of...sensible and more honest to the people around me to say “that’s what I am, that’s how I feel,”...

Once Rupert had become determined to begin discussing his sexuality with the important people in his life, he turned to some of his closest friends, both to finalize the process of coming-out to himself (about which, more later), and to gain support and encouragement to help him to continue with further, even more challenging, disclosures to others.

...I had been thinking about it [coming-out to his parents] for a while before. I had talked to one friend like three weeks before and another friend a week before, and talking to them and having them say “it’s okay, things will work out,” really helped. I think I was lucky that I had the friends for that.

So many people when I told them would respond in a really accepting way and that was wonderful. And it really helped me feel better about...the change, the realization, the acceptance of myself.... And yeah...it was...it was like taking off a Band-Aid suddenly and saying “well things aren’t so bad underneath. It’s going to be okay....” It was a really good experience. It just felt like...I could stop worrying about how people perceived me...it was very liberating. I just could be myself and say “that’s me and you’re just going to have to accept it.” It was a very positive experience, once it was over with. [Laughs] But during the time it was hard.

Fortified by the positive reactions he had received from his friends, Rupert approached the task of disclosing his changed sexual identity to his parents. As

he had mentioned earlier, Rupert's plan had been to come-out to his parents as quickly as possible after he had begun making these disclosures to others. He later came to wonder, though, if the suddenness of his coming out to his parents may have contributed to their cautious and not entirely supportive response.

I think that's probably why my parents got a bit freaked out at it, just because it was so fast.

My parents...because I'd just been having a girlfriend for eight months, it was a bit of a transition for them [laughs]. They think "oh wow" when I told them and so they asked if I would maybe talk to a psychologist or a therapist or something, just to make sure that I wasn't going through something really loopy and coming out in the middle of nowhere.

[His parents' suggestion that Rupert see a counsellor was] to make sure that...I had my head on my shoulders. I was a bit taken aback by that, the very day that they said it. But now I can see that they needed some sort of...they just needed probably some time to get used to that, and that's okay. And also just some sort of way of saying "well, we don't know much about this, we want someone who knows something about this to make sure everything is okay," kind of.

...It wasn't what I pictured in my ideal coming out to my parents talk.

They kind of...they made it a bit upsetting for me.... Just the feeling that my parents were worried about me or concerned about me, kind of...made

me more worried and concerned, or made me feel like...this was a bigger deal.... Just this feeling that my parents...weren't sure or were taken aback by this. ...Now I can look back and understand that that would have been a real shocker for them, and so that's okay. Now I can totally forgive...not really even forgive but just...I'm used to that idea. But at the time it kind of wasn't what I wanted from them....

Happily, Rupert's experience with his counsellor (discussed later) was a positive one, and his immediate family have become increasingly positive and accepting of his sexuality since he came out to them approximately 4 years before our first interview.

...I have one brother and he's always been really great and supportive. It's been okay. The first time I went out for coffee with a guy, my mom was like "why did you spend time with this friend?" Or something like that, and I was like "mom, we're dating," and she said "oh right, you have to remind me about this." [Laughs] It was really cute. And so yeah...they've been getting used to it. It's been good. It's been a positive experience...how the immediate family has worked out.

Rupert indicated that discussing his sexuality with the members of his extended family has felt both less urgent and, in some ways, more difficult. He described how the fact that he was not involved in a long-term romantic relationship at the time of our interview made coming out to his grandparents feel less necessary, but that if he did become involved with someone in that way, he would feel much more motivated to disclose some of the details of his sexuality to these family members.

I get the feeling that...I can cross the bridge of telling my family if I met someone and wanted to have more of a permanent relationship with them.

Because I've only dated maybe up to four months with someone, so it's never been a very long relationship, necessarily.... But somehow it would make it...then...my extended family would deserve to know, or there would be a reason definitely that they should know. But right now, when I'm just dating someone in the short term, somehow that's different. And it's very strange, because that wasn't at all how I was thinking when I was coming out to my immediate family.

Rupert also recalled that his parents initial, quite cautious reaction to his coming out seemed to have an inhibiting effect on his willingness to come out to other family members.

But my parents said something along the lines, right away, about "could we wait to tell the rest of your family", or "could you keep it quiet until you've talked to the therapist, until you know for sure?" ...So I just got this feeling of "keep it quiet." And my own friends...it kind of feels like it's my choice. With my family it feels a bit more like...like I had that impediment at first, and so then it's been hard to go past that now.

He related that at least some of the increased difficulty he experienced in disclosing his sexuality to his extended family was likely due to their being mainly older individuals and those whose values and attitudes toward homosexuality might be less congenial than those of Rupert's immediate family members.

...For my grandmothers...they deserve to know too, but somehow it's just, in an everyday sense, I can avoid it, and so I have been for a while now. I'm not comfortable with that, and I'm not proud of it, but somehow I've managed to avoid that and somehow in my head that's okay. But they

deserve better and they deserve to know what's going on with my life. I mean, it's tricky because around the time I [began] coming out, my grandfathers were still alive and I kept feeling that they wouldn't necessarily have been as accepting of it.

Now I think...I don't know why exactly. I still feel a little scared, I guess, of older ideas and values.

And I'm a bit worried about my father's side of the family. They're a bit...they're quite traditional.... And they're just...there isn't someone out on that side of the family. So I would be the first, and that's scary to me I guess, still.... And my dad had three brothers and so very much a guy's guy...type of feeling when the family is there, very much into repairing cars, and gardening, and building sheds. And I don't know, just...I still get this feeling that comes across to me that I don't feel 100% comfortable with saying I'm gay.

While Rupert's efforts to be completely open and honest with his extended family members about his sexuality continued, the process of coming out to new friends proceeded apace, and he also began to gain some first experiences of what it was like to date other men.

...I guess I'm still in the process of coming out 100% to the world or still have not yet. But, any new friends that I meet, that's what I say.

And then for a long while it was just a question of talking to my friends about the fact that I was gay and that was plenty...I didn't really have any...the first like dating experience I had was still a half a year or a year later after realizing that I was gay.... ...He was flirting with me in a choir situation and then he just asked me to go to coffee and it was just...very exciting and...nice. It was a good feeling.

A final important aspect of his process of change in sexual identity that, for Rupert, seemed to be broadly connected to his relationships with others was an apparently reciprocal interaction between feelings of certainty about his sexual identity facilitating the process of coming out and the process of actually coming out to others further solidifying Rupert's certainty about his sexual identity.

And I remember when my parents were like "oh, are you sure?" I felt kind of almost...I felt like "well, if I've taken this big step to tell you this, yes I'm sure. I wouldn't waste my time if I wasn't sure," you know?... And I almost got a little impatient with them...I felt a little like, "no, I've worked really hard and gotten past fears to say this to you. That is why I am sure."

I think going through the process of telling my...at that point girlfriend and parents that I was gay kind of solidified it to me almost, because I was so ready to say something scary to myself...it was scary for me to say it, and I was willing to do it anyhow. And so that kind of, to me made it okay....it was "I have accepted this" or "this is who I am."

Yeah, expressing it [his gayness] to other people did it for me. And the first two times that I was calling a friend or talking to a friend and saying I think so, was kind of testing the waters, but I still didn't feel 100% sure. And with it being one or two close friends I felt like if I changed my mind I could always just say "well, that was what I thought at the time."

Stories of Teasing, Stereotypes, Roles, Role Models, and Community Connections

At several points during the telling of his story, Rupert described his familiarity with various culturally-available stereotypes of what gay men are allegedly like and what impact he believed this knowledge had on him during his process of change in sexuality. Even before he came to recognize his attractions to other men, Rupert said that others would occasionally tease him about their perceptions that some things about him concurred with predominant stereotypes of gay men.

There had been teasing and stuff before about being gay and I kind of had the feeling...I remember having the feeling that being who I was didn't mean I was gay because I was a friendly, open person, and so sometimes that comes across as the stereotype of being gay. And I felt like just because I was a stereotypical person that seems gay doesn't mean I am gay. That was my, like, defiant feeling.... [Also] a lot of my closer friends were girls, and sometimes that comes across as being that. I was fond of wearing bright colors.... Otherwise, I'm a music student and I was into choirs and stuff like that and...that's a big one actually. Those types of interests rather than playing sports. That comes across as the stereotype.

Not saying that that is a clue or anything like that, but that's kind of what makes people think that that's a possibility.... Nothing big. Like it was never anything that made me feel really hurt. But just every once in a while a friend would make a comment or something like that.

Rupert described how, on different occasions, both before and after coming out to himself, other people's suggestions that he in some way fit a stereotype of a gay man awakened in him a sense of defiance. This was not a rejection of his feelings of attraction to other men, but a refusal to be limited by other people's stereotypical expectations.

...Once in a blue moon I would just get this feeling like someone had said something like that [suggesting that he conformed to stereotype in some way] and it would kind of bring out a defiant like "no, that doesn't make me gay." ...Liking guys makes me gay. Singing music does not make me gay, and that's kind of the feeling I had in me and it was kind of "grrr," you know?...Just kind of defiant.

Rupert indicated that, since embracing his new identity as a gay man, he had had some occasion to reflect on what role, if any, prominent stereotypes about gay men might play in influencing his behavior. He also wondered whether or not he was content to accept such influences in his life.

...I think also I remember saying...during that conversation with that therapist, that I was afraid I was a stereotype and I didn't like the idea of that.... That I was a music student who was gay, a voice major who was gay, and that just seemed to me to be so...like I was almost just buying into something. I was a bit afraid that it wasn't who I was, that it was just "well that's what everyone thinks, so why not?" I was a bit scared about that.... I've not thought about it as much since; I think I've just gotten on

with life and not worried about it. But that was something that I was concerned with at the time.

I still sometimes think about that stereotype and worry about whether I'm behaving...because of what I am, or whether I'm behaving because...of a social norm. And so I...I don't know. Sometimes I just kind of self-evaluate a little bit about that. But we all play roles throughout our day and throughout our lives and so maybe that's just another role that I'm aware that I have.... So I'm still conscious of it but it isn't...something I worry about actively, just something I try and make sure that I'm not presenting myself as because I think people expect it. If I'm presenting myself as something I want to do it because I want it, not because...I think other people want it of me, maybe.

To me...the thing that people expect is someone who...I don't know...I just worry about being super dramatic about something or coming across as being...kind of frivolous. Kind of Jack from "Will and Grace"; very over-the-top and not...having much substance. That's the negative things that I want to avoid. That's just the feeling that I get, that I don't want people to discount me.... I don't want to present that and I think sometimes maybe I do....

Rupert's eventual contacts with other men who identified as gay provided him with examples of ways of being that stood in sharp contrast to the predominant and generally negative stereotypes of homosexuals with which he

was familiar. He described how interacting with complex and interesting individuals who publicly embraced their gay identities was a powerfully positive experience which significantly reinforced for Rupert the availability and personal acceptability of such an identity.

And I met other people...afterwards when I...started going to college and they were the first actually like peers who were openly gay. There was no one at my high school who was openly gay. And so I think seeing that and seeing...I mean I had an aunt who was a lesbian and had a partner and so it was accepted within my family, and that's a great step and that was really wonderful, but just seeing someone else my age, who was openly gay, I think that just kind of helped...me to realize that that was...normal or that was possible for me or something. It seems so strange because growing up...it's been much more of a possibility. There's been "Will and Grace" on the TV and everything, so I don't know why that did it for me, but somehow it did....

Rob: Do you think there was added relevance that these were also men?

Rupert: Yeah, I think that's probably part of it. Someone my age and a guy.... ... Just seeing other people around me, my age, my peers, that said "I'm gay" and that were just...that was fine for them. It was really a good feeling.

Rob: What about what you described...that sense of...that somehow meeting other gay guys your own age, that this made it [identifying as gay himself] more possible?...

Rupert: Yeah,...I saw the reality of it or the fact that it was accepted and...that there were just people around and that's who they were, but there was a lot more to them than that. And it was very liberating to see that. Because when you see...often still, when you see...a gay character in a movie or a TV show, that's like 90% of their character, being gay. But these people who I met...they were complete people, who were gay. And it was just much more real then. It was really good....It was just who they were, and they were many other things as well.

Although Rupert indicated that his personal contacts with other gay men had been very rewarding, and despite their apparent significance to his process of identity change, he stated that he had not yet experienced much desire to seek out elements of his local, organized queer community.

I don't interact with...Davie Street or the "official" [community]...or even just like Pride [on campus] a great deal. Little bits, but...it isn't...I mean I like the idea, and I like being there sometimes, but...it isn't where I'm 100% at home either.

Rupert stated that, at least at this point in his life, he enjoyed the company and camaraderie of gay-identified friends and classmates, but had little occasion to reflect upon issues of gay liberation, human rights, or community membership.

It's not super important to me...I don't talk with gay friends particularly about being gay very much. ...Just having other gay people around is really nice.

Rob: So, it sounds like most of your contact with other gay people is through friendship networks and school?

Rupert: Yeah, it's incidental. It's not necessarily directly seeking it out. In the end maybe it's good sometimes just to treat it like "I met another person with freckles today," almost. You know? It's just something else...I mean obviously it does color our perceptions, and other people's perceptions of us much more. But sometimes just letting it be...just another part of us.

Rob: Was there ever a point in your process where this organized community or being where other gay people were felt more important?

Rupert: I can't think of anything, no. Just since coming to school..., there've been more gay people in classes, openly gay people in classes. So I've...not been the gay person in a situation, alone. So maybe that's why I'm kind of spoiled and I don't feel like I need to seek out other gay people because I've always had that, just without even trying. So then I can feel kind of...safe and it's okay, without looking for it.

Stories of Experiences of Counselling

Rupert attended a small number of counselling sessions with a psychologist at the request of his parents, having a specific focus on his changing sense of his own sexuality. Rupert said that his experience of these sessions was generally quite positive, and that they served both to help him feel more confident in himself and his sexuality and to assist his parents in their acceptance of Rupert's status as a gay man.

...I went to this confidential counselling service through my dad's work...where you can talk to them about whatever you need to and nothing will get reported back which was really nice. ...I talked a lot about...things

like the fact that I was attracted to the male model on a poster rather than female one, or things like that. And yeah it was a good experience. And I think they [his parents] thought I was going in for more of...an ongoing therapy, but this place was more about one or two times, or if I felt like I needed it. So at the end the therapist said... “well, you seem to have your head screwed on right” type of thing. “If you need any more advice or more time with me, feel free to call me.” But it was two hours and it felt...exhaustive...it felt like that was good. And so I went back and told my parents and that was just kind of it for a while. We just kind of dropped the subject. My family’s kind of good about just leaving things be sometimes.

Rupert’s description of his therapist’s approach to queer issues in counselling was also very positive: she seems to have been a very caring professional working within a clearly gay-affirmative paradigm.

Rob: [What] was your impression of your counsellor in terms of their perspective on gay people and their knowledge about gay issues?

Rupert: She didn’t seem like it was her job all the time. I think it was one of the things that she knew about but it wasn’t her specialty by any means, I don’t think. But she seemed knowledgeable enough...for then...knowledgeable enough when I didn’t have any specific issue that I was bringing up. It was good enough and she...I don’t know. I wasn’t going to her as a resource to find out information.... I had trust and confidence in her at the time.

She seemed to think it [homosexuality] was pretty normal. My view was that her perceptions were pretty positive about the whole thing. Her main thing was wanting me to kind of take my time about things in case I was feeling something at that time but it changed later. Just not to do anything that...just to take care of myself. ...I think it worked...it was pretty good. She was more about talking to me as a person rather than addressing an issue that she thought I had.... I think it was pretty good.

Stories of Sense of Sexuality and Identity, Identity Labels, the Process of Change, and Choice

The overall process of change in sexuality and sexual identity that Rupert described, while at times very challenging and stressful, seems to have progressed quite quickly and in a generally linear fashion (i.e., with only the most minimal backtracking or divergence from what appears to have been its main “path” or “trajectory”). Rupert moved relatively rapidly from his first awareness of feelings of romantic and sexual attraction to other men to his eventual acceptance of the genuineness, positive value, and permanence of these homoerotic feelings and to an increasing level of skill and ease with which he became able to share this very important aspect of his identity with others.

It was quite fast for me, overall. I think I probably talked to my first friend on the phone mentioning it about a month before I told my girlfriend and family. I mean, I must've thought about it for a little while before I told my first friend, like maybe another month at most. But I mean...two months personally, is quite fast I think. [Laughs] And...it wasn't like the question wasn't in my mind before that, but I didn't think

about it seriously for a very long time before I made up my mind...came out. And...I didn't go back and forth a lot in my thinking. ...I must have been unsure, but it wasn't anything that I can remember definitely changing direction a great deal on. It just seems to be something, now looking back, that it was kind of gradually getting used to it, or figuring out how to handle it, overall. That's just the way that I can describe it. That it wasn't too back and forth, but it wasn't very incredibly smooth either, obviously.

As a process and a personal story, Rupert's experience of change in his sexuality seems to have commenced with his, at first tentative but increasingly undeniable, recognition that his feelings of romantic and sexual passion for others did not fit the socially prescribed, heterosexual pattern. Rupert described being confronted by the facts that he felt little if any sexual desire for his then girlfriend, but that he was increasingly aware of having such feelings for other men.

I think the fact that I was happy making out with my girlfriend at the time, but I didn't really want to do more than that, it was a big starting point. And then...when I looked at a billboard and there'd be two models, a male and a female model on it, I just liked looking at the male model more. It was just the very plain fact.... It was very simple that way. It was just kind of realizing that that was what I liked more, and that was what I wanted more.

Now it's simple to say [laughs] but at the time it...wasn't easy to wrap my head around. It was just kind of something where I was like "well, I like my girlfriend but...I don't like her enough." I mean that could just be the

person, that obviously doesn't necessarily discount a whole gender, but it just wasn't...my preference, what I wanted the most....it wasn't any one person...that made me say "wow, this is it!"

I can totally appreciate it in a picture on a wall type of way, when a woman is attractive, but it's just...kind of nice and "good for you," but when a man is attractive it's just...it means more to me. It...attracts me more.

When asked about his familiarity with the concept of bisexuality and whether or not adopting that identity had ever been something he had considered, Rupert replied that, at least early in his process of change, he'd had less familiarity with bisexuality and bisexual people and, while he was aware of the category, he had given little consideration to the possibility of that identity being relevant for him. In the final analysis however, he indicated that bisexuality simply did not feel as though it were as accurate a description for his overall feelings as did gayness.

...At the time I didn't know anyone that was bisexual, so maybe that was part of the... "there are gay people and there are straight people and I've heard of bisexuals but I haven't met one." Maybe that was part of the issue. And now I have, and so now to me it's like "well that's an option." But at the time it wasn't so much, maybe. I don't know. But it just wasn't something that crossed my mind very much.

Rob: So what was it about [being] gay as opposed to bisexual that you identified with?

Rupert: I think this feeling...that I really felt like no women...I mean breasts and the whole thing, that just isn't really what I want. It isn't what I need.

Yeah...it suddenly became more settled. That it just wasn't girls for me.

Rob: It really was just "who am I attracted to?"

Rupert: Yeah.

Rupert noted that the social and emotional closeness he had experienced with his girlfriend seemed very much like the feelings he had more recently been having with the men to whom he was romantically attracted. He concluded that the crucial difference between these two types of relationships was that the latter had become deeper, more complex, and more fulfilling with the addition of his recently-awakened feelings of sexual attraction.

Rob: In being attracted to someone, you had talked about how with your first girlfriend...the camaraderie, the closeness, the emotional connection was there; enjoying one another's company was there, but not the sexual desire.

Rupert: No, not so much.

Rob: So, with your attraction to men is it different?... You definitely mentioned the sexual attraction. What about the other components of attraction?

Rupert: Yeah...it's almost still more important for the emotional and social closeness with someone to me personally. I don't tend to choose someone to date because they attract me right off the bat. And so I tend to date someone that's already been a friend or someone that I've kind of

known and I like their personality more. So I think that's always a priority and maybe that's why going out with her [his former girlfriend] still felt right for a while, because that was my priority, maybe. But it's definitely got more to it than that now. Just that it's got the sexual side to it as well and that kind of balances things out.

Rupert's reflections on how important the availability of proximate and salient role models was for his process of accepting the changes in his sexuality have already been discussed in the earlier section focusing on his social life. It seems that the availability of these positive and personally relevant role models assisted Rupert in his negotiation of a new, more congruent and authentic sexual identity, helping him to overcome the ubiquitous social pressures against any affiliation with the commonly degraded and caricatured group of men who are attracted to men.

Rupert's decision to begin sharing his new sexual identity with others, both in order to be honest and genuine with the important people in his life and also as a way to prepare them and himself for the changes that his new identity status entailed, have already been discussed in the context of Rupert's sexuality and his important social relationships. He described how his first disclosures were to close, trusted friends and how he then moved on to the more daunting tasks of coming-out to his parents and girlfriend, and then to other friends and members of his extended family, all approximately six months to a year before having his first same-sex dating experiences. In Rupert's case, it seems that his desire to be honest with others, combined with the emotionally and energetically demanding nature of the process of coming-out, led him to prefer to complete the majority of his acts of self-disclosure before finding a male partner who he would then wish to integrate into his social networks.

[He was eager to come-out to many people as quickly as possible] just to have it there and everyone ready for it, rather than dating someone and having them have to deal with it at the same time, something like that.

Doing the transition on my own rather than having...some boyfriend in the picture at the same time....

...It was better to do that [come-out] then rather than to just keep it a secret and break up with my girlfriend and just keep thinking about it myself.

And then when my close friends or family would ask “why did you break up with your girlfriend?” that was why. And so then it was just kind of...sensible and more honest to the people around me just to say “that’s what I am, that’s how I feel....”

Rupert’s reflection that the act of disclosing his homoerotic sexuality to others seemed somehow to strengthen or crystallize that identity for him in a reciprocal fashion has also been discussed previously, as has the information that these disclosures have become easier and felt more regular and familiar with repetition. By the time of our main interview, Rupert indicated that he had reached the point where using the identifier “gay” felt most authentic and congruent to him.

Rob: ...I want to be sure that I’m getting the term that you use for yourself, so would you say that you...I think I’ve heard you use the term “gay.” Would you say that that’s, in terms of your sexuality, the identifier you would use?

Rupert: Yeah, yeah, I’m gay.

Rupert reflected that while he had some misgivings over the ways that an identity label could be used in dismissive or diminishing ways, he felt that describing himself as gay was, on balance, positive and appropriate for him.

Rob: What about...the importance of that...identity label to you. Is it important to have a term to use to describe yourself?

Rupert: It is in a way, but it’s strange to say “I’m gay.” I don’t often say that to people. Sometimes...when I’m telling someone that I’ll just say...

“yeah I’m gay.” But sometimes I just say it in different ways. So maybe if that...term or label didn’t exist I would be OK without it. But I think it’s good, I think...it goes both ways. I don’t like the fact that someone can dismiss me using a title, but I like the fact that I can identify with other people because of that same title. It’s good and bad in different situations but I think good or bad, I still want it and am proud of it or glad to have it, overall. It’s like having fair skin that turns pink all the time. ...Some days I just get so irritated by it, but overall, I’m happy with it. [Laughs]

Rob: It’s part of your uniqueness?

Rupert: Yeah...it’s who I am, and in the end, for better or for worse, that’s me and so...I’m going to...do what I can with it.

Rupert also commented that, while he considered himself open to the possibility of entirely different experiences in the future, Rupert’s felt sense of his sexuality and his gay identity was that they had reached a point of immutability and permanence.

Rob: ...Another dimension of that identity sense...I wonder about...[is that] people have a sense of the permanency of this. Could you imagine your sexuality ever changing again?

Rupert: I like to think that I could let it happen, that I’m...not making myself rigidly stick to being attracted to men. But I have to admit that I don’t...consider being attracted to girls very much anymore. Like I don’t look out for romantic attraction to a girl at all. I would like to hope that I would be able to recognize it and be fine with it. ...I think I could allow it

to happen but I just don't...think about it much or consider the possibility much.

Finally, while he had never mentioned having any sense that choice or volition had played a role in his experiences of romantic and sexual desire, I took some time to ask Rupert for his impression of what role if any choice may have played in any of the changes that occurred in his sexuality. Rupert stated his belief that while he was at least somewhat free to choose his behaviors and to decide whether or not to conform to any stereotypes regarding gay men, his feelings of desire themselves seemed to be non-volitional and beyond his control.

Rob: I'm interested in what you said about roles and of course we all play roles, as you said, but that metaphor, it has a sense of kind of consciousness to it, that we deliberately choose a role and put it on.

Rupert: Oh no, I don't think so, but I think sometimes...I can just catch myself in the middle of doing something and realize that I'm...I don't know. ...I totally believe that a lot of time the roles are unconscious.

Sometimes you can just modify how you behave within them or something. ...I don't have a problem with some of the things applying to me, but I don't want to feel like I'm just some cookie-cutter cut-out of what something should be.

Rob: What about that whole...question of choice? ...In some areas you hear that certain people want to believe that sexual orientation involves choice. Do you have a sense that through your process of change...was there choice involved?

Rupert: Hmm. [Pause] I don't think I ever chose...no. I don't. In a very like who I'm attracted to sexually way. I don't think that's been something that I've chosen for myself. ...I don't feel like sexual attraction is a very strong thing in my life or in who I am in general. So I don't think I would have been absolutely miserable if I hadn't...come out, if I hadn't chosen to see that I was gay, whatever you want to say. I think that my life could have been OK. But I don't think I...chose...no I don't think I chose the sexual attraction.

Rob: We had some discussion about the role and whether you were buying into the role, but it sounds like you could say that this [homoerotic desire and a gay identity] feels like something very genuine.

Rupert: Yeah. Well, I feel like there's a very distinct difference between telling my friends and family that I'm attracted to men, which I think is good that I figured that out, and then buying into a set of behaviors and stereotypes. ...I like to try to keep that separate in my mind. That is something that I can continually change and work around, but being attracted to men...that's something...I identify strongly with,...but the stereotypes of behavior for a gay man, I kind of look at those and say "what am I going to choose from?" in those. So that's how I kind of differentiate in my mind. I don't know that I always...that's the best case scenario.... A lot of times I just act instinctively and don't think about

anything, but...that's what I like to think of it as when I'm thinking about it, like right now.

Reflections on Implications for the Future and Overall Meanings

A final component of our discussions was devoted to Rupert's sense of what meanings his process of change in sexuality held for him, from implications for his future and what it might hold, to broader, more spiritual or philosophical meanings that he drew from his overall experience. In relation to Rupert's process of coming-out to others, he described being worried and uncertain over the implications that a gay identity might have for family life and child-rearing.

[I was] scared of "what type of family life will I have down the road?" and things like that. Not a white picket fence type of future or something. Just kind of scared of something different, something new.

Rupert's final reflections on the process of change that he had undergone seemed quite positive. He characterized his experiences as having involved significant elements of growth, learning, and personal empowerment.

I've been glad of it [his experience of change in sexuality] as...it's made me feel a little bit independent and...like this is me and this is something I've done or recognized in myself and it's been me. It hasn't been anyone else around me. It's kind of been a bit empowering in a way. I value it. ...It's been good, in the end. [Laughs] It wasn't easy at the time at all, but yeah...I'm glad for it.

It means...to me it just...I think maybe in the end it means that...I've become aware of who I am and what I want, at least in a little way. I think

there's lots of things I don't know about myself, or I don't know what I want about many things, but it's just one thing that I've identified in myself and that's a good feeling, that I've figured that out.

From a consideration of the narrative provided by the youngest of the five co-researchers and the quite current and modern issues he touched upon, I turn to the story told by Neil, the eldest of my five interviewees, and an account much more connected to the important historical events of the past century.

Chapter 5

Neil's Story

My interview with Neil was another wide-ranging discussion and covered a significantly longer period of history than those of any of the other study participants. While the stories he told could also have been arranged in a chronological fashion, I decided to continue with a thematic structure which gave more emphasis to what Neil identified as the important elements of his experiences, whenever they occurred or recurred throughout his life. In making this decision, I strove to give sufficient attention to the important processes, sequences, and other temporal elements that Neil described. The main thematic divisions that I found in Neil's narrative include the following: desire; social and cultural interactions; spirituality, religion, and personal meaning-making; personal and community connections and disconnections; volition, choice, and attempts to change; the process of identity change and identity labels; and experiences of counselling.

Stories of Desire

Neil referred many times to his clear awareness of his own level of physical, bodily sexual arousal and to a propensity to fantasize erotically about others, both of which seemed completely at odds with what he had been taught was appropriate for him and with his own wishes and often strenuous efforts to change. Neil reported that even from an early age, while attending a private boys' school in Winnipeg in the 1930s, his felt-sense of attraction and his fantasy life were clearly focused on other males.

I've known that I was attracted to boys from the earliest grade, grade three, grade four. And the first time I had sex with a boy was in about

grade 6 and I was about 12 years old. It happened with an English war refugee kid, who obviously had a lot more experience than me....We engaged in mutual masturbation and we ended up having anal sex. The first time it happened to me I didn't even know what he was doing, but I learned fairly quickly.

...Most of my fantasy life and my sexual interest...was with guys.

Neil related a fascinating biography covering a period of tremendous cultural change in the Western world and including a great deal of travel and involvement in many of the profoundly important events and social movements of the times. He indicated that after attending private school in Winnipeg, his family moved to Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1944, where he continued his schooling and completed grade 10. Near the end of World War II, Neil was sent by his parents to attend a private school in Connecticut, USA. Discussed in more detail later, Neil's early sexual experiences with some of the other boys at his elementary school had become somewhat notorious among his peers, and he was forced to endure a period of fairly intense homophobic violence and verbal abuse. He related how, once he and his family had left Winnipeg, Neil was determined to keep his sexual interest in other young men a much more closely guarded secret.

In...1944, we moved to Saint John, New Brunswick, and so that was the first chance I had not to be seen as a queer. And there was no way in hell I was going to tell anybody about it in that place because it was a community of a thousand people, where everybody knew everybody else.

While Neil's fantasies and felt-sense of bodily attraction continued to be directed toward other males, he described this part of his life as a period of loneliness and isolation. By this time he had developed a clear recognition of the prevalence of homophobic attitudes in the surrounding society, and limited himself to only the most furtive, covert efforts to gain some satisfaction of his homoerotic feelings.

How did I feel about it [his homoerotic desires]? Well I enjoyed having sex. I enjoyed watching guys. I would have liked to have been able to have sex with guys, but at the same time I knew it wasn't proper to do that. And I didn't know any other persons who had the same feelings that I did except for some of the guys at the school in Winnipeg, they didn't mind having sex with friends. But I felt that if I ever let anybody know that I would be victimized the same way that I was when I was in school in Winnipeg.

I didn't have any outlet for my attraction to guys at that point....But, there were things like, I don't know if you've ever heard of sunbathing magazines, they were actually magazines for nudists. But they actually depicted people in the nude. I would get...copies of them. It was one of the ways that I sort of satisfied my lust for guys.

Rob: You had mentioned earlier that in New Brunswick, it sounded like an environment where you had very little contact with other gay guys.

Neil: I didn't have any contact with gay guys at all. I was involved in sports with them [other young men] so I enjoyed watching them in the locker rooms, things like that.

[At his private high school in Connecticut] Some of the other guys definitely were attractive. But I didn't do anything about it because I was afraid to get back into the same problem that I had in Winnipeg.

It was also during his secondary school years that Neil mentioned first feeling some sense of attraction to women—a form of desire that, as will be discussed at more length later in this chapter, he spent much of his life attempting to cultivate.

I did actually date girls in grade nine, in Winnipeg, and I found myself attracted to a girl who was a neighbour of ours during the summer and lived near us in the winter. But nothing much came of it because we moved to New Brunswick at a time when I might have started dating her. In New Brunswick I did actually date a girl, but nothing ever came of it and I never really felt that attracted to her. I enjoyed having the companionship. I never even kissed her, on all the dates that we had, even though at one point we got snowed in, in St. John, and had to spend the night on a couch in a hotel lobby because we couldn't get home.

While Neil recounted several occasions when he experienced apparently spontaneous feelings of attraction to women, he noted that his desire for men was almost always more intense and that, throughout his life, his erotic fantasies were almost completely dominated by imaginings of other males.

[During his early University years] I also started dating a girl who was four years younger than me and I actually felt very attracted to her.

Would have liked to have had sex with her but it never happened. I was erotically attracted to her but still I never really felt...my fantasy life didn't really include her in the same way as men....I guess I was about 19 years old at that time. But my sex life basically was that I was attracted to this

girl. Still, when I was masturbating I would only think about guys.... I sort of grew up in that dating, in a heterosexual way, which I didn't have any opportunity for before. But my fantasy life did include her...for the first time. But it wasn't as strong as the attractiveness of men. But that lasted for four years, so it was a fairly tight relationship.

In terms of actual sexual contacts with others, Neil indicated that he remained celibate from the time his family moved to New Brunswick until shortly after graduating from university in Washington, D. C. with his first degree.

...Then after I graduated, I met a guy from another university because I was working as an economist at the Bureau of Labour Statistics for a year. He invited me to go home with him and he was a black guy who was working on his doctorate at the University. So I did that and I had no idea that he was gay but we slept together....that night we slept in the same bed and he came on to me which I enjoyed, so we actually had sex together.... Actually, I've been in touch with the guy for the last 60 years. It was scary in the sense that I was not brought up in the States and I wasn't really comfortable with understanding how blacks were treated in the States. So to be in an all-black community was sort of like being in a foreign land and I really had no guide on how to react. But that was the first adult person that I had had sex with.

Neil indicated that this sexual involvement did not last long because, as a member of the American Marine Corps reserve, he was soon called to active duty to serve in the Korean War.

I didn't really get called on active duty until 1951. The war began in June of 1950. So I spent the next few years in the Marine Corps, a lot of it was

in Korea. About five months of that was in combat, the rest of it was in the reserves. And I still had the same fantasies but I really didn't feel that there was any outlet for them in the Marine Corps....But during that time I was still in touch with the girl that I'd been dating.

Rob: It sounds like you were perceived...your fellow soldiers would not have identified you?...

Neil: No. No way in hell would I have ever been able to come out in the Marine Corps. Although as it turns out there were lots of gays in the Marine Corps, but I didn't know anything about them. And besides it was a pretty intense period of time. I didn't really have much time to think about it.... But nothing happened during the Marine Corps. Even if I had wanted to, I would have been afraid to approach anybody.

After the end of his involvement in the Korean War, Neil returned to the United States and entered law school. While his former girlfriend had become engaged to another man, it was through her that Neil met her roommate, the woman who would eventually become his wife. In describing their relationship, Neil recalled his genuine feelings of desire for her although, as in his earlier relationships with women, he noted that his attraction to and fantasies about other men remained more intense.

...I had some questions as to whether I was capable of...[being] attracted to a woman. And it was only after I had dated a woman for a number of years that I realized that I was capable, because I was certainly attracted to men, that was quite clear. But I wasn't secure in my attraction toward women. Even when I was dating my wife, I wasn't completely sure that I

was capable of being attracted. It was when we ended up having sex before we got married, that was sort of the turning point.

...I was erotically attracted to her. We got engaged six months after we met....but I was still attracted to guys. I was able to have quite pleasant sex with my wife, but I still couldn't get rid of the feeling [of attraction to men] and my fantasy life still continued to be with guys.

Rob: ...Talking about your sex life with her, I'm wondering was it satisfying, in the sense of something that you were looking for, or was it more something you felt obliged to do?

Neil: No, it was satisfying, but I still had the same fantasy feelings. As a matter of fact, when I was having sex with her I would sometimes fantasize of having sex with guys.

In the years that followed, while Neil's wife studied health education and medicine and began practicing as a psychiatrist, Neil practiced law, started a Ph.D. program in East Asian studies at Columbia University, attended a seminary, and became very involved in the US civil rights movement. Neil stated that he generally strove to remain faithful to his wife, but had occasional sexual contacts with other men. Several years into their marriage, Neil revealed to his wife some of his history of homoerotic attractions and experiences.

At some point along the road my wife and I talked about...I told her about my fantasy life about guys, and told her about my experience, and she understood that I had these attractions to men but nothing came of it. We proceeded on with our own lives. There were a couple of times when I

had sex with guys at conferences....We'd been married for about 18 years by the time I told her.

Neil and his wife had several children together, and adopted others, and they remained together until she passed away in 1996 after a short illness. After his wife's death, Neil indicated that he had little interest in pursuing any new romantic association and that what erotic desire he did feel was directed almost completely toward other males.

...Since she [his wife] died, I haven't really felt attracted to women at all.

I see some beautiful women that I wouldn't mind dating but I'm quite happy being what I consider to be virtually completely homosexual.

To his own surprise, however, he had become involved in a committed relationship with another man roughly 6 years prior to our first interview.

I didn't really expect to have a relationship. I expected that I would be able to find an outlet for my gay feelings. And I felt sort of guilty about it, to have lost her [his wife] when I would've stayed married, and then to start pursuing my gay attractions. I sort of felt I was betraying her. But at the same time, I felt released, and I felt guilty for feeling released....But it sort of opened up a new world for me.

Stories of Social and Cultural Interactions

Neil seemed to have a keen awareness of how aspects of the social world, such as experiences of bullying and homophobia, awareness of familial and cultural expectations regarding sexuality, and familiarity with the current social scientific literature and discourse, may have somehow influenced the development and expression of his own sexuality and sexual identity. The first related story occurred when he was describing his earliest sexual experience, at age 12, with the young male war refugee quoted earlier. Neil went on to say that

the problem was that when I came to school the next day...I was confronted by guys who basically said “oh you’re queer.” And they didn’t use those terms in those days; they talked about being “a homo.” He [Neil’s sexual partner] quite apparently had told some of the other kids, and blamed me for what had gone on. So this was not a particularly good greeting, and I was picked on a lot during the school years. At one point actually, we used to have recess in the woods, and a bunch of guys jumped me and tried to rape me. Fortunately the school bell rang before anything much happened....So anyways I did have sex with a number of kids from the school but I was picked on a lot, I had to fight a lot, which I didn’t like. I was never able to tell my family about it because it was too embarrassing and I didn’t feel comfortable talking to them about it. I didn’t know how it would be received.

Later, when Neil and I were discussing the terminology he used to refer to homoeroticism and related concepts, he returned to his primary school experiences in Winnipeg to elaborate as follows:

Rob: Throughout our discussion you’ve been using mainly the word “gay” to describe erotic attractions to men, and I wonder....

Neil: We didn’t use that term in those days. The only term I knew really was “homo.”

Rob: And where did that term first kind of get into your mind?

Neil: ...It was what the kids used in Winnipeg. I never heard the term until they used it. They actually confronted me when I got off the bus and

made facial gestures as though I was having oral sex. It was really quite a dramatic introduction to school that year....

These experiences of bullying and homophobia from other youths served as Neil's introduction to the socially prevalent attitudes of profound rejection and hostility that attended any expression of homoeroticism in North America in the mid-twentieth century. Neil noted at a subsequent point that it was only many years later, when he had enlisted in the American Marine Corps and become a skilled boxer, that he felt really secure from the threat of homophobic abuse.

Fortunately, I was safely over the hurdle of being picked on. I'd achieved a certain status that...I was really rather pugilistic actually, I took boxing lessons.

By the time he had reached young adulthood, Neil had also developed a very clear awareness of the sort of general life trajectory that was considered appropriate and even idealized according to culturally-predominant standards. In describing his recollections of what it was that impelled him to reject his felt sense of homoerotic desire and to seek to cultivate heterosexual experiences and relationships, Neil repeatedly made use of a terminology involving the normal versus the abnormal. He made clear how powerful a motivating force the desire to conform to social expectations and not to be perceived as sexually deviant had been for him.

Rob: ...Certainly, you were still aware of your own homoerotic attractions....

Neil: Oh, yeah. But I dated girls because I thought it was the thing I should be doing, quite frankly.

Rob: What was that like, approaching this milestone in heterosexual life, marriage, and yet knowing that you had been sexually active with men, and that your fantasies were primarily directed toward men?

Neil: Well, it's the kind of life that I expected I would want to have anyway.

I considered it [his attraction to other men] to be abnormal for a long time.

...To become involved heterosexually was just a normal thing to do.

Neil also elaborated at certain points that he had experienced genuine desire to pursue certain components of a culturally-sanctioned life course, including particularly an enduring, romantic relationship and the opportunity to have children. He stated that the lack of any visible, stable same-sex couples as role-models, with or without children, seemed to preclude such possibilities for him.

Rob: What was the motivation that drove you [to pursue heterosexual relationships]?

Neil: Simply because I felt it was a normal thing to do. And I did want to have a family, I did want to have a partner, and it never occurred to me that there was a possibility of being partnered with a man. There were no mentors around, no examples of how that was possible.

Rob: So it sounds like, despite your attraction to men, your expectation was that "I will be married, I will have children".

Neil: Yes. It might have been quite different if I'd known anything about the gay community. Even though I was in places like New York...I didn't

find it. I thought of...at times...there were a bunch of theatres that gays used to frequent in the Times Square area. But I never went in any of those, I thought about going into them, but I never really knew what it would be like. So, yeah, it was normal to get married, have a family, raise kids, so that's what I did.

One final component of the sociocultural environment that was quite prominent in Neil's story was his awareness of and the importance he assigned to the then current social-scientific literature and discourse related to human sexuality. Neil's respect for the knowledge and opinions of these expert, authority figures was quite apparent, and he indicated that, in his case, the very idea that there might exist a community of people with attractions similar to his own never occurred to him until he was lead to the concept by the writings of these experts.

Well, there wasn't any such thing as a community of people. There obviously was, but I certainly didn't know anything about it. So you're...you're basically on your own. You have sex with people when you can...I guess most of the gay world seems to have developed primarily in large metropolitan areas. And, I just never knew...for some reason none of my...none of the literature that I was studying and none of the reading I was doing lead me into any knowledge of that world....In the 40s and early 50s, it was not exactly a gay-friendly world to be in.

Neil reported that his first personally-significant contact with the scientific literature bearing on sexuality occurred during his undergraduate years with the release of Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin's (1948) *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. This document and its revelation of the relative commonality of homoerotic desires and experiences had an impact on Neil's thinking that was deep and immediate.

Nothing really much happened in college except the Kinsey report came out, which was something that everybody was interested in reading, so I did actually read the original report.

I thought it was very erotic, frankly. It was more than just a statistical report. It was a report that indicated to me that I fit somewhere in the scale, and there were a lot of other people like me. Even though I didn't know any....It made me feel as though I wasn't as abnormal as I thought I was.

Despite this early exposure to the startlingly novel idea that homoeroticism might not be as exceedingly rare and unusual as he had thought for most of his life, Neil continued his efforts to cultivate heterosexual desire in himself and eventually married a woman and had children with her. Neil's wife went on to pursue a career in psychiatry, and it was her involvement in this profession which afforded Neil a second, more lasting, and more personally-significant exposure to non-homophobic social scientific information and ideas.

I went with her to the American Psychiatric Association meetings every year and...I had nothing to do while she was in meetings, because she was actually one of the delegates to the assembly. And I came across this desk for gay and lesbian psychiatrists, which I'd never heard of before, and I asked them if it would be OK if I went to some of their meetings, and so I did....I've forgotten what year it was. Very early in...I think it was before the...in 1973...the year that the American psychiatric Association got rid of the nomenclature...being gay being a mental illness.

Rob: At that point, with the Kinsey report and the change in the psychiatric diagnostic manual, how important...it sounds like you were fairly attuned to...developments in science...and science related to sexuality. How important was that to your self-perception, your...evolution?

Neil: It was very important, because it actually validated my feelings of not being something that was terribly wrong. Basically it left me with the feeling that it was normal to have these feelings. I wasn't some oddity, because there were a hell of a lot of people like me. Anyway, that was sort of a turning point. Through them I learned a lot about gay literature that I hadn't known anything about before. And they accepted me as a part of their group.

Neil indicated that his contact with the Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists' Association was quite impactful in that he believed it prompted a rapid and profound reevaluation of his self-identification.

Rob: Do you have a sense of when it was in your life that you would have adopted one of these labels? "Gay" or "Queer"?

Neil: I don't really know. No, I can't remember when the term gay...actually began labeling myself as gay. Probably around the time that I got involved with the Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists' Association. Because that was sort of a...that was a real eye-opener, to find people who were openly gay in the profession that my wife was in, a very significant point in my life. And I began reading the journals that they published

annually. And I also started going to gay sections in APA meetings, which was an interesting thing to be doing.

It was a real relief to find... just to be able to go to the meetings and hear them talk about gay issues as gay people who were also professionals in the same profession as my wife. So, in a sense, that was a major coming-out period for me.

Stories of Spirituality, Religion, and Personal Meaning-Making

While partially subsumed within the previous theme-cluster, I found Neil's recollections of experiences related to the spiritual and existential aspects of his life to be sufficiently distinctive to warrant a separate section. Neil's stories of his personal spiritual and existential growth, particularly as they relate to sexuality, covered a vast territory. Initially, his general attitude toward spirituality seems to have been one of disinterest in or indifference to spiritual teachings. As he grew older and became more deeply involved with different religious groups, Neil's spirituality became a source of guilt and shame to be managed or endured. In the final phase of this process, as Neil actually studied spiritual issues at a seminary and became involved in various forms of social justice and advocacy work, his belief system seems to have evolved into its final, very gay-positive, and affirming form.

Neil's earliest mention of his spiritual perspective and beliefs involved his childhood membership in the Roman Catholic Church, the lack of concern he had for that organization's anti-homosexual teachings, and their lack of effect on his behavior and self-concept.

I was brought up in the Roman Catholic Church....but I never felt guilty about having sex [with other boys]. I never talked to them when I went to

confession; I never told the priest anything about what I was doing. It was none of his business....I didn't feel guilty about it, that came later.

Neil next described how, during his college years, he had become involved with a new religious group and how their extremely homophobic perspective had a much greater, although short-term, impact upon his spirituality and value system at that point in his life.

I actually got involved with a group called Moral Rearmament, which was a sort of evangelical, anti-Communist, somewhat Christian-based group. And one of their standards was absolute purity. But I didn't find that they were all that absolutely pure. At the same time they made me feel guilty about having attractions to men. So that became a factor in my not being able to express myself.

Neil: I enjoyed it [sex with men], but at the same time I felt guilty about enjoying it, and so there was a period of time when I actually tried to get rid of it.

Rob: How did you do that?

Neil: ...I usually prayed to get rid of it. It didn't do any good because I never could get rid of it....

Rob: Going from...the Moral Rearmament group, and the guilt it inspired, where do you think was the point where the guilt kind of ebbed away?

Where did it become okay to have your attractions?

Neil: Well, I just sort of rebelled against it, frankly. I think having sex with _____, the black guy, he made me recognize that it was fun and not as devastating as I thought it would be.

In the final and most recent stage of Neil's personal spiritual development, his academic theological studies, personal philosophical reflections, and social justice-related community work (particularly certain instances involving gay and lesbian youth) seem to have come together to facilitate his development of a positive, activist, and gay-affirmative body of spiritual beliefs and sense of personal meaning and purpose. Late in his educational history, shortly after having changed his career path and beginning theological studies, Neil reported that

when I went to seminary, my religious outlook was basically a social justice orientation, and that's why I got involved with the church to begin with, mostly through the US civil rights movement, and we were quite heavily involved.

...I worked in a church in Central Harlem, and the church had a program for youth.... And there was a young guy who was a Roman Catholic, who went to the youth program and then sort of came out to us as gay, and nobody with the Catholic Church had really made him feel as though...he could let anybody know that he'd had these feelings. So I did some work with him, talking about the validity of being gay in the Christian community.... That experience led me into developing some theological basis for an understanding of the validity of being gay, which the church really never accepted.

Rob: ...It sounds like there was certainly an evolution happening.

Neil: Well, basically, I think it was the needs of young gays that we encountered. I actually represented a couple of gay kids...one in particular, a young lesbian girl, who had been thrown out of school. I started representing people in suspension hearings; no lawyers had ever done that before. And this one particular girl, I managed to get back into school. And this led me to begin thinking about how there must be some religious justification for being gay. So I began to develop a theological understanding of what it meant to be part of God's creation and still be gay.... Most of it, I had to do on my own, because there was nothing....in the theological writings that I had come across, that in any way was positive toward gays.

Rob: And so you were able to bring this [these new gay-affirmative ideas] into your existing spirituality?...

Neil: Yeah, it took some hurdles, and then a number of people started writing in the gay community after Stonewall, that I found very useful.... And so it was not original to me, I just did what I was able to do with the theological works that were available at that time

...I consider my purpose in life, in large measure, it is fulfilled by being involved in issues in the gay community, particularly in the justice

issues.... My whole thrust in life is around social justice issues, and it always has been.

Rob: So it sounds like...even if you weren't gay, this would still be...your passion?

Neil: Exactly.... My identity was shaped a lot by the involvement in the civil rights movement....but the theological underpinning for my involvement in social justice issues has given me the rationale for what I'm doing.

Stories of Personal and Community Connections and

Disconnections

Neil's overall narrative included a large number of anecdotes connecting the development of his sexuality with the presence or absence of positive and supportive relationships. This held true with respect to his relationships with other individuals and with communities. After childhood, Neil's stories of relatedness to others carried a frequent sense of loneliness, with his disconnection from other men who had sex with men quite prominent. Later, despite many different encounters with homoerotically-inclined boys and men, Neil repeatedly asserted that the ideas of identifying in significant ways with these individuals or of having a lasting, meaningful relationship with another man never occurred to him until he became aware of the existence of a relatively large, cohesive gay community. Neil also described the importance that he attached to experiences of being mentored by another queer person. Finally, Neil's relationship with his wife was obviously extremely important to him, and while it in some ways afforded him access to information about and eventual contact with gay

communities, in other ways it also clearly militated against his adoption of a gay or queer identity.

In his comments focusing on the period of time between attaining young adulthood and his eventual contact with an organized gay community, Neil remarked several times on his sense of disconnection from other homoerotically-inclined men and of his longing for such associations.

Rob: You talked about the loneliness as one factor....it sounds like it was just something that made it difficult to be gay, at that time.

Neil: Oh yes, definitely.

While reflecting on his involvement with the quite homophobic Moral Rearmament group, Neil remarked that

...there wasn't really any outlet for it [his homoerotic feelings]...had there been an outlet, had I been able to make connections with the gay community, I might have felt quite different. I might have been much happier, knowing that other people felt the same way that I did.

The following quotations also reflect Neil's often-repeated and, I think, quite interesting assertion that his isolation from a cohesive gay community somehow forestalled his development of any sense that the homoerotic elements of his sexuality had any relevance to his identity, other than as a shameful indicator of abnormality. Neil clearly had multiple social contacts with homosexually active boys and men, and apparent knowledge that some of these individuals would be exclusively homosexual throughout most or all of their lives. In addition to his early sexual relationships with several boys at his elementary school, Neil noted the following connections during his final year of high school and at college:

...the teacher who was teaching the [high school Algebra] class tutored me and he was obviously gay. He used to put his hand on my knee when we were being tutored, and at one point he actually asked if he could take a

shower with me when I was already in the shower. But nothing really came of it. It was obvious to me that he was erotically charged.... But it was a good experience because he never really approached me, didn't violate anything any more than had happened in the shower....

...There were a couple of gay guys in the [high] school, but I never really got involved with them. One of them was a guy named Edward Albee. I don't know if you've ever heard of him. *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf* was one of his plays. He was an out gay guy in the school. There were two guys who were openly gay. The other fellow later committed suicide....

Rob: Was that unusual at that time to have school-aged kids out?

Neil: Yes it was quite unusual, but somehow it was more possible for them to do it in this private school environment where it would be difficult for the kids to harass them too much without being found out.

I knew that there were a couple of gay guys in my class at University. Neil indicated that he remembered the somewhat erotic relationship with his teacher as very positive and that he viewed it as one of valued mentorship.

Rob: It sounded like he...would you describe him as a kind of mentor or an example?

Neil: Yeah, in a way he was, and I felt erotically attracted to him as well.

Rob: ...There was your teacher, who sounded like kind of a positive figure, a mentor almost.

Neil: Actually, I introduced my wife to him, when he was in his 80s. We visited him in San Diego when we were vacationing. I thought it would be fun for him to know that he had been sort of a mentor to me....that he had played a significant role in my life.

Despite these contacts, Neil seemed to have required knowledge of the existence of a certain critical mass of numbers of queer people which he never attained until eventually making contact with a cohesive, organized gay community.

Rob: ...You...related that, when we talked about your first experience with the English war refugee, did you even have a concept that there were people who, throughout their lives, would be attracted to the same gender?

Neil: No, I had absolutely no idea at the time.... I had no idea that guys had sex with each other. He basically introduced me to that.

Rob: Even right at the beginning, there was at least, with your first sexual partner who initiated the contact; it sounds like from that point, you knew you weren't the only person out there who was attracted to members of his own sex.

Neil: Oh yeah. I mean, I did have sex with several other boys in the school. I think it became known that if you went to Neil's place for the weekend you were probably there to have sex....

Rob: I know you've said that when you might have started to identify yourself as gay, that was significantly later.

Neil: Well, I didn't know what gay was. I didn't know there was such a thing as a community of gay people; I really felt as though I was on my own.

Rob: ...I'm curious about that...when we don't have a word for a thing, how did you think about "the way I am" and the way that these other boys were like you too, in a way? How did you think about that?

Neil: Well, there wasn't any such thing as a community of people. There obviously was, but I certainly didn't know anything about it. So you're...you're basically on your own. You have sex with people when you can.

Rob: Did you have words?

Neil: No, I didn't have any word for it.

Rob: You didn't invent your own vocabulary for it?

Neil: No.

Interestingly, Neil mentioned knowledge of one aspect of the organized gay community in or around the 1950s, but for some reason he did not find it sufficiently relevant to his situation for further attention.

I had heard of the Mattachine Society [one of North America's first homophile organizations, founded in Los Angeles in 1950 {Armstrong, 2002, p. 36}], but didn't really know much about it, and it never occurred to me that...was anything that I could relate to.

It would be roughly another two decades before Neil made contact with the gay and lesbian groups and literature that would have their already-described great impact upon him and lead Neil to re-evaluate his self-concept.

Rob: ...We've talked a bit about...organized gay communities. And I wonder if they have any importance for you in terms of arriving at a sense of yourself as a gay person.

Neil: Well, once I discovered that they existed, sure it did. It was very satisfying to find out that there was a whole community of people like me, that I had not been aware of before.

Rob: When did you make that contact?

Neil: Really not until I got involved with the gay and lesbian psychiatrists group. I'd had virtually no touch with any of the gay literature, which is surprising to me. It was only after I got to know people in the psychiatric community that I began to read their literature, that led me to other readings, and that sort of opened a new world for me.

Rob: You had mentioned also that it was at that point, you think, that you really began to self-identify as gay.

Neil: Um-hmm. Yeah. It was a real relief to find...just to be able to go to the meetings and hear them talking about gay issues as gay people who were also professionals in the same profession as my wife. So, in a sense, that was a major coming-out period for me.

After having made this initial, pivotal connection with the Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists' Association, Neil's affiliations with other gay and lesbian community groups developed rapidly.

I never did anything that would indicate to my kids that I was gay. It was only when the Gay Games came along here in Vancouver that I talked with my wife about my going into the Gay Games, and she thought it

would be a good idea. So, I played ice hockey and squash in the Gay games, and she said “we ought to invite the kids to come down and watch you play hockey”. So, the four kids came down and sort of cheered us on....

Nothing [else] really happened until after she [his wife] died. She died in 1996. At that point I felt free to come out to my kids and I did. I joined the Rainy City Gay Men’s Chorus at that point because it had the word gay in it, whereas the Vancouver Men’s Chorus, which I was thinking of joining, didn’t. And I also happened to be on a CBC radio program talking about values and raising your kids and I thought that would be a good time to tell the rest of the world that I was gay, so I started talking to them about being a gay father.

...I did feel that I wanted to relate to the gay community, in ways that I had learned about through the Gay Games, and because I’d done a lot more reading about it in the gay literature. Things like X-tra West [a G/L/B/T/Q periodical] became an opening for me.

Eventually what happened was that I came out on the gay community and got involved in a whole pile of activities in the gay community.

Most of my life now revolves around taking [university] courses, and developing a program for the cathedral. I don't know if you know the Positive Space program [an initiative to raise the visibility of safe and supportive places for GLBT people and issues on his campus]?

Rob: Um-hmm [nods].

Neil: Well, I got them to adopt the positive space program....And I'm developing some lectures for them, comparable to the ones held here....

Near the end of our discussion, Neil revealed that it was through one of his community connections that he developed his first long-term relationship with another man.

...I was involved with Primetimers [a gay and bisexual men's group for people over 21].... ...I was on a committee...formed by the Gay and Lesbian Centre to "queer" the 4-11 Seniors' Centre. At one of the meetings, the guy who is now sort of my partner was sitting right across the table and I thought it would be fun to get together with him....

Anyway, we started dating and that was about six years ago, and we don't live together but we spend a lot of our time together.

Finally, Neil clearly assigned great importance and influence in his life to his relationship with his wife. While she had helped him to make his first contacts with aspects of the gay community and seemed to have been tremendously open to and accepting of his revelation of his homoerotic attractions, Neil indicated that his relationship with her also tended, at times, to prevent him from accepting these feelings and incorporating them into his identity.

...During those married years I think there were only about three when I had sex with men, none of which did I discuss with my wife. And then

really it wasn't a comfortable thing to do quite frankly. I felt it interfered with my ability to perform with my wife. I simply didn't feel I could carry on two different types of relationship. I mean be faithful to the one and.... It was just my problem. Some people can do it, I couldn't....

Rob: You had mentioned that it was about 18 years into the marriage when you told your wife about the fantasies?

Neil: I actually started by telling her about what happened to me in school, when I was a kid, and how I was attracted to guys.... She wasn't totally shocked by it. She was a fairly sophisticated person at that point in her career....

Rob: Did that change things in your relationship?

Neil: No it didn't. As a matter of fact we sort of nurtured the relationship. We used...we called marriage an encounter. It's a program that the Catholic Church developed.... ...We got involved in the marriage encounter program, which in our case spent a weekend together just having sex and talking about it. And that really...it reinforced my heterosexual feelings.

...After I got married, I was worried about that [sexual activity with men] interfering with my sex life with my wife, so I repressed most of my feelings [for men] at that point. Not...out of guilt so much, although there was a certain amount of, you know, "why the hell do I feel both attracted to men and to women?"

Rob: So it sounds like there was quite a strong desire to kind of be there for your partner, to be faithful.

Neil: Oh yes, definitely.... ...I felt that marriage was something that required that I be faithful.

Rob: Just working as much as you could to make the relationship strong?

Neil: Yeah. Even though I still had a fantasy life that included men.

Rob: ...When you look at the entire process, what it feels like now, what you've told me is that you've arrived at a place where things...feel comfortable, they feel good, natural.

Neil: Um-hmm.

Rob: When did the sort of struggle...end?

Neil: You mean in terms of being gay? It only really came to fruition after my wife died. I was self-conflicted before that point.

Stories of Volition, Choice, and Attempts to Change

Neil's initial uncertainty regarding whether he could be truly attracted to and function erotically with women and the active, persistent efforts he made to cultivate these capacities in himself, leading eventually to his courtship of and marriage to a woman, have been described. Neil clearly found his romantic and sexual behaviour to be largely volitional, once he was certain that he was capable of functioning sexually with a woman. He also clearly hoped to alter his experiences of erotic desire, but found this much more difficult.

I dated a girl in college, and was sort of trying to get rid of my gay feelings.

Rob: It sounds like this [heterosexual desire] was something you actively cultivated in yourself.

Neil: Yes, definitely.... It took some work, actually.

Neil apparently had better success in strengthening his experiences of heterosexual desire when he remained abstinent from sexual contact with other men.

It [having sex with men] sort of made it difficult for me to continue to have sex with my wife with the same degree of satisfaction. And so I decided it was not a very good thing to be doing because it was interfering with my married life.

Near the end of our discussion, and while reflecting on his overall experience, Neil had this to say:

Rob: ...I'm interested in your sense of was this sort of a defining thing about you? Was it permanent or did you have a sense that, well...something else? Something that you could change if you felt like it?

Neil: No, I never thought I could change it. I mean, I did try and change it, but it didn't go away so I just gave up trying, and decided to enjoy what there was....

Stories of the Process of Identity Change and of Identity Labels

Neil's sense of his identity, as something in development and process and the terminology he used throughout his life to describe his homoerotic desires and

behaviours, have both been referred to numerous times in earlier sections. Neil's earliest stories found him in a rather naïve state, when as a young adolescent he seems to have been able to pursue the gratification of his erotic desires with little regard for societal homophobia, scant apparent appreciation that his homoeroticism might constitute an important or lasting component of his identity, and lacking even an awareness of words that might be used to describe his sexuality. From that point, his narration revealed a history of gradually increasing awareness of and sensitivity to the messages of homonegativity that surrounded him, particularly from peers and religious authorities. As Neil struggled to cultivate greater heterosexual desire in himself and to repress his predominant homoeroticism, he began to develop a conceptualization of sexuality as a persistent aspect of identity, but still lacked an acceptable term to use for self-description.

Rob: ...I'm wondering...at this point in time [in his college years]....

Would there be a term that you would use for yourself when you identified?

Neil: I didn't have any term that I was using at that point. I still didn't know the term gay actually.

Rob: And the term "Homo" [which had been used pejoratively by his teen-aged peers] was not something you would use for yourself?

Neil: No. I didn't like the term. It didn't register. It wasn't something that I thought was a decent term.

As he grew older, Neil for the first time began to receive information from scientific and spiritual authorities that allowed him to develop much more positive, non-pathologizing perspectives on homosexuality. He decided to adopt the "gay" and eventually "queer" identity labels for himself.

Rob: It sounded like, during the progression...during your marriage, there was a point where your spirituality seems like it stopped being something

that was driving you to want to change, and then you seemed to become more accepting of your attraction to men.

Neil: Yeah, well my theological reflections supported the whole concept of being gay. As opposed to being opposed to it.

Rob: At what point did that happen?

Neil: Well, it really happened when I was in seminary and also working in this church in Harlem.

Rob: With regard to identity...categories of identity that we use for ourselves, you're using the term "gay" now, I hear that.

Neil: Yeah, either queer or gay. Frankly, I think queer is a more encompassing term.

Neil seemed to make only passing mention of the concept of bisexuality and I wondered whether that label may have fit for him at some point in his life.

Rob: I heard you also...you had said that at certain points in your marriage, that you would probably have used "bisexual" for yourself.

Neil: Well, I wouldn't have, in my marriage, because I never thought of being bisexual, I mean, I never knew about the concept. It was only the Kinsey gradations. Nobody talked about, in my experience, used the term bisexual.

Our final exchange on the subject of identity and identity labels, referring to Neil's current situation, proceeded as follows:

Rob: ...In your life, when you reflect back, has it been important to have a word? Like, we talked about the time when you weren't even aware of a word to describe people who are attracted to members of the same sex.

Neil: Um-hmm.

Rob: So, do you think it's important, has it been important for you to have that identity term?

Neil: Since I came out, you mean?

Rob: All along the way, throughout your life.

Neil: Well the only term...which has been useful is the terms which have been developed in the gay community. I didn't have any particular need to have any term applied to myself until I discovered how the gay community was referring to themselves....

Rob: So how certain do you feel about any of these terms?...

Neil: Well, I think they're very useful terms. The term queer is more useful for me than gay, simply because there have been times in my life when I felt I was more bisexual. But I like the term because it's a term that was a put-down but we appropriated the put-down and turned it on its head.

Rob: A term of pride.

Neil: Yeah, it's a term I'm quite proud of. If you want to call me a queer, that's exactly what I'm happy to be.

Stories of Experiences of Counselling

Finally, while Neil never spontaneously referred to his experiences of psychotherapy, when queried he described the ones he had had as generally quite positive, respectful, and gay-affirmative.

Rob: Have you ever had an experience of counselling or psychotherapy that you thought was relevant to your sexuality?

Neil: Well, I have gone through periods of depression, so I actually see a psychiatrist once every three or four months now, and it was very helpful to have him to relate to about my gay life. He was also a colleague of my wife's, so I've known him for a long time.

Rob: How was he helpful to you?

Neil: Well, just the fact that I could talk about how I felt and some of the conflicts that I've discussed with you, and affirm that I wasn't an unusual thing, that I wasn't a freak of some sort.

Rob: So, a normalization of things?

Neil: Yeah, he's been very helpful.

Rob: So, it sounds like...your sexuality was not a central issue [in counselling].

Neil: No, it was one of the issues that I had to deal with, but not the central issue.

Rob: It sounds like it was dealt with in quite a respectful way?

Neil: Oh yeah. It was very affirming. It has been to this day.

With the completion of my discussion of Neil's life story, I move next to my presentation of Tom's narrative, one that also deals prominently with the theme of the struggle to change one's sexual identity when it is found to be unacceptable.

Chapter 6

Tom's Story

Bearing at least a loose, general similarity to Neil's account of his sexual life, Tom's narrative dealt largely with social and internal conflicts related to identity and sexuality. Described below, Tom also found it unacceptable to found a public identity on his homoerotic desires, and the approach he took to dealing with his wish to be heterosexual made for a unique and fascinating story. I have organized Tom's account and my commentary on it into the following seven rough thematic divisions: physical health and developmental issues, spirituality and religion, social factors and personal issues making homosexuality unacceptable, the great experiment, desire, resolution and resignation, and counselling experiences.

Stories of Physical Health and Developmental Issues

One of the more distinctive aspects of my discussion with Tom was the prominence he gave in his accounts to stories of serious physical illness. He made it clear that these intense experiences had a powerful impact on the unfolding of his life and constituted an important component of the context within which the remainder of his stories occurred. Referring first to his early physical, mental, social, emotional, and ethical development, and anticipating his eventual struggles with his sexuality, Tom stated that

I was very late to puberty. And there was a little bit of...experimentation with a friend, but by the time I was ready to experiment further, he had already been more advanced and into girls and stuff like that. At the time I felt that this urge to sort of...fool around with a peer male, there was

nothing wrong with it...I mean I actually felt that it was a goodness. But, as I lost the opportunity to do it, [and became] more and more intellectually oriented, I started to overlay this with some...intellectual superimposed things and although I approved it [homoeroticism] in other people, I thought I was too good for this.... And so I sort of fell into a dichotomy of...I wasn't at all condemnatory of other people, but I just thought that...I had this will...and there must be way for me to avoid this.

Rob: Avoid being gay?

Tom: Avoid being gay [laughs]. And so I just sort of shunted off onto a side track [laughs] in life, for quite a while.

Tom's sense that his life and personal development had become in some aspects delayed, while in others perhaps unusually accelerated, involved many dimensions of his sense of self, particularly physical health and spirituality.

I didn't really unlock my sexuality...until I was about in my thirties. I had a background lack of health, which I didn't really realize at the time, and then I went into a professional school and I kept postponing and postponing and saying that I had to concentrate on work and everything, and then when I got out of professional school I dealt with a major health problem and I decided that I would just deal with that. So I kept postponing.

Rob: So work and health issues rather than romance and sexuality?

Tom: Yes, I did classify myself as asexual up to that point in time. And I sort of went through what I would consider a...late psychological adolescence after my health was restored, and my romantic attraction was

for males and because I had really postponed my social development, my perspective of my social peer group was really much lower than my actual age. And so in social, sexual ways I sort of felt my peer group was sort of older adolescents. As I have evolved, this has continued to rise in age but it's still mid-twenties that attract me rather than my peer group....So I feel that...I sort of really postponed a lot of my development and part of it was because of my feeling of wanting to be moral and not having a model that fitted homosexuality into this model.

Tom's connection of the spiritual and ethical aspects of his life, which are discussed in more detail later, with the serious illnesses he had suffered were made particularly clear in the following excerpts:

I was just unrealistic and not really into the real world when I was trying to be super moral. And it is possible that I'm using these theoretical sets of morals...as ways to avoid growing up, because I didn't want to face homosexuality as my ultimate destination. And on the other hand, as I was growing sicker, in my early thirties, and facing the real prospect of death, I do believe that is more true spirituality. You're thinking about the meaning of life and things like that. And again I think that some of my conclusions were a bit unrealistic, but I felt that I had been...projected into old age as a young person, because I was already thinking about the thoughts that old people think about. ...And yet I had to go back and think about young people things like sex, so that was a dichotomy there.

... I was sick. I really was sick. My heart was enlarging. I would have died if I hadn't gotten a kidney transplant in October, within six months of that, I would have been dead. And so it was another spiritual thing.

As Tom had more to say about the course of his physical, spiritual, ethical, and sexual development, the linkages among these and other dimensions of his life and the complexities of his overall story became clearer.

Stories of Spirituality, Religion, and Personal Ethics

Tom was a person for whom spirituality and personal ethics were important aspects of life. His poor physical health and the fear of death apparently fuelled Tom's interests in spirituality and religion, and his developing spiritual and ethical perspectives clearly came into conflict with Tom's late-emerging sense of his own desire and sexuality.

My spiritual background is a dichotomy between sort of humanism and agnosticism and a...religious background that includes Roman Catholicism...I went to church and while the emphasis in my family was on doing the right thing, I decided that I would sort of be an ultra-moral person and I used the church model of this, which didn't include homosexuality.

Tom's spiritual beliefs definitely evolved over the course of his life story, beginning in a mostly conservative and moralistic pattern in his youth and shifting gradually toward a more tolerant and humanistic perspective as he grew older. By the time he emerged from his first serious illness Tom was in his 30s and indicated that his ethical and spiritual system had already changed a good deal from its initial, quite homophobic form. While generally tolerant of homosexuality in others, Tom held something of a double standard, still

perceiving the homoerotic feelings he had detected in himself as largely unacceptable.

My spiritual conclusions were that fair play and decent treatment are really all that matters in the world, and that homosexuality or heterosexuality does not enter into this construct....

Rob: Was it different when you were much younger? You talked about being quite a moralistic person.

Tom: Yes. I thought there were simple answers.... But my feelings were very conflicted. Certainly I never spoke out against homosexuality in any way. It was just sort of...my homophobia was internalized [chuckle].

However, at the end of a major life crisis, and health rebirth, I decided that these thoughts of right and wrong were inappropriate and the world wouldn't fall down if I acted on my impulses. And at the same time, though, I read that the Roman Catholic Church had come down with a new...new to me philosophy that homosexuality was not a sin, it was the act of homosexuality. So I thought well,..did I really want to be homosexual? Not necessarily. There would be a third option: I could sort of explore my psychology...(this was when I was about 33)...without acting upon it and I would still be "moral", even though I was questioning this concept. ...And I'd also been intellectually considering that if some of my friends who I trust say that it's impossible to change, and others say that it was possible to change, and also if the Roman Catholic church says

it isn't possible to change yet I hear this conflict of evidence type thing, there must be a trick to it.

The trick Tom referred to constituted a very important component of his overall story, and was described at length in the section entitled "the Great Experiment". As for Tom's personal spirituality and ethical sense, they seem to have continued to develop throughout his life, until the time of our interview, and I return to what Tom had to say about their current forms later in the chapter.

Stories of Other Personal and Social Factors Making

Homoeroticism Unacceptable

In addition to the reservations Tom felt regarding homoeroticism in himself that seemed to emerge mainly from spirituality and religious teachings, he identified a small number of other factors that, for him, weighed heavily against the adoption of a public or private gay identity. These factors included fear of HIV/AIDS, expectations of social prejudice and loss of personal opportunities, a feared linkage of homoeroticism with loss of individual self-control, and an experience of negative role-modeling with respect to an apparently gay relative.

Tom indicated that as he recovered from his first serious illness and began the long-postponed process of seriously engaging with and reflecting on his sexual identity, HIV and AIDS had only just attained international pandemic status and a high profile in the public awareness. Tom's commentary clearly indicated that fear of what was then often referred to as "the gay plague" was a very serious concern for a young man who only reluctantly acknowledged his homoerotic feelings. Interestingly, Tom also acknowledged that he tended to dwell on the threat of AIDS deliberately, as a way of motivating himself to be more heterosexual.

I was afraid of AIDS, which was just coming on the big social awareness.

So then I decided that, well look, I don't necessarily want to be...I don't really want to be gay. I've always wanted to be a typical heterosexual and...even though...even though...I, I realize that it isn't anything to be ashamed of or feel badly about, given AIDS and given social stuff that it would still be worthwhile for my value system to see if I could maximize my heterosexuality.

Tom: And I was trying to avoid...getting AIDS because I really still think that if I really wanted to sort of let all constraints go, I'd get AIDS fairly quickly.

Rob: I'm struck by...you've mentioned several times that worry about AIDS and HIV. That's pretty powerful for you?

Tom: ...I don't think that you can influence your sexuality without, in addition to a lot of other things,...a belief that you're going to be adversely affected in some fundamental way because it's very deep down, your sexuality. ...I do believe that if you think that your life may be at stake, it can motivate you to change in a deeper way than if you don't.

Rob: So would you say then that you sort of deliberately focused on AIDS as a threat in order to help yourself change?

Tom: I would.

In addition to his fear of gay men's supposed vulnerability to disease, Tom indicated that he was very cognizant of the social stigma generally attached to homosexuality. He said that he worried about that stigma in the abstract and

specifically about what it might mean for personal opportunities and his chances of social and economic advancement.

When I came out, there was a lot of resistance. This was in 1988 and although...I was overly sensitive, nevertheless I felt a great social impetus for me to not be gay.

Rob: You had said earlier that that desire to change was not a condemnation, but a sense that life would be better, more convenient as a heterosexual?

Tom: Yeah. And also...you know there are certain non-legitimate criteria that go with people becoming sort of let's say an admiral or something like that—they should be a married man and this and that. And I'm just sort of thinking "well if I want to be the best I can, I should be such and such". And I'm sorry that it did...reflect societal prejudice.

Rob: So kind of opening doors for yourself, perhaps?

Tom: Yes, but I wasn't consciously thinking of that as much as this idea that you're always trying to be the best that you can be. And again it comes back to an incorrect assumption that gay is not best and about what aspects of life are under your control and are not.

Perhaps connected in some way to Tom's attachment to an idealized prosperous and high-status future was the next of the fears that he associated with being homosexual: the fear of a more general loss of control of his own body and behavior.

And also I did actually think that if I really didn't come through into another mind space [and manage to change his own sexuality] I would be

really acting on rather destructive urges for just sort of abandoning all restraint in homosexuality that might lead me into AIDS and things like that. And so there were lots of things going on psychologically and I felt just things were just moving and it became quite uncomfortable where I was psychologically.

And also at this time [immediately before resolving to attempt to change his sexuality] I had such exaggerated body language with my hips swaying so much and I was sort of hunched over with a...feeling of...I don't know. But the fact is that they talked about Quentin Crisp going down the street and the way he walked being a scandal or something. I think that I was walking the same way then. It was really quite exaggerated. And then it has taken quite a long time for my body language to come to average.

Rob: One other thing that you had mentioned that I'd like to come back to, and it sounded quite interesting, was this sense that you had of your body, as you were going through this lifelong evolution...what you said about your body feeling out of control, the way your hips would move....

Tom: Well I don't know why...I just...that's true. And to some extent when I'm feeling tired and not particularly sharp, I still...become socially uncertain, I can still to some extent get a different type of bad body language but I mean it's not bad, the hip swaying and everything, but I couldn't control that and I don't know why.

Rob: So when you say out of control and explain that this is a form of body language that you associated with gay people, you were kind of involuntarily expressing these things?

Tom: The hips, yes. The rest of the body language I just think represented somebody who felt very cowed.

Rob: Would you say that that kind of perception of yourself, your movements, your posture, that sort of thing, did that contribute to the way that you went through this process of self-identification?

Tom: It could well, but none of this was conscious.

Rob: So the movements themselves weren't conscious?

Tom: No, and nor was the wish to maintain them.

The last of the four factors not directly related to religion or spirituality that were identified by Tom as somehow contributing to his desire not to be gay was his having undergone what might be referred to as an experience of negative role modeling. Tom related a childhood memory of a visit by a male cousin who he strongly identified as both homosexual and of extremely poor character. Tom indicated his belief that this encounter's influence on him was an unconscious one, but that it stayed with him over the many years between its occurrence and his eventual active engagement with the question of his sexual identity.

...There was a cousin who stayed with us who was an active homosexual, and I have a feeling I might have been rebelling against him somehow, and I don't know the psychology of that.... He was a really poor character. I mean...believe me, there are many ways that he was a really crummy person [laughs] and he's not really somebody that one would want to

emulate. ...He was irresponsible, he really was....I don't think I had a good role model [chuckle].

The Story of the Great Experiment

Having reached the conclusion that he did not wish to be gay, despite early life feelings, fantasies, and experiences that made him believe he might be, Tom quickly formulated and began to implement his own psychological strategy with the clear goal of increasing his degree of heterosexual desire. The development of this strategy was a complex process, some of which was planned and some of which took place completely by happenstance, and it involved a mixture of deep introspection, the fairly extended cultivation of particular types of social experiences, and what Tom described as a form of self-hypnosis. As discussed at more length in the next section, Tom believed that this psychological strategy produced a quite significant, although ultimately temporary, change in his sexuality.

Tom's efforts at change began with his deliberate engagement in deep self-reflection regarding sexuality: reading, writing about his experiences, and viewing gay erotica. This process was unexpectedly interrupted one day by a knock at Tom's door that produced what he believed to be a significant breakthrough.

...I had a bunch of gay erotica [laughs] and so I was working really hard on an assignment at home...and I was actually getting into some auto-hypnosis...setting my goal and then reading and then writing. And I mean...when I say auto-hypnosis it's because sometimes I would start and then I'd look up and 45 minutes had passed and I'd produced all of this. Now my psychologist said that this is irrelevant to what happened, but I just wonder if I wasn't really opening some [laughs] sort of channels up.

And anyway, I would get up from this...and I'd read some gay erotica and etc., and then I would go back to work. So I was completely sort of focused on my sexuality as well as working really hard. And under these conditions...somebody came to the door [laughs], delivering something. And I just...I don't know why, but I perceived him as heterosexual, him as perceiving me as homosexual and being sort of...warm towards me. For all I know he was homosexual, but my thought was that he was heterosexual, and because of that I developed my theory [laughs]...that basically there are drives, and two of them are heterosexuality and an urge for heterosexual bonding.... I'm theorizing that that urge for a heterosexual male to associate with other heterosexual males, is an urge for heterosexual bonding, which I think is parallel to the urge for heterosexual sex. And I think that homosexuality is just a super-imposition of those. And once you're gay, you don't get the heterosexual bonding that will sort of allow your brain to train itself to separate out these two things...and so the theory of that is that if you're too gay you don't get the heterosexual bonding and you're stuck, and that's what happens in society.

So this was sort of a self-engineered experiment that sort of worked at least in the short run. But it was based on some little sort of personal experiences that suggested what would work for me....and then it didn't really work permanently in the end because, whether it's a habit or hard

wiring [Tom's by that point established homoerotic desire proved to be resistant to any very major, long-term change]....

As Tom began to put his newly arrived-at strategy for changing his sexuality into motion, his first concrete step was to seek out what he referred to as bonding experiences with heterosexual males. Since he had just joined a quite cohesive and friendly class of younger students for some professional upgrading, Tom was presented with what appeared to be an ideal opportunity to pursue his strategy further.

And so...I took advantage of some experiences when I was around a younger peer group, I mean like 23 year olds. ...By now I was theorizing that...you couldn't change sexuality if you weren't in communication with your sexuality, and if you were in communication with your gay sexuality, heterosexuals wouldn't want to necessarily become good friends with you and bond with you. But I did have a trick up my sleeve [chuckle] and that is...although it sounds silly, it did work. I said "well I'm gay, but I'm a virgin, even though I'm 34". And because...the fact that we had something in common professionally...what I hoped would happen was sort of true. They thought I was sort of a...nice oddball that they should sort of take under their wings, and sort of try to bring up, right? [Laughs] And so I got a lot of heterosexual male bonding....

Rob: I wonder, what was that like, that time? It sounds like you were going through a long struggle with trying to be more heterosexual, and yet for many people, certainly not all, but for many coming-out is sort of an affirmation of gayness....

Tom: It all came down to this intellectual belief that your orientation was one thing and your actions were another. And a lot of people think that...coming-out is just an affirmation of their sexual experience, but for me it was an affirmation of my psychological identity.

Rob: ...You talked about sort of deliberately cultivating a heterosexual peer group. What was that like? What went on in these groups and how did you feel about it?

Tom: I felt so happy to be liked. The fact is that...the reason why my theory might not be generalizable is because I became a loner for most of my developmental life. And so it's possible that I was just making up for the types of things that I would have experienced if I hadn't been a loner, and I would have ended up in the same place if I hadn't been sort of so stiff-necked or whatever. But the fact is that...I felt very...I felt approval. They were accepting me as a person, worthy of their friendship, and it had over and above the fact that they were trying to...help me, they were genuinely happy to be my friend.

Rob: It sounds like you had a kind of plan in mind, that you wanted to associate with heterosexual males, but what did the group of people do together?

Tom: It was mostly going out beer drinking after class and beer gardens and a few sports events, although I wasn't very sports minded [chuckle].

And there were events and...they were trying to be good big brothers to me. It was really quite nice of them.

As has already been mentioned, the final component of Tom's strategy for altering his own sexual orientation consisted of a form of self-hypnosis or inner dialog with what he perceived as his unconscious source of erotic desire. Tom indicated that he felt as though he was in discussion or negotiation with a very real entity or aspect of himself and that, in combination with the other components of his strategy for change, these dialogs contributed to a very significant shift in Tom's felt-sense of his own sexuality.

... I certainly believe that at the time, as I would go home, and I would think about these bonding experiences [they] would seem to satisfy a very deep need. And there was this one time I thought "well, here now I have a really good bonding experience, and if I'm going to do something, it is now." And I am not going to claim that it was as I perceived...but what I perceived was the following: I went deeper and deeper looking for my source of sexuality. And I just concentrated and concentrated and then all of a sudden I...I was able to trace back through those paths that were concerned with...childhood constraints about what was right and wrong, and all of a sudden when I accessed those I was able to find my way further towards deeper areas of my sexuality, and I was almost...you might think it was some sort of a hallucination but I felt I was in communication with a deep part of my brain concerned with heterosexuality...I mean with sexuality. And it was like I was talking with an infant type thing, something not very complicated...and I said to myself/it... "if I don't change, I'm afraid that we'll die with AIDS, and I have this, which is the

heterosexual bonding. And if I give you this, will you be satisfied...without having homosexual sex?" And there was sort of this exchange [chuckle] and this deep center said "well, I'd still like that, but if you give me this...this will do" type thing, you know? So I sort of came out of that with a feeling that I'd somehow negotiated with my subconscious, and if I could give it heterosexual bonding, it would make homosexual sex optional rather than sort of so strongly necessary. And that...it was from that as well as all my previous experiences that I developed this [his theory]. As I say, some people may think it was sort of a dream or something, but it seemed to be real to me.

...And every day I would go home and I would sit down 45 minutes and reflect on what had happened about bonding and how it satisfied my innermost self. And this combination of internal self-reflection and the various types of...bonding that I got, and all of these social pressures, real and perceived, it was really most uncomfortable for about...for two months and then it was more of a roller coaster when I started to date and really feeling in love [with a woman] for the first time in my life. So that was about three months in which I regard...I sort of compressed a huge amount of adolescence.

Stories of Desire

Having discussed Tom's strategy and efforts aimed at producing change in his sexuality, I turn next to a consideration of what he had to say regarding how

he experienced erotic desire throughout his life. The stories Tom told having to do with desire in general could be laid out in a roughly chronological fashion from his early curiosity about sex with other boys, through his period of apparent asexuality, to the time of his experiment with change and sense of increasing heterosexuality, to a final period of ebbing desire for women and resurgent homoeroticism. Throughout each of these different time spans, Tom made reference to his felt sense of attraction, erotic fantasies, sense of change in his sexuality, erotic relationships and experiences, use of gay erotica as an outlet for unsatisfied desire, and application of identity labels to himself.

In an excerpt quoted earlier, Tom indicated that he had engaged in some experimental sexual play with a male friend about the time that he entered puberty. He later elaborated on his experiences during that period, dividing them into quite distinct early and later segments.

Rob: So it sounds like it was just experimentation...not being particularly drawn to another boy?

Tom: At the time it was just experimentation without any real...any attraction. About a year and a half later I started to develop homosexual feelings, but by that time he had gone on to girls....

Several years later, after Tom's early health problems had been stabilized and once he had been pursuing his strategy to change his own sexuality for a short period of time, he reported that he was able to detect in himself a significant change in erotic desire.

...the fact is it [his attempt to change his sexuality] really did project me into heterosexuality in the majority for...I would say...one year and then it started to trail off again. But I think I peaked out at about 60 or 70% heterosexuality. And then it...was sort of a slow drop off.

Rob: Can I ask...how are you sensing in yourself this increase in your "heterosexual side"?

Tom: Two things. All of a sudden, I would look at these men and instead of seeing them in a gay context, I would see them as non-sexual people; and two, I had an interest in heterosexual sex. Nevertheless, I have to admit that a lot of my erotic fantasies were still male. But nevertheless, I appreciated the way women looked and...at this time I also fell madly in love with my future wife.

After Tom's initial, apparent successes in his efforts to cultivate heterosexual desire in himself (and after he had married his current wife), he indicated that the feelings of attraction for women he had been experiencing began to diminish, at first quite rapidly, and then at a slower but still noticeable pace.

Rob: ...So that 60 or 70%, you said it dropped off fairly quickly?

Tom: ...Oh, I guess it dropped down to maybe 30% quickly, but that 30% was quite persistent.

Referring to this period of diminishing heterosexual desire, Tom described what it was like for him to experience the sense of heterosexuality he had worked quite hard to achieve slipping away, and how he coped with being in a marriage to a woman toward whom he felt steadily less sexual attraction.

Rob: ...And so this was after you had said that your sense of heterosexuality was beginning to ebb again. What was that time like?

You describe it as a rollercoaster....

Tom: But I'd already tricked myself into a new psychological plane, or groove. And so I just kept going down that groove because I'd established a new set of normal operating procedures [chuckles] and so...and so I was continuing my relationship and I just...when I felt like it I'd sort of get...the gay erotica and do things in private.

Rob: ...After you had reached kind of a peak in this sense of yourself as a heterosexual, and it started to drop off, you said....

Tom: I would say it was about six months after the start of this.

Rob: What was that like for you? It sounds like this was something that you had worked for very much, and it started to disappear.

Tom: Well it really had no practical significance because I still have enough heterosexuality to make everything work. So I just would have...an increasing proportion of gay fantasies and masturbation. So a little bit [of] disappointment, but my internal goal wasn't to accomplish heterosexuality, it was to try for heterosexuality to the extent that I was capable of, and once I'd done that, it was...a feeling "well, this is okay. I've tried and so...now I understand that I've done my best".... And so once I shift something into the realm of this is something that I have no control over, it's stupid to worry about, then that's where my sexuality is now. So its shifted mental compartments.

In terms of his proportion of felt heterosexual versus homosexual desire, Tom described some very significant shifts over the course of his life. From an initial point just prior to the commencement of his efforts to change his sexuality when Tom considered himself "exclusively homosexual," he has previously been quoted as saying he believed he reached a point of 60 to 70% heterosexual attractions in a very short period of time, before shifting again to what he thought was approximately 30% heterosexual desire within six months of the beginning of his experiment with change. From that point, Tom indicated that his felt sense of desire had continued to shift toward homoeroticism at a more gradual pace.

I mean for better or for worse I tried my best to become heterosexual and it worked to some extent. I still regard myself as possibly 15% heterosexual but...as I say, now I've done my investment and que sera sera.

When I asked Tom which of the current culturally-predominant identity labels related to sexuality he might have applied to himself over the years, he indicated that he had used several of them with varying degrees of certainty throughout his life, up until the time of our interview.

Rob: I wondered also...as you were going through this whole process...was there a time in it when you applied different labels to yourself in terms of "I'm a gay person," or "I'm a heterosexual," or "am I bisexual?"

Tom: I considered myself asexual with a suspicion of gay for much of my life until I was about 33, then I considered myself gay, then I considered myself bisexual at about age 35. And I applied that label to myself for a long time, and it still might be accurate but now I just say that I'm basically gay because it seems to be the dominant long-term theme, but...it would be unfair to say that my gayness now was the exclusive gayness of my early adulthood.... I feel an appreciation for adult humankind as sexual beings, both genders, but I didn't as a younger adult. And so while my impulses are primarily gay, I think it would be equally valid to say I'm bisexual, even though I'm mostly gay....

Rob: What about those transition points where it sounds like the labels shifted? What were they like?...

Tom: When I was able to get some legitimate heterosexuality that had some duration, namely in the fall of...1988, I felt comfortable with the label bisexual...but my adoption of the term gay now is more resignation than any...radical decision that I'm gay rather than...it's not resignation in the sense that I regret it, it's just that by saying I'm gay it's sort of acknowledging that I'm more gay than heterosexual.

Rob: So it doesn't sound like...as you say it's not a radical thing, but it doesn't sound like a particularly positive thing either.

Tom: That's a tough one. My attitude is that gay and heterosexual are both good, but that gay is so inconvenient.

Rob: In what aspects of your life?

Tom: In the context of AIDS and societal expectations.... I think [my] original reference was "is it good or bad?" It's certainly good in theory but in practice it still has difficulties.

The tone of resignation and mild disappointment which I think is evident in this last excerpt from my interview with Tom serves to lead from the theme of desire to the next major thematic area.

Stories of Resolution, Resignation, and Sense of Personal Completion

The last of the relatively large groupings of thematically similar statements from Tom's interview seemed to be focused on the time in his life when he reached what appears to be a final coming-to-terms with his sexuality and also his feelings about that process. The elements of Tom's story that fit into

this section could be subdivided into those having to do with his experiences and feelings related to a same-sex relationship that took place after all of the other events previously discussed, with his sense of relatedness to the broader gay community, and with his reflections on how the trajectory of his life might have been altered if he had made different choices in his past.

I found the themes of resolution, resignation, and seeking for personal completion to be especially prominent in Tom's description of his first adult sexual relationship with another male. This took place several years into Tom's marriage to his wife, during a time that he indicated they had separated temporarily because of reasons unrelated to his sexuality.

I did lose my gay virginity five years later...when we [my wife and I] were separated because of parenting difficulties/differences. It was good for me because I wouldn't have been satisfied without...experiencing this because it's sort of...I would have felt totally incomplete if I had not expressed my sexuality at least once.

Rob: ...You had said that...that experience felt...it sounds like a pretty vital self-exploration?

Tom: It was. Yes, yes. I thought...I mean it would be a lot easier to pick up a hooker...but the fact is that putting aside all of the physical dangers involved, I mean like infection and stuff, I decided that that just wouldn't...satisfy my urge, not only for the actual act, though this was mostly what I was after, but I wanted the process of a relationship, however transient, that it was something that was wanted by the other person and it was not just a...a non....

Rob: Kind of a transaction?

Tom: Yes [laughs]. And I just think that I would be not nearly as satisfied....

...Now I can imagine that there would be...it would be great to have a boyfriend in some ways. But I'm pretty fortunate to have a good mate, and I don't want to rock that boat, though as I say I have fantasies, but the fact is having had a [same-sex] relationship, I'm like 60 or 70% toward being...the majority of my urges have been satisfied because I can say "been there, done that" type of thing.

Later in our interview, Tom and I returned to the topic of his experiences during his relationship with another man and, in particular, to his sense of his emotional state during that time.

Rob: I was wondering,...when you had your experience with a male partner do you...remember your emotional experience at these times?

Tom: Well...I developed a sort of desperation about wanting to...see at that time...now I'm more...realistic in my expectations but then I really thought...that life had passed me by, and I was sort of desperate to fulfill myself so that I could say as a human being I experienced what I consider would be basic for me. And so it was quite deliberate that I was...looking for a partner, and I was very happy to explore what I could.

...It was an emotional experience to love my future wife and have sex with her. But as far as my male partner, we agreed that it was for sex and we enjoyed it on that basis. It wasn't an emotional...it was emotional because

it meant so much to me and it was emotional because it was something that was very sensually intense. But it wasn't sort of a love affair.

Rob: So it sounds like that sensuality was very strong with him, but not with your wife?

Tom: Yes, but that didn't mean that my sex life with my wife wasn't extremely good for the first few years.

Given that Tom had characterized his adult sexual relationship with another man as so profoundly important for him, I wondered if he had had any interactions with the broader gay community in his area, and if such contacts might have held a similar importance for him. Tom indicated, however, that his experiences with the gay community had not felt particularly positive or meaningful.

Rob: We've talked...the experiences you had with your fellow students. I'm wondering about your experience of sort of the organized gay communities....

Tom: OK...I've always felt apart from them because my experiences are so different. I found them...fine, but not that relevant to me.

Rob: Because of your difference from the average?

Tom: Yeah. And there really isn't much...support or respect for married gays. There are a lot...I'm quite sure that there are...many more married gays than you would think.

The final sections of Tom's narrative that I considered were related to the themes of resolution, resignation, and personal completion. These were focused most particularly on his, perhaps rather wistful, reflections on his life, his relationships, and what Tom believed he had learned about his sexuality from his long struggle to change it.

In many ways, I'm not the same person I was like 20 years ago, for better or for worse. There's a lot of things that I just...I mean, if I had it to do over again I think I'd just become actively gay because it's so much simpler, but now that I've invested so much in everything else, I'm satisfied with where I am. But it's really struggling uphill.

Rob: You talked about a sense that if you had this all to do over again, you might do it differently?

Tom: I have experienced some rewards, both emotional and societal, for having pursued the course that I have done. And I...facing all the health problems that I am right now, I certainly wouldn't want to rock the boat. I'm very pleased that I have as much relationships in my life as I do, but if I had it to do over again and given the fact that I did hurt my wife a little bit by not knowing where my ultimate sexuality would be, and...given this and given the fact that it's been too much effort for the return, I think I would have become gay, had a gay lifestyle, in a responsible way, I hope, but I'm not sure about that. I think it's easier when you grow up with it, you know? Then any irresponsible phase is over before you can hurt yourself.

Rob: So what's changed to have this different perspective now, at this point?

Tom: Because you never can really ultimately change your sexuality, so it'll always be nagging. Society has changed a lot; I think that's another

thing.... So basically...I wouldn't change what I have now, but I'm just wondering if all I've been through hasn't been more trouble than it's been worth.

Stories of Experiences of Counselling

As with my other co-researchers, I wanted specifically to ask Tom if he'd ever undergone any counselling or psychotherapy, what it was like for him, and if it was related at all to his experience of change in his sexuality. I found it interesting that, when questioned, Tom gave his psychologist a good deal of the credit for inspiring his original belief that changing one's own sexuality might be possible, despite the fact that the counsellor apparently explicitly rejected such a proposition. This final section of our interview proceeded as follows:

Rob: ...One sort of final area I'd like to look at is if you had any experiences of counselling or psychotherapy, this is just because this is the discipline I'm coming out of, that are related to your sexuality.

Tom: My psychologist made an off-hand remark which sent me off on this slightly wild goose chase of male bonding, which worked for me. And he said that people...many people say that you can't change sexuality but a few think that if you can hold yourself apart from it somehow...if you somehow accept it yet hold yourself apart slightly, you might stand some chance of evolving. And then I knew somebody who said something to me along the same lines. He's basically a...a very older bisexual who...his comment was quite similar and it seemed to be from personal experience. So there were two things that suggested what I could do to sort of see what I could do about my own homosexuality.

Rob: Your experience of psychotherapy, would you say that the people you worked with...what was their attitude toward homosexuality, and were they well-informed?

Tom: It was...positive.... I frankly didn't believe the fact that he said that people couldn't change. And again it's this sort of grandeur. I felt that I could sort of...I didn't have to be sort of one of the pack.

With my discussion of Tom's story and his very distinctive approach to attempting to alter his own sexuality completed, I turn next to the narrative that may seem to have the least in common with any of the others, and to the ways that Chris experienced sexual identity development and change.

Chapter 7

Chris' Story

Chris' story constitutes a fascinating and, I think, quite distinctive expression of the great complexity and diversity of the pathways people could take in the development of a sense of themselves as sexual beings. I divided Chris' narrative and my consideration of it into the following six thematic divisions: stories of delayed experiencing of sexual desire; stories of shifting feelings, desires, sense of sexual identity, and the process of change; stories of the broader socio-cultural milieu; stories of spirituality and personal fulfillment; stories of gender transitioning and desire; and stories of counselling experiences. Additionally, since many aspects of Chris' life had altered quite dramatically from our initial main interview to the time of our follow-up contact (roughly two and one-half years later), when Chris had largely transitioned from the male identity assigned to her at birth to a female one, I occasionally distinguish from which interview a quotation was drawn, in an attempt to clarify how Chris' situation changed over time.

Stories of Delayed Experiencing of Sexual Desire

What I found to be one of the more prominent features of Chris' story was the fact that her development of erotic feelings for others seemed to have been significantly delayed by a medication she had been prescribed, contributing to her experiencing what may have been more than the usual difficulties coming to terms with the intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of dating and sexuality in her early 20s. Chris was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in childhood and her treatment included prescriptions for psychotropic drugs which,

in her case, produced some powerful sexual and libidinal side effects that did not become apparent until after she had stopped taking them.

I had obsessive-compulsive disorder as a child, and I was on various SSRIs [Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors] from when I was about 13 with one break until I was two months before my 22nd birthday. And the most significant [laughs] change in my sexuality happened when I went off SSRIs. I didn't realize they were putting a huge damper on any sort of erotic feelings I might have as well as my full [laughs] capacity to reach orgasm. I didn't realize that anything was wrong. I just thought this is how everyone felt all the time. So I went off in my first year in Rez [student residence] when I would have been 19 and 20...yeah, 20 was when I stepped down my dose and I developed a very sexual crush on a girl who was on our floor. And then I went back on them [the SSRI's], I don't know when, later...and that [sexual interest] evaporated.

...When I had obsessive-compulsive disorder, I didn't realize that other people didn't feel the need to flick the light switch on and off twelve times before going to bed and...had to check the door locks several times and then be wracked with obsessive thoughts before going to sleep. I thought that was normal. Before I went off the Fluvoxamine, I didn't realize that one would masturbate to orgasm.

Chris' initial experiences of interpersonal dating and romance, immediately after the first occasion when her Fluvoxamine dose was significantly reduced, seemed at times rather arid and intellectualized, and her actions appeared

as though they may have been significantly affected by social influences and her beliefs regarding what she “ought to be doing” as a sexual being in her early 20s.

Now, in that time, I did ask someone out but I wasn’t...I didn’t realize that I wasn’t actually attracted to her, I just thought this was the logical thing to do.

I was 22...I realized that I would really like to find a romantic relationship, and so I tried looking for one, and tried initiating some and had a really rough time, partially because I had no idea how to go about doing this....I guess every time that I tried, or every time for a two-year period when I tried to initiate a romantic relationship, I just felt it was this weird and unhealthy concoction of idealized logic and not understanding my own emotional state. I’d be trying to sort out if I should actually ask this woman out.... I’d methodically go through what interests we had in common and at one time I composed a [statistical] index using [laughs] our goals. It sounds silly but trying to make a decision...I realized I just have this idea of what I should do for a relationship, not what I actually wanted.

Rob: ...What I’m focusing on is that sense of “this is what I should be doing.”

Chris: Yeah.... Well, I mean, part of it was also driven...I had liked for a long time the idea of being in a relationship, and sort of emotional closeness and shared living...but, without really [laughs] knowing what I

was doing. Having never actually asked anyone out before. I mean...you sort of...guess as to what [laughs] the right way to do it is. And one of those things you have to figure out is who you should ask out. And apparently these are qualities that people look...this is someone that I'm friends with and she has qualities that I would think would make for a good relationship, so I went with that.

There also seemed to be times, at least at this very early point in Chris' sexual and romantic development and perhaps related to her OCD, an early expression of discomfort with her male sex, or both, when she felt a noticeable physical, emotional, and intellectual aversion to some aspects of sexuality.

I stepped down my SSRI dose...when I was at home from school during the summer and I tried masturbating and actually had orgasms, I was vaguely disappointed [laughs]. We hear all about how orgasms are supposed to be the most exceptional part of the human experience and it's like, um kind of messy.

...I wanted this feeling of emotional closeness and physical closeness in terms of cuddling, not necessarily sex. Actually not sex.

Rob: Do you have a sense of why that was the case?

Chris: I don't really have a good grip on how to—even now—how to approach sexuality. I feel like I'm making some sort of imposition on other people even by thinking about them sexually...let alone demonstrating it.... ...Everything surrounding romance and sex...OK, so we're younger, we understand how to deal with it when we're tired, when

we're hungry, when we need to go to the bathroom, what have you. What we're not taught how to deal with is sexual feelings. So we grow up not talking about them and not even...not dealing with them ourselves. So it's like reaching into somebody, going past any sort of protection or self-awareness that most people have.... And sex and romance, that kind of scares me. It does really weird things to your head. It's odd.

I've grown up with this very...with this feeling that I should not...that for a man to express his sexuality towards women is in a position...I'm very aware of how I look at women and how I come across to women but when I am around men, it just doesn't.... I feel more comfortable I guess...comfortable looking at a man sexually than I do looking at a woman sexually because there's less social...less psychological baggage tied to that....

Rob: From what you describe, it sounds as though in some ways there's a concern not to exploit the woman....

Chris: Yeah, that's pretty much it.

The character of Chris' romantic and sexual feelings and experiences gradually changed however, becoming more passionate and developing more emotional depth, after she went off of her psychotropic drug prescription a second and final time.

Since starting a sexual relationship when I was a little over 25, my attitude towards sex shifted again and I started being more directly attracted to people, both men and women.

I return later to a discussion of Chris' development of feelings of attraction to men as well as women, but at this point I want to focus attention on the overall shift in the character and intensity of her attractions to other people, generally. It appeared that it was at this time in her life that Chris' previously intermittent feelings of embodied, physical attraction and desire became consolidated and they seemed, somehow, to emerge from within, rather than being as laboriously thought out and worked through as they had been earlier.

When I was 24, I was sitting in a lecture and I was looking over at this guy who was sitting beside me and thinking "this is strange, I'm attracted to him, that's extraordinary. Wow. I didn't see that coming."

Rob: ...How did you experience that? How did you come to that realization?

Chris: The way I'm looking at this man and what I'm feeling in my body and I guess desire to make out with him is probably indicating that I'm [laughs] sexually attracted to him.... I didn't say anything, I just sat there going "holy shit"....

...I can't imagine living my life knowing that I have one sexual orientation, but constantly telling myself that I have a different one. I think that would be intolerable. ...It wouldn't be worth it.

Rob: ...It sounds...as though you're saying that when you did the first interview, that identifying yourself as bisexual felt really genuine at that time.

Chris: Um-hmm.

Rob: OK....

Chris: ...Really genuine.

Chris' sense of sexual identity shifted again, and I return to that transformation in a later section.

This was also a time when Chris experienced new aspects of relationships and was challenged, often through some very difficult experiences, to develop an expanded repertoire of romantic and interpersonal skills.

I tried online dating and found that to be an interesting but ultimately very painful experience because people can be anonymous and act however they want toward strangers. And that goes both ways. I was treated very rudely on two occasions and then I turned around and treated someone very rudely and felt really bad about this.

Rob: ...You talked about these social skills, would you say that attractions like that have felt awkward?

Chris: Oh terribly. I've only recently started to learn how to really respond to body language, and how to express how I'm feeling through non-explicit measures, that is to say not through just directly stating something, but by acting a certain way to indicate that this is how I feel.... Dating is this...game of half statements and in some ways I really dislike it.

...During this period [the time of an early relationship breaking up] I also felt really distraught, really...really angry...I was crying a lot, I wouldn't sleep. That was a shitty experience and I...want to minimize the odds of going through that again. Like I understand I'll probably go through

several relations where it will happen again and I'd like to have a relationship last a bit longer and when it ends, it doesn't end in such a dismal fashion. So yeah, I'm scared.

I experienced sexual jealousy for the first time a little before I was 25 and I couldn't figure out why I was suddenly so angry at this woman and it was like "oh gee, I'm attracted to her and then she's gone and made out with someone else. [Laughs] Right, OK, that explains why I'm angry." It's kind of nice to experience a change, a shift, at this age because I have a better awareness of how I work. I kind of wish I'd done it sooner, because I feel like I've been missing out on a lot....

Having considered how Chris' romantic and sexual attractions began, I turn next to recounting some of the stories she had to tell regarding later experiences with erotic attraction and identity and how these constructs may have changed across the rest of her life.

Stories of Shifting Feelings, Desires, Sense of Identity, and of the Overall Process of Change

Much of what Chris had to say during our interviews regarding sexual attraction and self-identification consisted of a loose chronology of events experienced and changes undergone, punctuated by my questions and requests for elaboration. The following describes the general process of development and change she outlined, with attention to those aspects relevant to the concepts of sexual orientation and identity. This part of my discussion of Chris' story is limited to her experiences prior to any but the most initial instances of gender discomfort or transitioning. I return to the ways that Chris' gender change seems

to have interacted with her experiences of erotic desire and sexuality in a later section.

Perhaps setting the stage in some ways for the actual changes that did occur, Chris devoted some time to describing both her sense of her own overall personality and the expectations she held for the relationships in which she would be involved.

...I really like online tests and I ran into this test at one point that was from some Americans Psych department.... I took this and it said "...according to this you have a strong desire to be accepted as a member of a group and a strong desire to deviate from social roles." I do not have a lot of preconceptions or I guess a lot of instinctual preconceptions other people have, or I don't hold to them. I have done some really weird shit, like...I was naked...[in a photo in] the Student Union paper.... So I have...this tendency towards I guess you could say perversity. If people are doing one thing and everyone seems to be doing it, I start thinking "why aren't people doing something else? Why are people always complaining that it's too cold? I like winter, I like snow".... I find things to like that other people dislike.... But on the other hand, I have this desire to have people like me, and the fastest way to get people to like you is to conform, or at least tolerate you, or at least not give you a hard time. So I guess that's where I stand on conformity, although I have this desire to please people and this desire to come across as being a nice guy. It's something that's kind of counterproductive sometimes....

Rob: ...You mentioned your initial attraction to women and then to men, is there a difference in your sense of these feelings?

Chris: Yeah. ...I don't see myself.... I would like to be in a—not just a long-term, but a permanent relationship at some point. I don't see that happening between myself and a man. But that could change. Seeing as already [laughs] how I feel about sex has already changed quite a bit.

...I can see maybe dating a man, but at present I don't see a permanent relationship, maybe public displays of affection if I feel safe....

Rob: One word that you used that I wanted to come back to was “expectations”, and you talked a little bit about not seeing yourself marrying a man...and I wonder, as you were growing up and maybe even now, what expectations have there been about coupling, and family, and children?

Chris: ...My youngest aunt on my mom's side of the family got married when she was about...38...my mother was 33 when I was born, my father was 35, my uncle must have been in his late 20s, possibly early 30s...so there's the expectation that it will probably be a while before I get married and have kids....

Rob: You used the expression “when you get married”. It sounds like that's fairly certain.

Chris: It's something I would like to do. ...My mother has said and other people have said a number of times that I am very good with kids, and I've heard a few times that if I decided to have kids that I'd make a very good parent.

Rob: I remember you had said that despite the attractions that you have for men, that you don't really see yourself in a long-term committed relationship.... ...Is there any connection between that difficulty and those expectations...in terms of being married and having children?

Chris: I think so.

One other factor somewhat in the background but potentially influencing Chris' sexual development, and one which was quite powerful in my co-researcher Tom's story, was worries about sexually transmitted infections.

My introduction to sex was mostly revolving around risk management surrounding disease, because we were in an open relationship.... The disease thing scares me—especially AIDS. I was kind of surprised that no one in my social circles...people have sex, but maybe they weren't as afraid about it...about not necessarily AIDS but still, wow....

Some of the preceding excerpts touch upon one of the earliest of several interesting shifts experienced by Chris in her sense of her own sexuality: her quite sudden development of feelings of attraction toward men as well as to women.

Prior to going off of SSRIs...I had no sexual interest in anyone, and then developed sexual interest in women and then realized later on when I was about 24 that I was also attracted to men.... ...Feeling sexual desire in

terms of an intense crush, about mid 20s, feeling generalized sexual desire towards women when I was 22, towards men around 24, more intensely and more generally at about 25, which is to say about nine months ago [before the date of the initial interview].

I realized that I was at about the stage of I guess...in some ways it's like the sexual development that someone would be going through when they were about 14 and I was about 24 [laughs]. And I realized that I would expect to be attracted to people I hadn't been attracted to before. I wasn't entirely confident that I was heterosexual, so I went "oh, I'm attracted to men as well. Okay."

Rob: That's interesting to me. It seems that for most people in our culture, we were raised to be heterosexual...yet you had this....

Chris: I come from a very left-wing family. My mom...when we were in the car at one point said "do you understand it's okay with me if you're gay?" Because she knows that I've never talked about anything to do with sex. ...Perhaps where and when I grew up and what I was paying attention to when I was growing up indicated that a lot of people weren't heterosexual. So I think it was more normal to me, than to other people.

There was a sense of confusion [during her first experience of attraction to a man] as I was trying to sort out what was going on in my head. And it's like "oh, I'm attracted to him," and I'm trying to think of...like the

emotion in my voice there is about...is about the way I was thinking. It was like “wow, this is interesting, this is surprising, this is kind of cool. This is...I never thought about that before, it could be a lot of fun [enthusiastic]!”

I was also curious about Chris’ sense of the character of the changes she had experienced and how they tended to follow one another. We had the following exchange on the topic of the nature of Chris’ changes in desire:

Rob: As a process, your sense...of yourself as a sexual being...do you have a sense of having been going through a distinct progression? Has it sped up or slowed down, gone backward and forward?

Chris: Events trigger new developments. I went off of SSRIs, but I didn’t have an orgasm for I think a couple of months, and I realized “oh, I can do this,” and so I masturbated a lot. From that I developed more of an understanding that yes I would like to be in a sexual relationship but I don’t know how to work that. So I would like to have this emotionally secure relationship as well. Now, that was also the year I was in residence and was living somewhere where I wasn’t terribly happy...so that could have explained it too.... I tried dating for a while and I realized this is something that I really enjoy and that triggered an interest in dating. Like initially it was just saying “well, I have another opportunity here, I should pursue that” and then I realized this is important, this is an opportunity to see if this is rewarding.... It’s not a continuous development.... So not a smooth transition—definitely stages.

Rob: ...Were there impediments or things that set you back?...

Chris: No.... It's more like climbing—or taking a path and the path branches.... But impediments.... Yeah, actually, I had such a terrible experience with online dating and that I was just completely off dating for a year. I was angry at other people, angry at myself, I was afraid, upset.... I was really depressed. After [Chris' first girlfriend] and I broke up, I was pretty shook up.... Impediments mostly come when I try to be open...or when I experience resistance...or when I'm afraid of resistance...and the more I challenge that, the better I feel.

In response to Chris' early description of her sudden development of new feelings of desire for males, I was interested to know how she experienced her feelings of attraction to the different sex-genders. Were these feelings and sensations of attraction fundamentally similar for her or in some way distinct, and how did she feel about exploring these different attractions? All of the following group of excerpts are drawn from our initial interview.

Rob: Where I was going with the question was about the...sense of what it's like to feel attraction towards a woman and it not being the same for a man.

Chris: I'd say the character is fundamentally the same—this desire to touch them, and I would say to grip someone...as in not just to touch them but interact with them in an aesthetic way—like together...is not different.

Rob: One question that I wonder about—in your experience of your sexuality and attractions do you notice, particularly since you've talked about some fairly distinct subcultures that you've sort of travelled

between, do you notice any difference in terms of your experience of yourself sexually in these different contexts?What is attractive to you? Are you focusing on different things in different places?

Chris: No, it's about the same thing. I'm attracted to people who don't present themselves in conventional fashions. I like it when people experiment with their clothes and their hair and don't talk like everyone else does, or don't come across like everyone else does.... I find...the way attraction seems to be conventionally presented seems to be really bland. I find that the people on the covers of these magazines aren't sexy. Some of them looked kind of plastic-y or sick and I understand that those people are supposed to be attractive, and it's just not doing much for me. So I like the space between what people are being encouraged to look like, which is ridiculous, and how people can present themselves. They can be very attractive and if it's not attractive, there is still this space to be how they want....

That is the difference between men and women: and the smell. Most men don't smell good....some do. Some women don't smell good either.... It has something to do with bathing habits.... It's not a "right" smell.... It can or cannot be explained...it's kind of hard to describe.... I'm not sure, that most of the men I think smell right are homosexual or bisexual, I'm not sure how on earth this works. Maybe it's habits, maybe it's what they eat...you can kind of tell people's eating habits by their smell....

Rob: What about attractions to men versus women? Do you find that there's any change at all in terms of your context?

Chris: There's a lot more attractive men that I look at [laughs].

Rob: But is that just a function of there being more attractive men?

Chris: I think it's just because there are more men who are more attractive in whatever context....

I feel like not having felt much bisexual interest [involvement with males] for quite a while, I have really missed out on something, and I feel like this desire to scramble to try and get back...get into sort of this approach to sex at some time in early adulthood.

Finally, despite Chris' indication at the time of our first interview of having clearly experienced erotic desire for both women and men, with an apparent preponderance of attractions to males at that time, she stated that she found it difficult or that it seemed personally unnecessary to adopt any particular identity label to describe her own sexual orientation.

Rob: What about the more intellectual aspects of this, more reflective?

And one particular aspect of this is self-label, self-identification....

Chris: I've had people ask me that—"how do you identify?" And I get this...expression because...I just can't slap a label on myself. I...know there's no political reason for this, I'm not doing this for some sort of cause, I'm just...I don't know. I can describe myself and how I feel but I don't really identify...I don't feel the desire, or I've never felt a strong desire to.... And it's like "why do people keep asking me this? Why do

people care so much?” That part of it, self-identification, has been a bit of a stressor, I suppose.... It’s like a handle that you carry something around with. It’s like putting things in a sack as opposed to having a bunch of objects sitting around that you have to sort through separately each time.... ..I don’t feel that I need to have it, but I’m wondering if I shouldn’t take a look at it. It seems to be really important to other people, much like sex is really important to people and it took me a while before I got it.

Rob: So just to check my understanding, it sounds like you’re saying that you’ve reflected on different...current identities and labels...and that none of them feels authentic for you....

Chris: Yeah....

This concludes my discussion of Chris’ account of her internal, phenomenal experiences of erotic desire in transition. From it, I turn next to what she had to say regarding her particular social context, primarily up until the time of our initial interview, and how important others in her life might have impacted upon her processes of self-exploration and change.

Stories of the Socio-Cultural Context

As was the case with the other co-researchers, Chris devoted a significant amount of time to describing how impactful the sexuality and gender-related beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of the important people in her life were for her. Chris gave particular attention to the ideas that were communicated to her by family members, peers, members of the queer community, and people at large.

Chris’ mother expressed great supportiveness of her child’s free exploration of her own sexuality, encouraging Chris to embrace whatever sexual orientation felt genuine to her. Chris further indicated that her mother’s

compassionate and accepting attitude extended to matters of gender as well as sexuality.

...I've been kind of raised with the idea that gender is just a bad idea. So that would probably be my opinion [laughs]. From what I've been raised with, the idea that one should only have sexual partners of one sex for some sort of moral reasons just is really bizarre because this is like saying that you should take your job based on your sex or you should have hobbies based on your sex.

Chris indicated that the rest of the members of her family with whom she was close also shared a quite open and accepting attitude toward sexual diversity.

...When I was 10 or 12 there was a United Church conference in Chilliwack where they were deciding whether or not they would ordain an openly gay minister.... It was very clear that some people were homosexual and would have a homosexual marriage and this was okay. Like my mother's side of the family, where I have 99% of my contact, was very behind the idea of having an openly gay minister in the church, and why not? And so we did talk about this at family dinners and so on, and we went to the Church conference....

Regarding her experiences with friends and other peers, Chris recalled reactions to her own atypical gender and sexual experiences, to gender and sexual diversity in general, and to generally nonconformist ideas and behaviors that were at least open and permissive, if not even more positive.

Rob: ...You talked a bit about the time when you first noticed one of your classmates—your male classmate who you were attracted to. What was

that like, having this new aspect of your sexuality that kind of came to your attention?

Chris: It was interesting.... But it was not something that I was readily able to talk about with a lot of my friends, especially some of my friends were fairly conservative...and I was keeping my mouth shut. But I did talk about it with a couple of my friends and they were entirely reasonable and reflected on the experience that they had—whether it was homosexual interaction or bisexual.... It was good.

Rob: It's interesting to me that you describe various instances of these ideas [that complete heterosexuality or complete homosexuality could be seen as limiting or disordered], but that was definitely, I would think, going against the grain of society, the current society.

Chris: The current society, but not necessarily the people I was hanging around with. Most of the people I hung around with read geeky books and had a similar political agenda and would not always conform to standards most people would conform to...standard relationship practices.

I wasn't hanging around the general social environment and the older I got the more I guess you could say unconventional the people I hung around with were. So I wasn't...we all had the general understanding that most of the population in most cases was completely wrong.

I think that one of my friends...or I'm pretty sure that one of the friends I grew up with, we went through high school...kindergarten through high school together, was bisexual or at least bi-curious.

...A lot of the people I know who are pleasantly casual [regarding sexual and gender diversity] also have the opinion that most people are weird and most people are unnecessarily reactionary, most people are immature and so on.

Rob: Would you say that you're part of a particular subculture?

Chris: Probably,...we have a lot of intellectuals [laughs]. People seem to fall into the category of people who want to be students, people who are students, people who dropped out of high school, people who do creative things with their time, people who watch foreign movies, to a lesser extent gamers...those who are into the artistic side. Geeks, intellectuals...oh, and leftists, but to a lesser extent.

As with the other co-researchers, I was curious to hear anything Chris had to say regarding her experiences with organized queer communities and any roles they may have played in her overall story of change in sexuality. Chris related the following regarding her experiences with general G/L/B/T groups, groups for people interested in kink or sexual sado-masochism, and transgendered peoples' groups:

Rob: ...Another dimension I'm interested in...is the social and interpersonal.... Maybe if we could talk a bit about your experience of changes that you've gone through both in terms of sexuality and gender

and how was that...in the context of say the organized gay and lesbian community?...

Chris: My contact with the organized gay and lesbian community...has been primarily through our campus group, which I only hung out with on a regular basis for a period of one semester. I should say in 2006—January to March/April, this last year.... ...I felt really scared the first time I went in. I wasn't sure at that period—the first time...I assumed I was straight. I generally didn't have a lot of sexual interest. I think it was before I realized that I didn't have a sexual interest in anyone—or hadn't had, and was starting to have sexual interest. The more I hung out there, the more comfortable I felt.

Rob: Has there been a sense of any sort of pressure that you've experienced to identify in a particular way?

Chris: I am surprised at the lack of pressure at [her campus G/L/B/T/Q group]. No one has asked me what my sexual or gender identity is [laughs].

And kink—people identify as tops, bottoms, and switches, as well as what the hard limits are, and to a lesser extent there's a little bit of how kinky someone is. The idea is that it's better to be kinky than non-kinky, and by extension there's, I think, an undercurrent that it's better to be more kinky than less kinky, which isn't, I think, the best attitude. But I don't see a lot

of it. So I don't feel there's a lot of pressure. But people do ask me if I'm a top or bottom or switch. Before I got into this I didn't realize that people identify as tops or bottoms. It still strikes me as strange.... Like the gender thing, it seems kind of limiting.

Rob: You've talked about communities that you've been involved in in terms of kink and L/G/B/T groups. What about transgendered or transsexual groups. Do you have sort of a social network there?

Chris: Sort of. Through this overlap between the kink and gay communities, there are a few transsexual people.... I've been trying to find some sort of community. I feel a little uncomfortable—much like I did when I went to [her campus G/L/B/T/Q group] for the first time....

And there's another group downtown with whom I feel a little uncomfortable because I notice that with older people, people more...than 10 or 15 older than me, surrounding unconventional gender expression they fall into what I find to be fairly traditional, confining categories in that you are either a cross-dresser or you are someone who is trying to adopt the gender expression of one sex completely, and I'd say for me, excessively. Not just for me in terms of what I'm interested in, but what I feel comfortable around. I don't feel entirely comfortable around someone who is extremely masculine or extremely feminine.

Finally, Chris had several observations and comments to make regarding her experience of people at large and this broadest, least intimate, but still important circle of social contacts and what they had to say regarding sexual and

gender diversity and change. This group's stance was usually perceived as the least positive, and Chris seems often to have experienced it as threatening and constraining.

Rob: So [finding herself attracted to a male for the first time] doesn't sound upsetting or disconcerting.

Chris: ...When I was an adolescent I was worried that I might be gay because I understood...you'd be ostracized. You'd be beaten up—your life would be at risk. It'd be [laughs] a pretty shitty place to be, and the same to be bisexual.... So, I have a lot of...I'm afraid of how I come across to people and how people will react to me.

Rob: When you say how you come across, is part of that wondering whether people might infer that you are gay?

Chris: Well, not "will people infer that I am gay?", but if this person infers that I'm gay, or if I told them that I'm interested, then are they going to have a problem with it?

Rob: It's interesting to me that you talked about...at high school and before that a gay person might be ostracized, and yet it sounds like when your first attraction happened, that wasn't too much of a concern...that didn't affect you too much.

Chris: No. It had been...I'd gone to college before for two years and then I'd gone to [a University] for four years. So then two years out of high school and then college. And four years out of [her conservative hometown] on top of that, so my social environment was different. It was

no longer something to be afraid of. It was just another avenue.It complicates things but it's not in an unwelcome fashion, it just opens more doors. If someone has a serious problem with it, that's not someone I'm going to hang around with. This was also after a period when I realized that I wasn't really sexually interested in anybody for a while. ...So it was also just good to feel sexual at all.

...One significant emotional experience would have to be the reactions of other people to this [atypical sexuality and gender expression], and I've always been very quiet about how important in terms of...what I am talking about is not just acceptable, but welcome. And when I feel or think something for a while I start...I wonder about how socially acceptable this is.

What I'm talking about [gender nonconformity] is getting into some pretty scary territory and that actually is putting myself at some considerable risk. ...I have a fairly good idea of the dangers of demonstrating gender-deviant behavior. At one point I was walking home with a friend of mine...and a couple of guys slowed down in a car beside us and started screaming "fag" at us, and they were following us slowly and looked like they were going to get out of the car and beat the crap out of us—we managed to get onto a bus. And at that time we were not displaying any gender-variant behavior, we were just walking home, at about one in the

morning. So that's what happened, and I've had people lean out the window of their car and shout "fag" at me—but I don't know why. ...If I want to go ahead with really doing some things about my gender presentation to make myself feel more comfortable...I'm scared.

I don't know if I'll be able to go out and feel safe. If this is something that's important to me, then I think I'm going to have to. I guess the most important thing that I've learned over the last couple of years is that I'm going to be myself—I'm not going to be afraid of how people are going to react. This is really breaking some norms.

[At the time of our follow-up interview, Chris remarked that]

...As a transsexual, it's much safer for me to explore my sexuality with women than it is with men...or I should say as a transsexual woman it's much safer...as bisexual and homosexual women may not always be friendly to transsexuals, but won't react violently, whereas many straight men will react violently if they find out you're a transsexual at any point, whether you're on a date with them or whether you're just saying "hi" to them [laughs]. So...even in a space where I'm relatively free, there is still a great deal of social pressure on me...ironically there's pressure on me to be gay....

From Chris' experiences of the sociocultural context in its broadest sense, I turned my attention to what she had to say regarding her encounters with the

perhaps partly social and partly uniquely individual domain of spiritual and meaning-related experiences.

Stories of Spirituality and Personal Fulfillment

Chris and I devoted a relatively small portion of our discussion to ways that her spirituality and drive to achieve personal meaning and fulfillment may have been in some ways related to her experiences of desire. The majority of this part of our conversation, all of which took place during our initial interview, was focused on Chris' experiences of organized spiritual groups, but she also made what I thought were some interesting comments regarding her perception of the similarities and interconnections between spirituality and sexuality.

I realized...there's an opportunity to have a great deal of sex in life, and it's a lot of fun, and...it can be very good and complete. And when I say good it's more in a...completing sense to want to have this important thing in one's life.

Rob: You mentioned a sense of fulfillment, that sexual aspect of fulfillment....

Chris: Yeah. ...It's part of a balanced lifestyle.... I need to be doing something on a regular basis where I feel it's conducive to feeling happy. I need to have a circle of friends to feel happy. I need to have a bit of time to feel happy...I need some sort of avenue for some kind of a relationship, at least at this time, to feel that I have my life together. And my life is for the most part together, but I need to find some sort of relationship, or the sex part of it, but I prefer a relationship.

Rob: You had talked quite early on about being involved in the United Church organization. How important is spirituality in your life and how does that factor in, in terms of your reflection on sexuality and changes?

Chris: ...I went to the United Church...until...I was about 14, when I decided that I...was not enjoying myself and didn't want to go.... I stopped going primarily because...I wasn't getting the answers that I wanted. I thought it was just dancing around [serious metaphysical discussion].

...So I stopped going to church but I was still interested, and I read a lot, and most of the material I could get was an extension of my interest in paranormal phenomena...I'd try to find theological answers there. There was an extended period where I was agnostic. My Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder interacted with...some sort of anxiety I was feeling around religion.... I went to sessions with Sokka Gakkai International, which is a branch of Nichiren Buddhism, which is a sort of Protestant messianic Buddhism. And I did it because I wanted to have religion in my life. I wanted to go somewhere where it was okay to be spiritual.... But when we had a discussion, there was just chanting songs and kind of vague approaches. Fundamental doctrines were never really examined.... So, spirituality is very important to me.... The question, to me, of what is good, I think is what's whole, what is complete, what has all of its parts working together as one. A religious experience to me...is when it feels like everything is coming together and people are happy because they are together and there is this dissolution of boundaries. That's what I'm

looking for and that's what I would like to find in sex, but I've not really found it in sex. Perhaps I'm being a little idealistic.

Stories of Gender Transitioning and Desire

During our initial interview Chris reported experiencing some discomfort with and questioning of the gender assigned to her at birth, and this had developed into full transsexualism by the time of our follow-up contact roughly two and a half years later. As Chris' process of gender transitioning progressed, she seems to have undergone a related shift in her experiencing of erotic desire. In the following excerpts, all drawn from our final interview contact, Chris describes some aspects of her experience of transitioning from a man's to a woman's gender and how she perceived this process to have directly produced some significant changes in how and for whom she felt romantic and sexual desire:

I've found...that with transitioning [laughs] I seem to have become more directed towards women than I was expecting. So, that means that that's changed somewhat in the last three years...or...two and a half...

Rob: ...With your gender transition going on, how are things changing? Are they changing...in terms of your attraction to other people?...

Chris: Well...it's more focused. Like, I can tell now...there are times when I find I think I would be attracted to someone, but I think I was more, I think, looking up to the person in question and liking what they were...for example,...I'd feel this sort of charge around some "dykey" women. And then I realized, once into transition...once off the medication and into transition I realized it had less to do with sexual interest, and more with a feeling of "oh my God, I've found someone who is similar to myself, but not with my body and gender identity matching up with them."

...I can now actually think about myself having sex and enjoying being touched...whereas before I'd find having sex to be very frustrating....

Rob: ...Would you say that was gender related, in terms of...that you would want to have a sexual experience from a woman's body, or something different?

Chris: Oh, yes.... Yes, that's very much it, like...I would have sex, pre-
transitionally, and not want to be touched [laughs]. And it was very
frustrating for both my partner and myself. Because I couldn't understand
why...I couldn't enjoy it.

...As far as who I am attracted to, once I've been able to tear apart the "oh,
I'm very like this person" [as opposed] to "oh, I'm very attracted to this
person"...I notice that there's been...a bit of a shift, and a bit of a
broadening out of who I am attracted to. I seem to be interested in
a...wider range of women that I thought I would be. Some of who are
more feminine than I would have been attracted to before, and some of
who are more masculine.... I've also been hanging around with enough
[laughs] transgendered people that I realized that I find other
transgendered people attractive who often have no interest in conforming
to particular gender norms...whether because of their bodies, or the way
they dress, or the way they act, what have you.

Rob: ...OK, you've mentioned women, and how that's broadened out,
what about with men? Has it changed?

Chris: Um...I can...I know now more about what I would like to do in terms of having sex with men, and I think I could have a fair amount of fun, as opposed to before when I felt occasionally interested in men, but I wasn't really sure what to do.... That's about all that's really changed. I guess I'm...more comfortable with the different facets of my sexuality than I used to be....

...Now that I can feel the alternative to being in a cissexed [having a gender experienced as congruent with one's birth-sex] male body, I can see how uncomfortable it was making me. ...I am more comfortable wearing clothes that are not so baggy as to conceal my entire body [laughs], which is what I would have worn. Um...I enjoy doing things with my body much more...than I used to, and that ranges in everything from exercise to cuddling...even eating, to be honest,...to seeing myself in the mirror....

Rob: ...How would you describe your current erotic desire in terms of attraction to males, females, or transgendered or intersexed people?

Chris: I'd say I'm predominantly a gay woman...and I say gay instead of lesbian in part to...I guess...muddy the waters a bit. ...I'm definitely attracted to women...I'm usually attracted to people who describe themselves as dykes, who may or may not also identify as women.... I'm attracted to some gender-variant gay men...by gender-variant I mean...men

who are unusually feminine. ...But my sexual orientation seems more directed towards the female end of things.

Rob: OK. So that does sound like a shift from when we had spoken [previously].

Chris: ...Yes, it definitely is a shift.

Rob: Do you have...any sense of how that happened? Has this been a kind of a gradual thing that...reflecting back on you don't really notice it going on?

Chris: ...I think it happened with me stepping further and further into a female body and a female identity. ...I think my experience is a much milder version of what many transgendered people have found...that once their gender changes the...context the sexual attraction occurs in changes too. For me the shift was very mild, because I found...the way I was sexually attracted to people was somewhat conflicting with how I thought of myself...so there was already that...disjunction there. ...Over here in a female gender role I feel more comfortable with my sexuality, and I guess it's just that I can feel it fully and do not have to keep backing away from it and feeling uncomfortable. I think that's it.

From Chris' reflections on how she felt her gender change may have acted to both broaden her erotic attractions and to shift them somewhat from males more principally toward females, I move next to a consideration of the final theme emerging from our discussions: her experiences of counselling and psychotherapy.

Stories of Counselling Experiences

As with each of the other co-researchers, I wanted to know if Chris had had any experiences with mental health care practitioners that might have been related to her sexuality, and whether or not she experienced those practitioners as being appropriately knowledgeable and respectful. Chris' recollections of counselling and psychotherapy, which she expressed during our initial interview, were focused primarily on OCD-related therapy during childhood and much more recent counselling for gender issues. The relevant psychotherapy-related sections of our interview included the following:

Rob: ...Because I'm doing my degree in Counselling Psychology, I'm interested in any experiences you might have had with counsellors and in therapy. And, if you've had any, has it been related at all to gender and sexuality, and how have these experiences been?

Chris: ...I had a really rough ride in grade six. I was the class pariah so I went to the school counsellor, and my mom took me to a counsellor as well. It had nothing to do with sex...or sexuality and gender, although some behavior that I was presenting in grade six was the beginning of some kind of gender work.... I was seeing a child psychologist for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, but again it wasn't anything sexual....

Rob: So gender issues were never raised?

Chris: Probably talked about by me occasionally...what was causing obsessive thoughts, and so on.

Rob: How was that? Do you have a sense of the counsellor as being well-informed, accepting, competent?...

Chris: Oh yes, he was great...or at the least good...and at one point he said “I feel like you’re holding back, there’s something you’re not telling me” and he was right. ...The only problem I had was I was not the most eager participant...I was holding back and I was not saying everything I could say and so a lot of what I got out of the counselling I went through was from sitting down and thinking about it after the fact....

Rob: What about your experiences of counselling specifically about gender issues?

Chris: Yes, I went to [her local G/L/B/T/Q community center] and after [laughs] staying for a few minutes...I got this pamphlet that said I could go to the health clinic and there was a drop-in to see a counsellor, which wasn’t entirely accurate. There was a drop-in at a different time and I could see a physician who would refer me to a counsellor who, according to his voicemail, would get back to me sometime in the next few weeks [laughs]. So I didn’t go there to see a physician, I wanted to see a counsellor.

Rob: And the...doctor who started the referral process, they talked about taking hormones?...

Chris: I was terrified when I was going there. That was the leap...and I realized if I do decide to go ahead with this,...whether I want to use medical technology on my body,...or if I just want to change gender expression without it,...I am going to have a lot of challenges. ...I was afraid. The doctor was very direct and very polite and I could talk to her

as someone who was up on what she was looking for and...she was asking questions for the information she wanted. So that back and forth to give her as educated as possible...was kind of awkward. But much of a relief, coming in.

I want to close my consideration of Chris' story with some reflection on how I approached the writing of this particular section. While all of the co-researchers' accounts of their lives and paths of personal change were unique and fascinating, Chris' story is distinct in that it includes some atypical elements that were never experienced by any of the others. Chris' experiences of transsexuality and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder served especially to set her story apart. In reflecting on her narrative, I devoted a good deal of thought to how much of Chris' discussion of gender discomfort and transitioning I could usefully include in this project. Male to female transsexuality is apparently a relatively rare phenomenon, with the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association indicating that "roughly 1 per 30,000 adult males [or people assigned a male gender at birth]...seek sex-reassignment surgery" (2000, p. 579) in western, industrialized nations. Chris noted and I definitely agree that this estimate might be overly conservative, given the financial barriers and other impediments that could prevent individuals from obtaining such surgery, and studies from nations where the costs of sex-reassignment procedures were partly or entirely defrayed by a government health-care plan showed significantly higher prevalence rates (e.g., 1:11,900 in the Netherlands [van Kesteren, Gooren, & Megens, {1996}], and perhaps as high as 1:2,900 in Singapore [Tsoi {1988}]). In any event, however, the relative infrequency of transsexualism in the general population seemed reasonably well-established. Chris also indicated that she had been coping with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder for nearly all of her life, and I wondered how to go about integrating such uncommon stories with those of the other co-researchers. My final decision was to attempt to err on the side of

inclusiveness as much as possible, and to strive to be open to whatever I could learn from each of the co-researchers unique stories, inasmuch as they relate to sexual orientation. I omitted sections of my discussions with Chris that focused exclusively on the process of gender transitioning, which I considered to be beyond the scope of this study and really deserving of a distinct research effort of their own, but where her comments touched upon sexuality and desire (which I believe are distinct from gender, although clearly related in some ways), they are included here.

From Chris' very engaging story, I move next to what Luke, the last of the five co-researchers, had to say regarding his experiences of changes in sexuality and sexual identity.

Chapter 8

Luke's Story

The last of the five co-researchers who graciously agreed to participate in this study chose Luke as his pseudonym. I found Luke's story, as those of all of my co-researchers, to be rich and engaging, and our interview meetings challenged me and led me to reflect on my study topic in several new ways. I believe Luke's narrative share several elements in common with the other co-researchers, while several others are unique to him. I have divided my discussion of Luke's story into the following five general thematic sections: desire, fantasy, sexual behavior and the process of identity development and change; changing consciousness of personal possibilities; social factors including supports, impediments, and community; identity, sense of empowerment, and other positive outcomes; and meaning, existential issues, and spirituality. In reflecting on Luke's narrative, I found what I thought were many points of overlap among these thematic divisions, and I note these possible linkages as I proceed through the sections I have identified.

Stories of Desire, Fantasy, Sexual Behavior, and Identity

Development

As I believe was the case with all of the other co-researchers, an essential foundational component of Luke's story was a chronology consisting of his recollections of erotic fantasy and desire, dating and sexual activity, and how these had changed over the course of his life. Luke said that his first memories of feeling romantically attracted to another person were from his pre-teen years, and that, almost from the outset, he had a sense that his feelings somehow set him apart from his male family members and peers.

I think I knew that there was something perhaps different about my sexual longings or desires probably when I was ten, eleven, twelve at the very latest. ...I had no real frame of reference for them. ...I simply thought that...no one else talked about the...things that I was either dreaming about or thinking about on a regular basis. ...I think the difference was that all of my dreams and fantasies at that time predominantly had men in them, and talking to either my father, or my brother, or friends it was always that...you were supposed to be fantasizing about women, or if you had any longings or anything it was supposed to be toward someone of the opposite sex. And so I think that...was my first, probably, understanding that maybe something was different, and I just kept it to myself, but didn't really think there was anything wrong with it per se.It wasn't until later that I was lead to believe that it was somehow wrong or different in a negative way.

Luke said that he kept his early homoerotic feelings entirely to himself and, during his junior high school years when many of his peers began to engage in heterosexual dating relationships, Luke followed what he saw as the expected and "normal" pattern and began to date girls as well.

Junior high I had fairly [laughs] fairly normal dating relationships with girls. ...At that point it never crossed my mind that I would actually try to date a boy...or, you know, try to develop some kind of romantic relationship with a boy, but it seems quite clear that what I was supposed to do was have relationships with girls.... Outside of the school doors, when I was in grade seven or whatever, you kissed girls before they went

home on their bus and you went home on yours, and...it seemed from, I think, grade seven or eight 'til twelve or thirteen I always had a girlfriend and that was just the way it was, and it seemed to be quite normal and, and, and healthy, as it were.

I was immediately curious regarding Luke's meaning when he used such arguably loaded and ambiguous terms as "normal" and "healthy". When asked, Luke clarified his choice of words as follows:

I think especially...talking about that...time, while I was growing up, there was only one "normal slash proper" way to express desire for someone romantically or sexually, and so I think "normal" was definitely Hetero and...you were supposed to be attracted to someone of the opposite sex and that's...that's normal. ...It wasn't necessarily normal for me, but it was certainly normal for everything that I was surrounded by.

As Luke went on to say more about his romantic and sexual experiences during junior high school, his narrative began to include more and more frequent dissonant elements. Luke related often feeling dissatisfied or coerced within his relationships with young women and that his erotic fantasies about other men were increasingly emerging into his consciousness at this point in his life.

I...had sex with a girl when I was 14, 13 turning 14. And it was a...an unpleasant experience....

Rob: ...Can I ask...how was it unpleasant?

Luke: I, I felt quite powerless in the situation. I'd recently moved to a new town, and...once again, I found myself quite quickly with a girlfriend, because that's what you're supposed to do, and...in that it seemed to come with a certain amount of, you know, popularity, and a certain amount of

social power, dating a, a popular girl. And she'd had sexual experiences in the past, and that was just kind of part and parcel of, okay, if you're going to be with her, then you're going to have sex with her. I felt quite powerless in the situation. I can't say that I necessarily wanted to have sex, but it seemed to be expected. So, I think wrapping all of those things into one, pubescent experience, it wasn't very pleasant.

...Throughout junior high and high school, I continued to...date girls, and have sexual relationships with the girls. Except in high school I think it became more and more clear to me that there was something abnormal about my own fantasies and what I would, perhaps like to be doing, instead of dating girls. So it's not that I didn't have sexual attraction toward the girls, because I did,...it just seemed to be more and more the unexpressed desires, the fantasies were taking up more mental space....

Rob: You talked about desire for men taking up a mental space.

Luke: Right [laughs].

Rob: What was that like?

Luke: ...At that point? That was more kind of the watching certain movies on a regular basis that had, I'd say attractive stars in them,...not sexual movies, simply, like *Point Break* with Keanu Reeves is a personal favourite that I've watched on a regular basis. And that was acceptable to watch even in company because it was a surfer dude movie, it was action-

packed with all of the things that, you know, straight boys were supposed to appreciate, but there were some added moments that...Keanu Reeves was an attractive man, and he certainly took up time, and space, in my mind.

Rob: So, do I have this right then, that it would be a sense of just enjoying things like that, with the attractive man in it, but it didn't, there was no real connection to "yes, I find him attractive"?

Luke: I think I was quite aware that I found him attractive, um [pause] whether...I knew I found him physically attractive...there was a desire for, for men. But there was some kind of disconnect during that period as well, and I never would have dreamed that I was gay, and I never would have actively looked for opportunities to have sexual relationships with men. It just didn't seem to be an option as something that I would or could do.

I was quite curious regarding the disconnect that Luke mentioned, and returned to the question of Luke's failure to link his apparent homoerotic desire to the possibility that he might be gay or bisexual in the next section.

During our follow-up contact, I also asked Luke to say more about his early relationships with his male peers and whether or not he had ever felt similar attractions for any of them as he had indicated he had for certain male media figures. Luke replied that

Yes I did feel physical and emotional attractions to three of my male peers during junior high and high school. Two in particular, that I spent a great deal of my time with. I spent two or three nights a week sleeping at these friends' houses in any given week.... And the majority of my socializing

time was in the company of these friends. I did, occasionally fantasize about having sexual encounters/relations with both of them. It was not something I allowed myself, however, a great deal of time or mental space for. None of these friends were in the least interested in men, sexually, and I found it very difficult and painful to spend time and emotional energy thinking about having a sexual relationship with them. These kinds of fantasies about something that could never happen, were painful and therefore I built very effective walls around them. So much so, that I feel now, I put huge parts of myself into such carefully constructed boxes that I gave up on those parts of myself, and made parts of myself seemingly invisible to even myself.

Luke indicated that the next major step in the development of his sense of sexual identity took place immediately after graduation from high school. Luke left his familiar physical and social environments behind, going by himself to live in Germany for six months. This change of venue seemed to have been associated with the beginnings of some profound alterations in Luke's sense of himself, understandings of what behaviors and identities were possible for him, and expectations regarding his own life and future.

And then I moved away. I graduated and I moved to Germany. And Germany was great, and I think when I was in Germany it was the first time that I actually realized that I...at that point, I had very little interest in having a relationship with a girl whatsoever....

I lived there for six months, and didn't have...any really sexual experiences in Germany, other than, I recall in Berlin. I went to this really

seedy theatre that was having a, a showing of... *My Own Private Idaho*, and the entire audience was gay men, and I remember feeling really empowered by that. I was in a theatre full of gay men, and it was okay that everyone was just having a good time, enjoying themselves, and I felt somehow worldly and accepted, though I wasn't out to myself even at that point. I remember feeling quite welcomed, in the theatre, and that was important.

Living in Germany took me away from all that was familiar to me, away from my social circle and family. It was a place where no one knew me and those who I met would...only be part of my life for a brief time. It was a time when I began, slowly, to allow myself to feel however I wanted. And...as that process began I did feel that homoeroticism was indeed more possible and acceptable for me. And thinking upon it now [at the time of our follow-up contact], I began to feel able to grow into my own sexual being.

Luke indicated that it was upon his return to Canada from Germany that he first tentatively discussed his feelings of homoerotic attraction with a small number of people from his existing friendship network.

When I moved back from Germany, I, I think I started finally expressing to my peer group that I had interest in men, and though...I would have to say I still would not have identified as gay or bisexual at that time, but I started expressing an interest, and I was interested, in men to a limited peer group....

Rob: What was that like and how did you choose the people with whom you had the conversations?

Luke: Um, well there was a fairly limited peer group of friends that were still in [Luke's home town] when I came back from Germany, and so I was pretty much spending my time with three or four people, and they were friends from before.... And they seemed like a very safe group of people, we kind of...had a conversation, but you wouldn't necessarily, you know, if you said that you were...had attractions toward men, or you had a dream about some movie star...you would not be judged for it, or...they would not make assumptions about what that might mean about you, or things like that. That group of friends that you had kind of abstract philosophical discussions with, they didn't necessarily have to have, you know, ramifications in reality. So choosing them was pretty safe.... I think...that it was kind of through those conversations with those particular groups of friends that I started understanding maybe what I was becoming, or whether I had always been, and I wasn't aware. Kind of an external communication that I'd started to develop...a vocabulary to explain myself to myself.

It was after having these first conversations with his small group of safe and supportive friends that Luke and another young man agreed to go on a romantic outing together. Tragically, Luke's first experience of same-sex dating was marred by violence.

...That's when I went on my first date with a boy. He was a lot older than me...like 10 years. Not a great deal older, but old enough. And...I met him in [a town near Luke's home], I was still living at my parent's home at the time, and...it didn't go so well. My very first date, uh, he sexually assaulted me. It was a [pause] a very trying experience. So that was my first date, with a boy. I didn't have another date with a boy for probably three years after that.

Despite the very shocking and potentially traumatic nature of this experience, Luke seemed to have endured it with great resiliency. He was not physically injured during the assault, and while he believed it did affect him in some important ways socially and psychologically, Luke stated his belief that the experience had no particular effect on his sexuality or sexual identity.

Rob: ...You talked about the assault experience...which had taken place during your first date with a man. And...I wonder if...in the aftermath of that, do you have a sense of how that affected you, in terms of relationships and attraction?

Luke: ...I haven't spent a great deal of time thinking about how that affected...relationships after that. I know for sure that safety became an issue for me for the first time, I think...after that. I think that the assault probably "cured me" of any hubris I might have had as a young man—the thought that I was untouchable, and nothing could hurt me, and nothing could go wrong in my life.... Yeah, that definitely changed my perspective around...how much power I necessarily had over what was happening to me...and that I couldn't necessarily go blindly into things expecting...the best.... An unwelcome reality check...that I got. ...As far

as how it affected relationships, I suppose that I probably was looking for...a certain amount of safety, a certain amount of open communication...possibly knowing what was coming.... I definitely withdrew from relationships for a little while. I started to think quite seriously about...kind of...long-term bachelorhood, as in not having relationships with anyone. And I convinced myself that that was normal and healthy...and that would be kind of a long-term future for me. I mean...actually [Luke's {female} partner] was the first person I started dating after that.... ...It wasn't something that was like "okay, I tried men, and that was dangerous, and ugly, and terrible, so I'm going to stick to women." No, that didn't cross my mind. I still, looking back, I don't think that that was at the forefront of my mind, or in my consciousness.

Luke indicated that he and his partner had been together, with the exception of a single six-month separation when he dated another man, ever since shortly after his experience with the sexual assault, and for over 10 years. I was curious regarding the apparent contradiction between Luke's assertion that his primary erotic attraction was for other males and the fact that his primary relationship for over 10 years had been with a woman. Luke indicated with good humour that he had been questioned about these facts many times, and he elaborated as follows:

...Even in myself, I think it's kind of strange. But, though most of my desires are definitely aimed at men, I'm in a monogamous relationship with a woman, and very happy about it. I'd probably have to say that, yeah, it is just the individual, and [Luke's partner] is just, kind of, everything I want from a partner and, yeah, it works quite well that way.

...I generally, in terms of men, only have erotic desire. I am not desirous of social or emotional connections outside of what I currently experience. My friends are pretty evenly split between men and women, and gay/lesbian and straight. I live a full and satisfying life both within my life-partnership with [Luke's partner] and my friendships.... If...you are talking in a more general sense, and asking is my attraction to [her] unique, in that I am only attracted to her as a woman, and no other woman...my answer is no. It is true that I am not often attracted to other women, and that men more often stir my desire, but there are other women to whom I feel attracted. I am at a place where I am sexually happy and fulfilled. It is with a woman. And I don't know if it could be the same with a man, I simply don't know, because that is not where I am.

In terms of his memories of romantic and erotic desire, fantasy, and behaviour, Luke summarized his experiences from childhood until the time of our follow-up contact as follows:

...I think there was a long time where I...was only attracted to men, but I knew that I would, or at that time felt that...I could only express desire toward women. So, all of my desire was toward men, but I expressed desire toward women. However, I think it then kind of did a...reversal where I knew I had a desire toward men, some kind of abstract desire for men, but was quite happily expressing affection toward women, and it wasn't just expressing affection, I had affection and desire for women as well. Um and [pause] and whether that was simply...a pushing back of a desire toward men and therefore the desire for women flourished...in that

environment, I have no idea. I know that my desire now....I probably find myself desiring men more than I desire women.... The proportion definitely changes. I'm not sure if that has any pattern to it or not.

I think it probably started off as...I don't remember having desires or...dreams, or anything about women...during those first years.... And then through high school, I guess my desire would have been predominantly for women, at least what I was willing to express to myself, and outwardly. When I moved to Germany, though, and when I came back from Germany, I was quite convinced that I was never having a relationship with a woman again, and didn't really feel any desire for women either. And so then it shifted back...solely to men, or at least predominantly.... But then [Luke's partner] came along, and that kind of changed everything for a while, that [pause] that I found someone that I really, really wanted to be with.... ...I really fell for [her],...and that was very strange for me...to have that desire for a woman 'cause I wasn't expecting it, and pretty much had told myself that that would never happen again. And so, yeah, there's a very healthy desire for women,...as long as it's [Luke's partner], and then the rest of the desire, yeah, I don't find myself attracted to women very often.

...For me it's quite clear that I started only having a real attraction towards men, or at least that was the first attraction that I had...that I remember

having, and...then quite...clearly...it's not that I stopped having those desires, but simply pushed them aside and then started romantic relationships with girls. And just had only romantic relationships with girls allowed, nothing else, for...the difference between junior high and high school, though by the time I got to high school having relationships with girls was becoming more difficult. ...So, I think those are fairly clear.... 11 or 12, only attracted to men, or at least physically desire men, and then, throughout junior high and high school, most of high school at least, I was attracted to women,...I don't think I was only pushing everything aside and "just have to do that" [engage in heterosexual relationships]. I mean, I...was attracted to women.... I suppose I tried...as much as possible not to think about my attractions toward men...and I think I was pretty successful.

Rob: ...[Your] attractions to women...would you say they came before or after you started to initiate dating relationships?

Luke: In all honesty, I don't think I ever initiated dating relationships.

Yeah.... [Laughs] ...People approached me, and I went along with it...happily, for the most part. And so...I'm not sure I was necessarily attracted toward girls before the first girl wanted to start dating me.... I think...it started off mostly as an emotional/social attraction.... And then...once I was sexually active, I did have sexual attractions for women...not exclusively, but...I think that they...definitely started off as...social/emotional attractions.... ...High school...my desires for men

became harder to ignore...and my physical relationships with girls became more difficult, because I wasn't interested in having sex with my girlfriends, even though it was expected...and I don't think I really related that to...wanting sex with men instead...I just didn't seem to be enjoying sex with the girls that I was dating. [Pause] Then...after high school, there was a change in that I did want to start dating men...I didn't really have a lot of interest in girls...dating girls. So it wasn't...really in my mind when I was in Germany, that I wanted to be dating anyone, but when I came back to Canada, I did want to start dating someone, I wanted to start dating men....but that really didn't turn out very well. ...And then...I think, primarily, I was still attracted to men...but was pretty much swearing off any kind of...outward...contact with men, or women. And then, to my surprise, I started dating [Luke's partner], who is a woman, and we really rekindled my desire for women. Yeah, so that was a pretty big shift. And then now...I still am sexually attracted to women and men. If I had to put a percentage to it, I'm definitely more attracted to men. And it's been pretty constant for a long time.

Within Luke's overall narrative, his experiences of desire, fantasy, and romantic and sexual behavior seemed fairly closely linked to his awareness of and more intellectual reflections on the concept of sexual identity and the question of which identity label might best apply to him, as well as to his interpersonal experiences sharing and discussing with others his sense of his sexual self. These general themes are central to the next two major sections in my discussion of Luke's story.

Stories of Awareness of Identity Possibilities and of Self-Labeling

Luke described having gone through different distinct states of awareness of exactly what categories of sexual experience and orientation were generally considered available in the society in which he was growing up. Luke clearly underwent a process of change concerning which of these groups he was willing or able to conceive of himself belonging to. Eventually, Luke related that he did feel able to adopt a sexual identity label for himself, although that process had been challenging in several different ways. In concluding this section, I also consider what Luke had to say about the foundational basis of his self-identification and his perspective on the ultimate source of his desire.

Upon reflection, I believe that most of the other co-researchers touched upon the themes of awareness of available identity categories and willingness or ability to self-label at least in passing, but these seemed particularly prominent in Luke's case, despite the fact that he only referred to them a few times in total. Beginning with some of his earlier memories, Luke expressed a seemingly straightforward lack of awareness that anything other than heterosexuality existed or could exist.

Rob: I'm curious; through these early relationships...you had mentioned that you'd been having fantasies that were focused on men....

Luke: Yeah....

Rob: ...So...how did you, bring sort of....

Luke: You mean reconcile them?

Rob: Yes, right. Your desire and your...dating behavior?

Luke: Whether [laughs], whether I was dissociative or not, I don't know.

I simply, I never really did reconcile it. I didn't think that that was necessarily a problem. You know, it was simply that...in private, uh, meaning inside of my own mind and my own dreams etc., that men were

predominantly there, but in outward life it was women...or girls at that point. I didn't, I don't think I ever, at that point at least, felt the...need to reconcile them. It just seemed that they both existed together, and that was just the way it was. I never dreamt of, of saying anything to anyone about it. I don't, I don't recall there, at least at that point, there being any real tension between the two....

But certainly I would not have, throughout high school, ever identified with being gay, or anything other than straight. I don't think it ever crossed my mind there was something for me to identify as other than straight.

I wondered about Luke's assertion that he could be well aware of his homoerotic fantasies and desires and yet never consider that this might place him within one of the (at that time and place) culturally fairly widespread and well-known categories of gay or bisexual men. It seemed to have been a part of Luke's process of identity development that in this early period the idea of identifying himself as anything other than heterosexual never entered his consciousness.

Luke and I had the following exchange with respect to this issue:

...Throughout junior high and high school...I...valued myself as straight.

There was no other...really, thing I could be. Everyone else was straight...so I was too.

Rob: Had you never heard, you know, the name calling?...

Luke: Oh yeah.

Rob: Kids use the "fag" word all the time.

Luke: Definitely.

Rob: So you must have known that this was possible?...

Luke: Yeah, I definitely heard those names...used those names myself, actually and yet I never...I honestly never put myself into that group. You know, "one of them." It was definitely us and them.... But no, I never...did put myself into the group of being gay or bisexual. Although, quite clearly I was. I think quite clearly. But perhaps that was just me not really allowing myself to question anything. Yeah, I certainly...it's not that I was unaware of the options...on the table, it's just that I never...bothered to think that I might be anything...strange.

Rob: Do you have a sense of why that was?

Luke: No.... It just wasn't even something that was in my head. To be...to label myself as anything else....

In relation to this part of our conversation, I wondered how clear Luke's memory of his different erotic attractions was to him. Luke seemed to have no doubt of the integrity of his memories, however, and clarified as follows:

Rob: ...Was there a sort of struggle for you in terms of what were your attractions to men and women?

Luke: No. I don't think I ever talked about or wanted.... I didn't necessarily want people to know about them, but personally? No not at all.

It was only subsequent to his return from Germany, after first openly discussing his sexuality with a few supportive friends, and roughly a year after his sexual assault experience that Luke said he first felt able to adopt a sexual minority identity for himself.

It probably wasn't 'til a year, yeah, probably just over a year after...my first date that I think I started actively associating myself, or identifying myself as a bisexual man who felt both attractions to men and to women...in varying degrees,...and I was really empowered by that. I thought that that was just the best thing that could have happened to me...not necessarily out myself to a lot of people as bisexual, but just to think that about myself, to have something to kind of hold onto, whether to help to...explain myself to myself, or maybe at that time I wanted to have some kind of category to fit into to give me some kind of strength, or identity as part of a group.... I do remember it being...a revelation, that was really empowering, and I enjoyed it a great deal.

I return in later sections to what Luke had to say regarding the particular difficulties he experienced in actively embracing a bisexual identity and with respect to the sense of empowerment he reported in connection with doing so.

The last aspect of Luke's sense of his own sexuality, perceived identity options, and self-labeling that I consider important to address was his sense of whether his desire was permanent and somehow integral to him, or if it might be more subject to alteration by cultural, environmental, or other factors. , Luke had a good deal to say regarding how important and empowering he found it to be able to choose his own sexual identity label. This led me to wonder whether it was an identity category or desire itself that Luke felt he had been able to choose. As far as his own experiences were concerned, Luke weighed-in to the essentialist-social constructionist debate in the following terms:

Rob: ...I wonder, do you have a sense of...does the [identity] label itself...you talked about just the act of adopting it leading to changing the way that you feel. But is there...even before the labels, is

there...something concrete...something lasting about you that is being labelled? Your attractions, your desires, would you say that they are there before?

Luke: Um-hmm. I think that...people evolve; people change as they grow up, and as they continue to grow when they are older. ...And though I am quite confident there are a lot of innate things that are just...there, throughout your life, it's the ability to think about them...I think it's...what's paramount to really knowing those things about yourself. If you don't have the ability to think or to...talk about them, then it's quite difficult to put your finger on them....

Rob: Is there any sense in your experience of...the identity that you had being something that you wanted, that you chose, or was it a matter of acknowledgment?

Luke: ...I think...I mean, I didn't choose to be attracted to men. I didn't choose to be attracted to women. ...I think that is innate. As far as labels, I think you can choose what you'd like to identify your self as...like I said earlier,...there are gay men that sleep with women, and say that they are gay. There are straight men that, on a regular basis, sleep with boys, and say that they are straight. ...So as far as the labeling goes, I think that you get to choose. As far as the attractions, desires...I'm definitely in the camp where you don't get to choose those.

Luke had mentioned that one aspect of the adoption of a sexual identity label that he found potentially important was that it could form the foundation for membership in a supportive community of similarly-identifying people. In the next section of this chapter, I consider the stories Luke had to tell regarding his experiences of social supports and impediments and of sexual minority and specifically bisexual communities.

Stories of Community and of Other Important Social Factors

Luke's stories of the social and community-related aspects of his development of an enduring sense of erotic and sexual identity seemed to fall into four general groups. The first was closely related to the chronology that emerged from his stories of desire and fantasy. These dealt primarily with Luke's awareness of the potentially dangerous homophobia of the society in which he lived and his sense of a need to keep secret his homoerotic desires. The second small group of stories related to Luke's difficult experiences of coercion and sometimes violence in romantic relationships with both women and men. The third collective of stories in this section laid out in more detail Luke's experiences of what it was like to share with others his eventually-embraced bisexual identity and how the people in his life reacted to Luke's declaration of his sexuality. The last portion of this section consists of a discussion of Luke's experiences of what it was like to contact and affiliate with queer and specifically bisexual communities.

A first group of stories Luke had to tell that related significantly to social influences focused largely on his experiences with societal homophobia and how he believed that homophobia affected him as he was growing up. The following excerpt elaborates, strikingly, the attitude that prevailed among Luke's family members and peers toward sexual non-conformity:

Rob: You had also talked about, it was actually when you were in junior high, that the sense of attraction to men being abnormal occurred to you for the first time....

Luke: Yeah.

Rob: Where did that come from?

Luke: [Pause] Well, the sense of it being abnormal definitely came from my, external influences, my family...was quite...my father was always very vocally homophobic, and I don't.... [Pause] I'm not sure if it was because he suspected that I might be something other than straight, or whether it was just the man of the household expressing his views on the world, and the family should listen.... There was a joke that my father used to get me to tell people, like when friends and family would come over, because he thought it was cute. It was a...it was a terribly homophobic joke, but it got positive reactions...positive reactions from my father, and his cohorts. So I...that made me know for sure that sexual desire towards men, let alone being gay, was definitely abnormal. Um, and then peer group as well. The friends that I had, you know and older siblings, whatever, that seemed to be more knowledgeable when it came to...sex, or people that you'd look up to for knowledge, or whatever, always had...their jokes, or their comments about fags, or etc., etc. It was quite clear that if you did act on your desires toward men that it was looked down upon, violently.

Rob: So there was a sense of physical threat, as well?

Luke: For people that were gay. There was definitely a sense of physical threat. And which I didn't identify with, so it seemed that I was, sort of...no-one knew about me and I certainly wasn't going to do anything

about it. I didn't identify as anything other than straight so, I'm not sure if I consciously thought that I was under physical threat.

From this clarification of the nature of some of Luke's closest and most influential relationships, the next excerpt gives his perspective on how this social environment impacted upon him.

I think that during periods of time I certainly was...quite a bit more emotionally guarded, then I am now,...certainly through...early puberty right on through high school, I was quite guarded. I didn't allow a lot of people to get too close.... Mostly, I think, because of...kind of...an innate...need to protect...myself from people finding out that I might be different from how they were.

A final quotation related to the impactfulness of the homophobia in Luke's social environment emerged from a question I had regarding how social contexts in general might have influenced his sense of his own sexuality.

Rob: ...Do you have any sense...that your sexuality...has it been influenced by context? Have you noticed yourself feeling differently in different contexts? [For example]...the times in your life you talked about...there were some shifts that happened. The time when you were in Germany, being surrounded by a community...do you think that being kind of immersed in a queer community...did you notice a change in your feelings or the intensity of your feelings?

Luke: I'd like to say that no, I don't think it really affected my feelings or the intensity of the feelings but, at the same time, I know that in certain contexts, at least growing up, there were times where you were in situations...that it was only permissible to express certain desires. So I

think the desire itself is probably fairly innate, but what changed with context was the expression of that desire.

The second general cluster of quotations related to social factors in Luke's life had to do with his experiences of pressure and coercion in romantic and sexual relationships. In the first of the following two excerpts, the coercion originated with his high school girlfriends.

...Some issues I had in high school around sexuality were, increasingly I didn't want to have sex with my girlfriends. I would,...try to avoid it when I could. And when I couldn't avoid it, it wasn't necessarily an enjoyable experience....

Rob: Would it be...that sense that you weren't enjoying it, sort of that you were being...pressured into it?

Luke: Yeah, I think so. More than anything, yeah, it was probably more the pressure....

The second of the coercion-related quotes is drawn from our follow-up contact, which was approximately two years later, when I asked Luke to comment generally on whether or not he felt his experiences of sexual coercion had had any lasting effect on him. Our exchange proceeded as follows:

Rob: At several points during our discussion, you mentioned experiences of feeling powerless or coerced in sexual situations.... Do you feel that these difficult and unpleasant experiences have had any specific influence on your developing sense of your own sexuality, and if so, in what way?

Luke: ...I can only say that it took a long time, many years that is, to reach a place where I accepted my own sexuality and took pride in my own interpretation of sexual pleasure. Only when I accepted that what I felt

and what I desired to feel were true to myself and that sexual acts were not required chores...did I begin to freely express my sexuality and enjoy my sexual experiences. Doing what I felt was expected of me did not mesh with what I myself wanted to do. Hiding, continually, behind my sense of what the social norms were, behind my belief that I needed to restrict my self-expression to what I believed were the social norms, resulted in me taking a long time to accept myself for who I truly was. At present, I don't feel like any lasting harm has come from it, only happiness that I have arrived at a place of personal acceptance.

The third group of quotations related to the social elements in Luke's experiences focused on occasions when Luke shared his new bisexual identity with others and his reflections on the bisexual identity and how well it seemed to describe him. Luke's discussion of his experiences of coming-out to others as bisexual was rather short but reflected both a diverse range of reactions from others and some of the difficulties that seemed to be unique to the expression of a bisexual identity.

...The coming-out process...is always a...limited success. ...With some people it was very successful. Um, [Luke's partner] was 100% supportive right from the get-go. There were friends that were embarrassed about it all. Um, there were family that were very unsupportive.... [Luke's partner] was my partner throughout the whole kind of official coming-out.... That was really nice to have, definitely. Yeah, I had lots of reactions, too, about that bit.... The coming-out as bisexual is kind of a non-coming-out. Because, you know, "why would you bother coming-out

if you're bi?" "...It's only really important to come-out if you're gay...."

But I didn't feel that way.

...[I've had] mixed reactions from both my straight friends and from the gay and lesbian community. Straight friends saying...like, "why bother...with bisexual?" Some friends said "if everyone was honest with themselves, everyone would be bisexual." Those were some reactions. Other reactions were "well, you're dating a girl, so why bother coming-out?" ...The vast majority of my gay and lesbian friends, and even a lesbian professor at the time, were quite adamant that it was just a stage. That there was no ability to actually stay bisexual. That you are simply on the righteous path of becoming a bona fide gay man. And that was a clear and often-repeated message. There wasn't really any such thing as bisexuals. You were attracted toward men, and that was where your path lay, and that's where your happiness lay. And so, "get out there." And yeah, I'm not entirely sure that message has really changed....

Against that backdrop of other people's confusion over Luke's bisexual identity in combination with his being in a primary relationship with a woman, Luke indicated that he has himself wondered what it meant to be bisexual and whether or not the identity category really fit him well.

...Coming-out, and starting to...associate myself with the identity of being bisexual...means that once I'd given myself the option, that I could see having a relationship with whoever I wanted to. That now that the choice was mine, everything was fine, that I could have sex with a man, and that

would be...again using the word normal, and it wouldn't matter. That would be the big difference. [Luke's partner] and I did break up for a period of time...and during that time I did date a man for a brief period of time, and that was fine. And [Luke's partner] and I got back together six months later, and I've been with her ever since, and that's good, too. So, now I kind of live this, well...I do live a married straight heterosexual lifestyle, but wouldn't dream of calling myself straight.

I guess talking about...where I am now, and where I've been for the last nine years is that it seems quite odd to be living this very outwardly heterosexual life, where I have a...happy monogamous relationship with a woman, and yet I identify myself as bisexual, and so have desire for men, but still somehow feel that being bisexual is an important part of my identity, and...yet I don't really see myself expressing any part of that identity outwardly anymore.

...I guess what I'm trying to say is...I'm not terribly concerned with what it means to be bisexual, as a whole. I am still concerned about what being bisexual means to me. [Pause] Is it okay for me personally to [pause] to only be with a woman for the rest of my life, or is that...is that the way it should be? I think so. I think that's...where I'm at, and where I'd like to be while still being able to express openly my desire...for men, with [Luke's partner] as well. So I'm not sure if I have a lot of problems with it

personally. I don't think that I do. Though expressing that to...the outside world, yeah, remains...problematic....

The final aspect of the social dimension of Luke's sexual identity development that seemed important, both to him and to me, was his experience of queer communities and of attempts to join with them. Luke indicated that both lesbian/gay and heterosexual communities had been quite rejecting of him, and that he had felt little motivation to seek further for a bisexual community.

...I don't think having an identity as bisexual is really a very good way to get into a group. It kind of just ostracizes you from the gay community as well as the straight community.

So I haven't really found any bisexual community...though...I think of myself as part of a queer community. But I have a sense that...at least the queer community that I know doesn't necessarily think of me as part of the community. Yeah. And yet I'm not...there's no straight community for me, either. I mean any...acquaintances that I have that are straight, even long-term friends, still bring up on a regular basis...well, an irregular basis, the sense of confusion around...if I am bisexual, and if I am more attracted to men, then how can I possibly be happy in my relationship with [Luke's partner]? People are baffled by that. But certainly no sense of support or belonging from the straight community either.

Rob: Have you ever explored resources on-line?

Luke: No. I do have a number of books that I've purchased over the years. Either...fun books, kind of a Who's Who of the bisexual world,

with some theoretical discussion, or vice versa. And then I've purchased a number of books over the years that...you know...have short stories surrounding the bisexual experience. And I think I have...kind of looked for myself...I've looked for others in other ways, through fiction or non-fiction writing. Though I can't say I've ever, at least in the kind of personal non-fiction stories, I can't say that I've ever found a reflection of myself in any of those stories.

Rob: ...You talked about some desire to connect with a broader queer community, but not so much with a specifically bisexual community?...

Luke: Yeah, you're right. Though...there are...I think lots of options to experience, I also haven't really taken [them]. And whether that's because I'm not really actively looking to become a part of a community, or whether it's that I don't necessarily feel like I would belong in that community?...

Despite Luke's admitted ambivalence regarding the possibility of finding and joining a specifically bisexual community, he described his process of adopting a bisexual identity for himself in generally quite favourable terms. His positive attitude and evaluation are particularly clear in the last two main sections of this chapter, the first dealing with identity, feelings of empowerment and other positive developments in Luke's life, and the latter, that focuses on meaning, spirituality, and existential issues.

Identity Development, Sense of Empowerment, and Other

Positive Outcomes

The fourth of the theme clusters that I identified as emerging from Luke's narrative had some elements in common with the other co-researchers' stories, and yet it was quite distinctive in certain aspects, as well. The first of two groups of excerpts in this section describe the broad feelings of freedom and empowerment that Luke, in common with most of the other co-researchers, experienced upon embracing what he saw as his genuine sexual identity. The second thematic sub-group is clearly related to the first, but is more significant as particular to Luke. The two tangible positive changes that occurred in his life after coming-out as bisexual were noticeable improvements in both physical health and interpersonal relationships.

Luke passionately described the almost euphoric feelings of freedom, liberation, and empowerment that accompanied his personal and public embrace of a bisexual identity.

When I did start identifying as bisexual, and started coming out to...a limited group of friends, and...eventually a limited amount of family, it felt really good. ...It felt like it was some kind of...an identity that I could have that would make it so that I could talk about whatever I wanted to talk about, express desires for whoever I wanted to express desires for, and I was accepted in some way.

Rob: I'm curious about the...before and after—it's like there was such a shift from...adopting a bisexual identity....

Luke: Um-hmm. I think it's a sense of freedom in that I could start...being honest with myself, more than anything. That I didn't have

to...have desires and feelings...or thoughts, or anything.... ...I think the...coming-out, or creating an identity for myself being bisexual really did give me the sense of freedom that I could think about all of those things, and I could explore them if I wanted to. Yeah, but I didn't have to hide. Not so much publicly hide, but I really didn't have to hide anything from myself anymore. ...That's probably the greatest thing. There's a social freedom, too.... You can actually express those feelings and desires to other people, and...that's nice,...but I think more the freedom...freedom with myself.

...At first I didn't really know that I had the opportunity to create an identity for myself...so I just kind of fit into what I thought was expected of me...and tried to live my life both inside of myself, and externally, what was expected.... And then the idea of being able to [create] an identity for myself was a really freeing experience...and then that, I think, really enabled me to get some of myself in control and to start putting myself out in the world the way that I wanted to.

The preceding excerpts touch upon the main content of the second subgroup in this section. Here, Luke describes how certain aspects of his physical and social being seemed to have been very deleteriously affected by his years of enacting a false sexual identity, and how these areas of his life changed quite drastically for the better upon Luke's internal acceptance and sharing with others of his bisexual identity.

...I know that I did struggle pretty heavily through high school...with alcohol, and drugs, and pretty much anything else I could get my hands

on...to make it so I didn't have to think about stuff very much. And in retrospect, I could see that frustration around identity or a sexual orientation and not feeling like I ever belonged to any group had that kind of stressing effect that I was always trying to numb out. So, I don't know how I can explain it very well, but I know that there's a number of things I was doing...during that time, that make me believe now that I was struggling a lot more than I allowed myself to be conscious of.

Throughout high school, and even when I was living in Germany, post-high school, I was remarkably less fit than I am now. I drank a great deal more, I smoked a great deal more, I ate a great deal more, and I wasn't that active. ...My physical health wasn't that great. And...there was a pretty marked shift...after I did start coming-out...to myself...and identifying myself in a way that I wanted to that...my physical health did change dramatically...I began to get significantly more fit, and became more and more concerned about longevity, and feeling fit in life, and making not only myself into who I wanted to be, but more and more making my body into what I wanted it to be.... ...If you want to live longer because you're now happier with yourself, if you want to enjoy life more than you have in the past because you now think there's a future waiting for you, and a future that you want to take part in, then...I think it follows, clearly, that you would want to take care of yourself for that.... ...And I did start feeling much more comfortable with myself after I started

coming-out, after I identified myself as bisexual. And I think if you feel more comfortable with yourself, then...you would be more willing and able to get active and start making choices for yourself....

Rob: ...Do you think as changes happened, as you had the coming-out experience...do you think there was any change in the way that you related to other people?

Luke: Well...I quite clearly, to myself at least clearly, became...a much more personable, possibly genuine, person. ...I was an arrogant prick all the way through high school....as a defense mechanism that...as long as I could portray myself as being smarter...than everyone else,...and having one up on people and...kind of...pushing my way...that I could kind of keep people where I wanted them to be. ...Once I...allowed people to see me for who I was...I didn't need to have those...kind of...blockades anymore.... People could interact with me and I could interact with them on a more genuine level. ...I think that's a pretty big change in that....
Yeah. I'm much more comfortable interacting with...people...than I ever was.

In high school and in the period directly after it, I would've been...quite uncomfortable spending time with someone who was out, someone who was...identified as being gay or lesbian, or bisexual for that matter. And

that certainly isn't the case now. So,...now a great deal of my friends and acquaintances are...out gays and lesbians....

The many positive changes that took place in Luke's life after he came-out to himself and others as bisexual seemed very likely to be linked to the contents of the last of the thematic clusters in this chapter. That is, they might be connected to Luke's reflections on spirituality and finding meaning in life.

Stories of Meaning, Spirituality, and Existential Issues

The last of the major themes that I identified as emerging from my discussions with Luke were concerned primarily with such ideas as personal freedom and the granting to oneself of permission to live in accordance with one's convictions, the discovery or creation of meaning in life, and the development of a sense of spirituality that affirmed the rightness and integrity of one's most profound self-defining choices. Luke's reflections on identity, freedom, permission, and attaining meaning are contained in the following quotations:

...I guess the creation of sexual identity for me has been really important....

Rob: ...I wonder if you could say more about how...it sounds like [the creation of a sexual identity] sort of gave you permission to express [feelings and desires]? How does the...identity label affect things?

Luke: I think it comes down to requiring a vocabulary to talk about things before you can fully think about them. Without...the words and without the concepts behind those words you can't fully express feelings or thoughts or any kind of psychological process without first looking at the words to do it with. And I think the creation of an identity, or coming out as a bisexual gave me...the words, it gave me the mental space where I could express those things....

Rob: I can see, definitely, why you'd want some terms in describing yourself, you'd want the vocabulary. But could you not express attractions to men without an identity vocabulary?

Luke: I suppose one could. ...I think, in retrospect, that it seems to me that the identity was...what I had latched onto, had given myself permission to be who I think I've always been. I think that giving myself the permission allowed...for everything to kind of follow from there.

Rob: Can I kind of zero in on one point in what you've just said about...having permission and...kind of...being allowed? Where is the permission coming from?

Luke: Right. I think...I think...I think from within. I mean, it really is...kind of...an existential epoch when you have that coming-out process...and...you really do start, I think, having that kind of an existential moment where you think more about your free will and...what you want to become as a person, and much less about messages that are surrounding you, externally. So, I think it's...it's giving yourself permission to feel what you feel and to do what you desire to do. And I think a lot of that permission from yourself is also giving yourself permission to ignore or disagree with messages that might be there externally.... And because they're external and you're raised inside of them, you do internalize a lot of those messages.... But primarily its permission from yourself.

Rob: ...You've talked already a bit about the kind of existential aspects of [your experiences]. Do you see, from the experiences of your past,...a message for you? Is there a meaning?

Luke: I think, quite simply, that it's been a journey everyone's supposed to be on, that I think everyone's supposed to take. And that's just getting to know yourself. What you're supposed to be doing, and who you really are, and what your purpose might be. And so, yeah, I think the whole journey is that: getting to know yourself and allowing yourself to be the person that you really are. I mean...it's simple, but it takes a lifetime....

Rob: Where do you see yourself in terms of accomplishing that...self-knowledge?...

Luke: I think I'm working on it! I have fewer and fewer places that I don't allow myself to go. I'm slowly opening up...slowly opening up doors, and I hope I'm still continuing to question both myself and everything around me...trying to find the answers. And I think there are always multiple answers.... But yeah, I think I'm...on the path.

The final excerpt from my discussion with Luke focused upon the place of spirituality and spiritual experiences in his life. While Luke had not spontaneously touched upon these topics earlier, he spoke at length about them when asked, and I found his reflections very engaging and thought-provoking.

Rob: One thing we haven't touched on is...spirituality. And whether you're a spiritual person, and is your spirituality linked to romance and/or sexuality at all for you?

Luke: [Pause] I think I have a two-part answer. One, I was raised by...a Catholic mother, and there were some fairly clear messages around sexuality and romance...growing up there was [*sic*] some messages around religion and romance and sexuality, but I'm not a religious person, though I do think I'm a spiritual person.... But my...I guess my beliefs around spirituality are that...you do...what you want, as long as...it's not hurting other people, or other things. And then...the way that I would engage in romantic or sexual relationships would be...in line with that...do no harm....

Rob: Has there been any change...in the way that you perceive yourself as a spiritual person?

Luke: Yes. I definitely...believe that I was an atheist for a long time...and that there was no...no spirituality.... I was just kind of like an empty slate...and...I found some...I found a great deal of strength in that idea...for quite a long time. But in my early 20s, I think I started to allow myself to...explore that without having such a hard and fast idea of it...and though I certainly don't...claim membership with any religious group, I do kind of revel in...the amazing...design, if you would, of Earth and get quite a bit of...strength now from the idea of...a Mother Earth or a Creator...that energy is connected on Earth...that it does flow around...and that's definitely a change from when I was younger. Yeah. That was a big shift.

Rob: ...About those...messages and ideas around romance and sexuality... It sounds like originally they were fairly negative?

Luke: Yes. ...The Catholic Church's view on sexuality and romance...they're definitely negative messages on...pretty much whatever I...wanted to do...or I felt that what I desired to do would send me to hell, or at least, I should be making a trip to the confessional...for thinking those things.... Definitely not...empowering....

Rob: You talked about...the perspective that follows from that.... Would you say that, for you, romance is a spiritual thing?

Luke: I think that romance has to be a spiritual thing, in that it connects to people together. And I think there is more...to a romantic relationship than sex...or just living together. I mean, there isn't...some kind of greater connection than that...I think it would be pretty empty...at least for me I think I would find it pretty empty and not fulfilling. So...I believe in romantic love, and I think romantic love is a spiritual connection to someone...yeah.

Rob: What about in terms of timing...and your spiritual perspective? ...Do you see that as occurring at the same time as any of the changes that you had in your sexuality?

Luke: Well, I think...probably one of the biggest reasons why I, even in high school, wanted nothing to do with the Catholic Church was...I think it was pretty obvious to me at the time...if I was going to be who I wanted to be, I had no place in that church. There was no place for me...in that church, unless I was going to try to give up...who I felt...I desired, needed...so I think that had a big effect on why that sect of Christianity

just...didn't fit for me. And I think it followed quite naturally from there to just, kind of, forsake religion, or any kind of belief in a higher power...and, try to take strength from "you're on your own." You, kind of, make your own way, that's the way it is, there's no-one out there helping you, or no...Great Spirit out there helping you. You try to basically make yourself...a strong island...going through life. And I think that's why I got a bit of strength from...being an atheist, or identifying as an atheist. But, as I did a lot on myself to get to know myself more, and to express myself more and...more and more becoming the person I wanted to be, I was much more open to the possibility of there being more out there...I suppose. Yeah.

With the completion of Luke's thought-provoking and absorbing story, I move to my attempts to integrate my understandings of all five of the co-researchers' narratives and to the overall conclusions I felt able to draw from the accounts that were shared with me.

Chapter 9

Discussion and Conclusions

As I approach the completion of this research project and of what has seemed at times a long and arduous personal journey, I struggle with how I want to present my personal understandings of the stories my co-researchers have shared. I want to be careful neither to obscure the life stories just presented, which I find so striking, engaging, and evocative with an overly loud, vivid personal “voice” or “signature” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), nor to leave my work with a signature so thin that it does not feel genuinely my own. At the outset of this project, I found that an attractive feature of this research method, which was freeing to me, was that there is no strict orthodoxy regarding how to structure a narrative inquiry—that it is expected that “as the writing of texts progresses, form changes and grows” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 153). Now however, as I organize and commit to words the final components of this dissertation, that same structural openness of narrative methods feels much more daunting. I hope that my completed project will be of interest and be accessible to anyone attentive to human sexuality research and to gay and lesbian or queer studies although, given my academic discipline, I have a special interest in structuring it so that it speaks to an audience of psychologists and members of related fields. I also want to ensure, in accordance with my early commitment to respect both social constructionist and traditional psychological perspectives on sexuality, that my work reflects fidelity to my co-researchers’ rich, poetically resonant stories of their own identities, in all their “ambiguous, messy, beautiful detail” (Freeman, 2007, p. 134), and that it also draws from what the co-researchers say to help to further the creative development of social-scientific knowledge. Given that the preceding five chapters are devoted to setting forth the co-researchers’ stories of experiences of change in sexuality, and that I am

attempting to engage in only minimal amounts of interpretation so that the stories told might most fully speak for themselves (while acknowledging that even the amount of editing and organization I've done involves an undeniable imposition of my own personal perspective and lens), I believe it is appropriate to give a greater amount of attention in this chapter to what I have found in the co-researchers' stories that is of possible broad application and to what the stories suggest regarding the general human experiences of sexual identity development and change. With all of the foregoing having been said, I have decided to organize this final chapter as follows: I return to the three questions, presented in the first chapter, which have guided this research project and attempt to respond to them as fully as possible now that I have gathered and reflected upon the stories that the co-researchers had to tell. As I proceed with this effort, I also note the ways that I believe the co-researchers' described experiences lend support to or tend to detract from an essentialist or social constructionist perspective on change in sexuality. I conclude the chapter with some consideration of the implications of this study for psychotherapeutic practice and some suggestions for further related research.

Returning to the Research Questions

The three questions that have been guiding this research project from the outset are as follows:

- (1) How do individuals understand the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality?
- (2) How do individuals experience the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality?
- (3) How adequate are the existing models of the development of human sexuality and sexual identity at conceptualizing and explaining these narratives?

As I reflect on these questions now, it occurs to me that, in almost every case in every story related, understanding seems to follow experience very closely.

Indeed, I believe that it is fundamental to the nature of narrative research that the co-researchers' stories must be respected and, while interpretation and analysis of story content and structure definitely take place, the "person's narrative story...and that person's best attempts at recalling the actual events of the past" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 117) are what are most appropriately taken as the raw material for analysis, without resorting to theoretically and practically problematic "depth hermeneutics," such as psychoanalysis, in order to attempt to unmask possible self-deceptions (Freeman, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988). I take a combined approach to questions one and two in the pages that follow, commenting on what the co-researchers reported as their experiences and related understandings. This commentary is followed by my consideration of question three, concerning the adequacy of existing models, and my proposal of a model of human sexual identity development and change, derived from the stories related by my co-researchers.

How do individuals experience and understand the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality?

As I reflect on the important similarities and differences among the co-researchers' stories, I find myself thinking again in terms of salient themes or factors that emerged from the various stories as I heard, read, and analyzed them. What follows is a description of the co-researchers' reported experiences and understandings of change in their sexuality over their lives in terms of prominent themes. Some of these themes appear in each of the co-researchers' stories (and are designated common themes), while others (that I have named important themes) were mentioned by only some of the participants but seemed significant enough to either the co-researchers or myself to be included.

Common themes.

I find only three themes to be sufficiently present in each co-researchers' story to be termed common. I believe that these three reflect experiences and concerns that appear fairly consistently in the existing literature regarding sexuality and the coming-out process, but that they are crucial to knowledge of this field in that they constitute a fundamental core of any model of sexual identity development. The common themes I identify in the co-researchers' stories include the following:

1. A sense of erotic fantasy, desire, and attraction as endogenous.

All five of the co-researchers stated that they experienced erotic dreams and fantasies, interpersonal infatuation, and bodily sexual arousal as seeming to emerge from within. While these erotic desires usually manifest very early in life, typically at or before the age of puberty, those co-researchers who experienced attractions to members of both sex-genders indicated that feelings of desire for each sometimes became apparent at somewhat different times. The co-researchers generally indicated that they felt they had little if any control over the directionality of their sexual desire, and those who engaged in sexual orientation change efforts reported that any changes they managed to produce in their own sexuality seemed to be partial and temporary, at best. Indeed, by the time of our final interviews, most of the co-researchers said that they perceived their own sexuality as fixed and permanent. The idea that erotic desire emerges from a stable sexual core over which the individual has little if any control is, of course, the central tenet of an essentialist perspective on sexuality, and the co-researchers' self-perceptions generally corroborate this aspect of essentialism.

2. The importance of social attitudes and reactions to different sexualities.

Each of the co-researchers' stories reflect a keen awareness of and sensitivity to the ways that the people around them reacted to sexual minorities in general, and to them personally when they were perceived as conforming to the expected appearance or behavior of a member of such a group. All forms of reactions, verbal, physical, and otherwise, were noted and responses ranging from the supportive to the condemning, and from acceptance to abuse appear in the co-researchers' stories. The importance assigned to perceived reactions from family members; peers; professionals, religious leaders, and authority figures; and the public at large seems to vary a great deal from one individual to the next and not all of the co-researchers mentioned attending to messages from each of these segments of the social environment. Neil, for example, described attending quite closely to certain social messages regarding sexual minorities, but he was the only co-researcher not to indicate finding the attitudes of his family members to be significant. There also appears to be a definite trend among the older co-researchers toward assigning less and less importance to other peoples' attitudes and reactions as the co-researcher entered middle and later adulthood.

3. The importance of hopes and expectations for the life-course.

All of the co-researchers indicated that their expectations for the future and their hopes and aspirations for what their lives might hold were significantly involved in how they reacted to their emerging sense of their own sexual desires. When an individual's idealized future life-course is perceived as being significantly incompatible with what they believe a sexual minority individual's life to be like, acceptance of homoerotic desires and of the related identity seems much more difficult. Tom's belief that homosexuality would constitute a major barrier to social and career success and Neil's conviction that only heterosexuals

could have stable romantic relationships or become parents are two examples of this theme operating in the co-researchers' stories.

This was another theme that seems to operate primarily early in life. After an initial period of doubt or struggle, at least three of the co-researchers described having much more positively revisited these important questions of purpose in existence and ability to live meaningfully and joyfully as sexual minority individuals.

Important themes.

I identify a total of fourteen themes that seem important for at least one of the five co-researchers in the processes of sexual identity development and change. While I am somewhat surprised to discover so few themes to be shared by all five of the co-researchers, I hope that this can be interpreted as a somewhat comprehensive descriptive system allowing for diverse pathways of development and change. The fourteen important themes are as follows:

1. Concern over negative stereotypes regarding sexual minorities.

I think this theme can be interpreted as a more negative version of the last of the common themes, representing an early fear of coming to embody what one believes are the negative traits of sexual minority members (e.g., effeminacy and HIV infection). If one accepts a corresponding identity, I believe it is more complex than that. I think this theme must also include concerns over negative stereotypes that persist after an individual has adopted a sexual-minority identity. This was apparent particularly in Rupert's story as he described his concern that he could possibly be accepting a gay identity because he believed that he fit, in certain respects, the predominant stereotype of a gay male. I find it interesting that Rupert eventually resolved this concern by flatly rejecting the possibility that such a mechanism, reminiscent of labeling theory (e.g., McIntosh, 1968), could be operating in his life, and by reaffirming that what made him a gay man were his

feelings of attraction toward other men. In this case, Rupert refused a social constructionist interpretation of his desire for an essentialist one.

2. The importance of positive and negative role-models.

Three of the five co-researchers indicated that an awareness of sexual minority individuals who served as positive or negative role models for them was important to their willingness to consider accepting a sexual minority identity. In Neil's case, a gay or bisexual teacher was fondly recalled as a positive role-model, while for Tom, an openly gay cousin who was seen as having a very poor character served as a negative example. For Rupert in particular, it seemed that some role-models could be much more influential than others. He noted that a lesbian aunt and gay male characters on a popular television program had little impact upon his thinking, but that the apparently more proximate and salient presence of another male of the same age who proudly identified as gay was very impactful for him.

3. Conformity to socially dominant heterocentric expectations strongest in the absence of endogenous desire.

I am struck by the way that three different story segments come together to produce the proposition that social pressure to engage in heterosexual dating and to conceive of oneself as heterosexual seems most effective when individuals have not yet developed an endogenous, bodily sense of sexual desire. In Luke's case, he dated girls most contentedly when still a young adolescent, and as he entered high school he reported having more and more difficulty ignoring his attractions to men and his reluctance to be sexually active with his girlfriends. For Tom, it seemed that he was most able to ignore his earlier attractions to other males during the period in his young adulthood when he was very physically ill and near death. Finally, for Chris, when she still identified as male and was taking psychotropic drugs that negated her sexual desire, she conceived of herself as unremarkably heterosexual, and it was only after discontinuing her prescription

and a first startling experience of same-sex desire that this self-image was challenged.

This theme is undoubtedly related to the first of the common themes, a sense of erotic desire as endogenous. However, I see it as somewhat different in that it carries the suggestion that social forces tending to produce a heterosexual self-concept and behaviour seem to be determining only so long as endogenous sexual desire is diminished or absent. I interpret this theme as conflicting with a social constructionist perspective on sexuality because it leads one to conclude that social forces may drive sexual behaviours and identification, but only in the absence of an endogenous adult sex drive.

4. The importance of scientific, medical, and psychological opinions on sexual orientation issues.

Three of the co-researchers sought the opinions of authoritative experts in the area of human sexuality, both in person and through the medical and social scientific literatures. They seemed primarily to be seeking information regarding official perceptions of homoeroticism and reassurance of their own psychological good health. While Neil attended both to the professional literature and later to his conversations with the psychiatrist he consulted, Rupert relied on a short personal session with a psychologist to help him to normalize his sexual minority status. I find it interesting that Tom seemed initially to discount his psychologist's efforts to characterize homosexuality as a permanent and non-pathological orientation, but came to an apparently reluctant acceptance of that position after his personal efforts at changing his sexual orientation had largely failed. As a psychologist-in-training, I am pleased to note that none of the co-researchers mentioned any homophobic or otherwise negative experiences with mental health practitioners, and that they described these helping professionals as generally knowledgeable, supportive, and sexual-minority-affirmative.

5. *The importance of sexual self-exploration.*

Four of the co-researchers mentioned experiencing a sense of it being very important for them to explore different aspects of their desire and sexuality, and the belief that it would have felt like a grave personal loss or failure to go through life knowing that they had never acted upon a clear felt sense of attraction for the members of a particular sex-gender. Tom's expression of this theme may be the clearest when he remarked that "I would have felt totally incomplete if I had not expressed my sexuality [with another man] at least once." The drive described by this theme seems to include an element of simple curiosity regarding novel and intriguing possibilities for experiencing, but I believe the co-researchers also reveal a much more profound sense that this sort of sexual exploration feels very important for their sense of self-knowledge and fulfillment in life.

6. *The importance of genuineness, congruence, and honesty.*

Possibly related to the preceding theme, this one consists of a strong personal valuation of honesty, integrity, genuineness, and relative openness in one's important relationships and in one's self-presentation to the world. Three of the five co-researchers clearly stated that they found these traits to be very important in their processes of sexual identity development. For Rupert, Neil, and Luke, the wish to self-present in what was judged to be a frank and congruent manner seemed to be a matter of both personal self-respect and pride and, especially in Rupert's case, there was a conviction that one's loved ones deserved to know what was reported as a critical aspect of one's identity.

7. *Coming-out experienced as profound and empowering.*

Corresponding closely with the last theme is the reported experience of disclosure of one's minority sexual identity, particularly to close family members and friends, as extremely momentous and personally empowering. Once again, it is Rupert, Neil, and Luke whose stories include segments contributing to this theme. Luke devoted the most discussion to this phenomenon, characterizing his experience of coming-out as bisexual as tremendously freeing and as contributing

to notable improvements in physical health, in the quality of his interpersonal relationships generally, and to his overall sense of engagement in life.

8. A reciprocal relationship between frequency of sexual identity disclosure and certainty of one's sexual minority identity.

While I note this theme in Rupert's story alone, I think it is sufficiently noteworthy for inclusion in the list of important themes. Rupert indicated that his first two disclosures of a gay identity to trusted friends had a distinctly tentative feel to them, and that he told himself as he engaged in these conversations that he could still "change his mind" about accepting a gay identity at that point. Later however, as Rupert came out to additional friends and family members, he indicated that his degree of certainty regarding his sexual orientation and identity became increasingly "solidified". This is the only theme I note that I believe can reasonably easily be interpreted as supporting a social constructionist perspective on sexuality. If one adopts McIntosh's (1968) version of labeling theory, for instance, I think Rupert's increasing confidence in the accuracy of his gay identity as he came out to more and more people can be seen as a demonstration of his resignation to a deviant, homosexual role and the lessening of anxiety associated with a completed role choice. On the other hand, I think a fair essentialist response would be that Rupert was simply growing accustomed to an anxiety-provoking social interaction, and as he developed a greater repertoire of assertive communication skills and a stronger belief that he knew what to expect and was prepared for all of the contingencies, the coming-out process began to feel less onerous.

9. The importance of contact and affiliation with other sexual minority individuals.

Each of the co-researchers' stories indicate that they, at least at some point in their overall life story, considered it important to learn about and have direct contact with other individuals with a sexual minority identity. For Neil and, to a

lesser extent, Chris, the desire to make contact with a community or communities of similar others seemed relatively straightforward and continued up until the end of the time frames encompassed by their narratives. Rupert seemed to experience this theme only slightly, and to be content with a small number of contacts with individual gay friends and role models, having little interest in affiliation with any organized G/L/B/T/Q group. This theme also seems to be present in Tom and Luke's stories, but in more difficult and apparently less satisfying ways. Tom seems to say that he once had a greater interest in his local queer community, but that he found it so unwelcoming to heterosexually married men that he gave up on his efforts to make any meaningful social contacts there. Finally, while Luke indicated having enjoyed numerous friendships with lesbian and gay male individuals, he believed that, because he identified as bisexual, he has been ostracized by both heterosexual and gay and lesbian communities, and said he feels ambivalent about seeking out a specifically bisexual community, possibly because of fear of further rejection over what he described as his "heterosexual lifestyle". With respect to the essentialist/social constructionist debate, I don't believe this theme can be interpreted as lending unambiguous support to either side. Some queer theorists argue that community contact must precede the adoption of a sexual minority identity (Dynes, 1990) but, in Neil's case at least, while he had no idea that any sort of community of G/L/B/T/Q people existed and had no terminology to use to express his same-sex sexual desires, he clearly perceived his homoeroticism as an enduring and important aspect of his psyche.

10. Inability to (acceptably) name one's desire not affecting awareness of that desire.

The lack of a personally acceptable vocabulary to name or describe one's sexuality does not appear to have any impact on these individuals' awareness of their homoerotic desire. This is the case for both Neil and Luke. Each of these men indicated that, for periods of at least several years, the only way they knew of to refer to their homoerotic desires was using the hateful pejoratives of the dominant, surrounding culture. They both indicated that they found it

unacceptable to apply such terms as “homo” or “fag” to themselves, and Luke went so far as to state that he simply could not conceive of himself as belonging to this devalued group of outsiders. Nevertheless, these two co-researchers both stated that they had clear conscious awareness of their sexual desire for other men. Alluded to in my definition of the last theme, the lack of an available vocabulary to express or describe homoerotic desire as an enduring aspect of an individual is taken by some queer theorists as implying that a person from such a culture cannot even form such a concept. While I demonstrate that this assertion is historically inaccurate in my Literature Review chapter, I believe that it is also disproved by my co-researchers’ life stories.

11. A reciprocal relationship between spiritual, ethical, and existential development and sexual identity development.

I am struck by how, for most of the co-researchers, their willingness and ability to accept their sexuality as an important and enduring aspect of themselves and to be generally “at peace” with this feature of their self-concept seems strongly correlated with their individual development in terms of several other, potentially interrelated, dimensions of the self. These aspects of self seem most clearly to include such constructs as ethical sense, spirituality, and existential sophistication and engagement. However these apparently related traits might best be characterized, I find the patterns of change among the co-researchers to be reminiscent of what numerous authors (e.g., Dabrowski, 1977; Kohlberg, 1983) postulate in theories of spiritual and ethical development. In general, what they predict is that individuals may advance from initially egocentric, conformist, competitive, defensive, and rigid structures of thought, affect, and behaviour to more empathetic, compassionate, reflective, curious, non-judgemental, and tentative ones. I believe that Luke, Neil, and Tom most clearly described such parallels between changes in sexual identity and increasing spiritual, ethical, and existential development in their stories. It seems to me that Rupert and Chris, on the other hand, showed evidence of fairly advanced ethical and spiritual growth early in their narratives, and that their sexual identity development is the most

rapid and least conflicted. Because these two co-researchers did not describe what I see as a full story of ethical and spiritual change, I classify this as an important and not a common theme, although I believe it could be seen as either.

12. Possible use of psychological defenses to ward off an unacceptable identity.

I propose this theme tentatively and include it primarily because Luke, in his story, specifically suggested that during his adolescent years it was possible he deployed some sort of defensive strategy to keep out of his conscious awareness any realization that his homoerotic desires might mean that he could be classified as a member of a sexual minority. While I do not intend to give attention to possible unconscious processes in this discussion, the fact that such a process is a part of a co-researcher's narrative leads me to include it. Luke's suggestion of a role for unconscious defensive mechanisms in his process of sexual identity development is certainly not unusual, and I find it to be somewhat reminiscent of the defensive strategies Troiden (1993) proposes in his model of gay identity acquisition and that he indicates are often used during what he terms the stage of identity confusion.

13. The importance of gender identity and gender transition to sexual identity development.

This theme is expressed by a single co-researcher only, but its role in the story is so prominent and striking that I feel it must be included in this list. Chris indicated that her process of gender identity transition seemed to coincide with a marked shift in her feelings of sexual desire, and with a change from a state of predominant attraction to males, while she still generally identified as male herself, to a noticeably stronger attraction to women as she moved toward the adoption of a female gender. I consider the relationship between gender change and shifts in sexual desire and identity to be a fascinating area of study, and it generates an intriguing body of scholarly investigation (e.g., Daskalos, 1998;

Lawrence, Latty, Chivers, & Bailey, 2005; Schrock & Reid, 2006). However, I believe that this aspect of Chris' experience is beyond the scope of this project. For the purposes of this study, I simply note that this appears to be a theme of tremendous significance in Chris' story, and one which seems to be associated with a major shift in her experiences of erotic attraction and in her sexual identity development.

14. Experiences of fluidity of sexual desire or changing sexual attractions subsequent to adolescence.

I find this last theme rather difficult to detect unambiguously in the co-researchers' stories, but given the central importance of experiences of fluidity of sexuality to this study, I believe this theme is essential to include. I am limiting my discussion of fluidity experiences here to those involving the desire component of sexuality and occurring subsequent to adolescence. This is because it is quite clear from the existing literature that it is very common for North American adolescents who eventually come to self-identify as gay or lesbian to have sexual experiences with members of both sex-genders when they are first becoming sexually active (Savin-Williams, 1998; D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001). I wish to distinguish between actual shifts in well-established erotic patterns and identities and what might be better described as adolescent sexual experimentation. I believe that evidence of changes in stable and relatively long-standing patterns of sexual desire is actually uncommon, despite the fact that all five of the co-researchers identified as individuals who experienced an important "transition in sexuality during adulthood". I think it likely that the co-researchers perceived more changes in the parts of their stories dealing with sexual behavior and identity than in those dealing with the stability of their erotic desires, although I agree that each individual described some very striking and interesting transitions in their life narratives. Focusing specifically on possible instances of fluidity of sexual desire, I think one of the clearest cases is Tom's story of his effort to change his own erotic desire. He indicted his belief that he was able to significantly alter his degree of erotic attraction to men or women for a short time,

but that within roughly a year he returned to a pattern of desire close to what it was at the outset of his experiment. Chris' change in erotic desire seems quite significant, but I consider it difficult to disentangle her process of gender transitioning from any fluidity of sexual attraction which may occur unrelated to her transsexualism. Luke told of some shifts in desire after adolescence but these changes seem relatively minor and well within the bounds of his embraced bisexual identity. Finally, Neil reported an important kind of shift in attractions in that he had a lack of desire for any heterosexual activity after his wife's death, but experienced resurgent homoerotic desire at that time. Given that Neil described himself as predominantly attracted to men throughout his life, however, I wonder if his experience may constitute some combination of a desire to explore his homoeroticism after a long hiatus and relief (with acknowledged feelings of guilt in relation to his wife's passing away) at no longer having to suppress this important aspect of his sexuality. Overall, I find only modest evidence of what I would define as fluidity of sexual desire or attraction in the co-researcher's stories, but I believe that their fascinating and very engaging narratives still give me some solid and useful insights into the broader process of sexual identity development and change. I proceed now to a consideration of these processes and of my third and final research question.

How adequate are the existing models of the development of human sexuality and sexual identity at conceptualizing and explaining these narratives?

I find the stories the co-researchers told to be wonderfully complex, rich, and informative, and they drew my attention to an array of important, distinct, and interlinked aspects of their experiences of sexual change and development. As I reflect on the prominent models of sexual identity development presented in chapters one and two, I think the co-researchers have told of their going through several processes and of their life stories being touched by various influential

people, groups, and other forces not yet well captured by these models. I have previously described the prominent conceptualizations of sexual identity development, such as those proposed by Coleman (1982), Troiden (1979, 1993), and Cass (1979), as generally stage-based and linear. They are criticized for sometimes rigid linearity and for giving insufficient attention to the individual's social and historical context (Eliason, 1996). The existing models certainly do capture many of the important aspects of what I believe the majority of my co-researchers experienced, such as identity confusion after a first awareness of same-sex desire, working to reconcile a sexual minority identity with societal reaction to such a status, the deployment of stigma management strategies, exploration of the gay sub-culture, and a wish to disclose one's sexual minority identity to others (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). I believe, however, that my co-researchers' stories illuminate aspects of the process of sexual identity development that are novel and important. Their narratives seem to reveal a diversity of complex, sometimes intersecting, individual trajectories that are not well conceptualized by the extant models, which generally involve a single, rather homogenizing and unidirectional pathway of development. The co-researchers' stories also reveal the importance of a number of factors I do not believe are mentioned in other models that seem to exert significant influence over how identities change and how quickly. Given these significant gaps between the existing models of sexual identity development and based on what was described by my co-researchers, I suggest an admittedly partial model of sexual identity development and change based on the stories laid out in chapters four through eight and on the common and important themes I believe characterize them.

As my model is based on data derived from a narrative approach to research, I think it particularly appropriate in this effort to conceptualize identity itself in narrative terms. I wish to attend to the ways that my co-researchers create life stories that are themselves identities "forged from the available repertoire of cultural myths, images, symbols, settings, and plotlines....[while at the same time giving] familiar cultural tales a fresh voice filtered through their idiosyncratic life experience and personal memory" (Baddeley & Singer, 2007, p. 178). To do this,

I conceive of the process of sexual identity development largely in terms of a narrative approach to identity, such as McAdams' (1993) life story theory, with the individual recognized as embedded in their society, culture, and history and as actively assigning meaning to experiences and organizing them through time into a coherent narrative whole. Structurally, I find my co-researchers' stories to be complex, and as I consider different ways to attempt to explain their processes of identity development, I find myself drawn to the general method of concept mapping (Artinian & West, 2009) as a way to present their complex, interconnected story themes both concisely and holistically, while maintaining a sense of loose temporal flow through the process. While the concept map is most commonly associated with the grounded theory research method, it is generally "useful in displaying the theoretical relationships identified in qualitative studies" (Artinian & West, 2009, p. 27). Figure 1 contains a concept map displaying my proposed partial model of sexual identity development, derived from the co-researchers' stories.

Figure 1. Proposed Partial Model of Sexual Identity Development

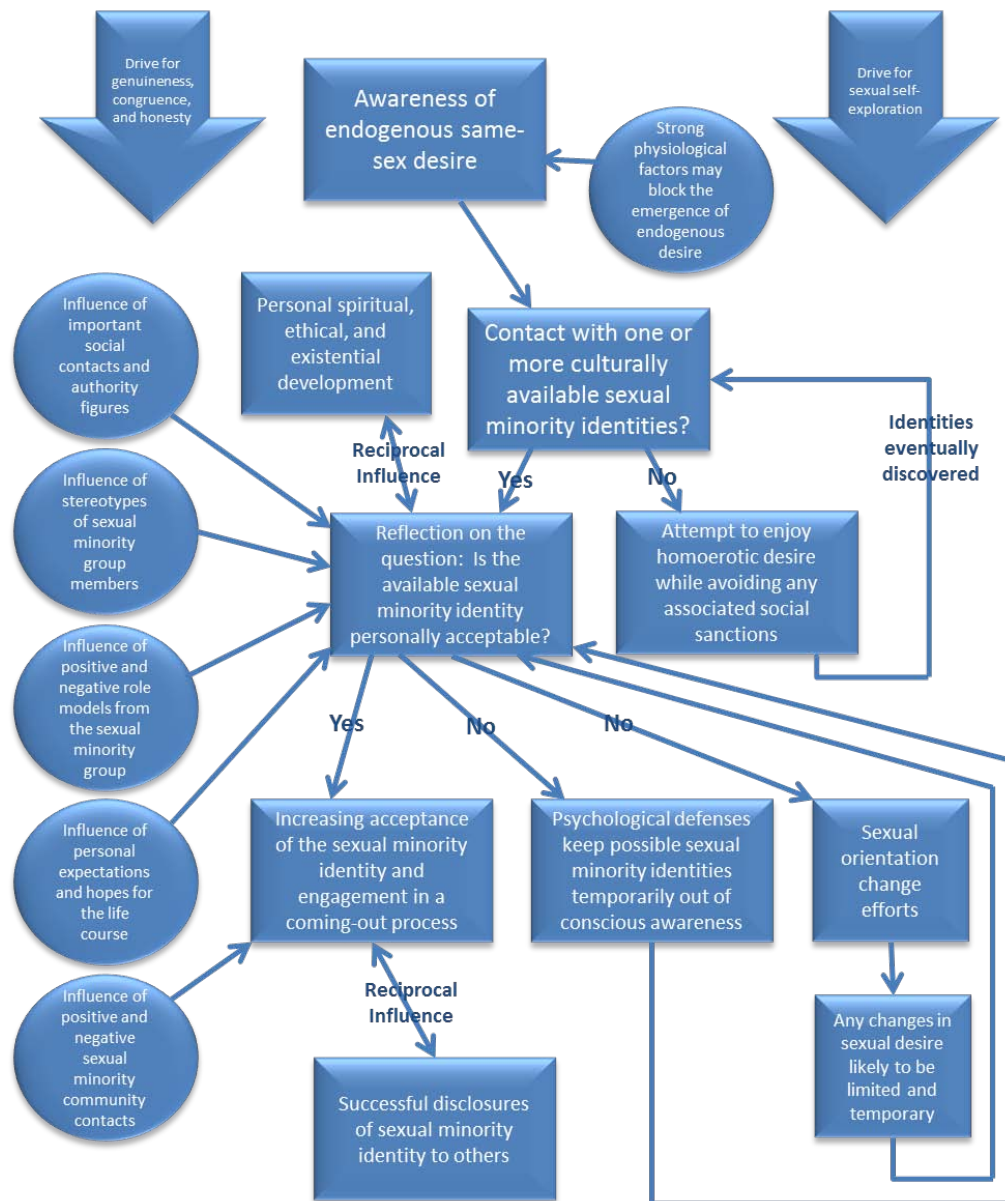


Figure 1. A concept map of the proposed partial model of sexual identity development. The process begins with awareness of endogenous same-sex desire and progresses downward. The two large arrows represent omnipresent motivations driving progress through the model, rectangles are major stages in identity development and important related processes, and circles are significant factors influencing rate and direction of movement through the model at different stages.

As is very briefly described in the caption accompanying my concept map of the proposed model, an individual's development begins with a first awareness of endogenous erotic desire for other members of the same sex-gender. Development then proceeds, at a pace that is unique to each person, in a downward direction. The two large arrows at the upper left and right of the model represent the significant motivating forces described by the co-researchers that seem to be present for most of them throughout their stories and that motivated them to move from one stage of development to the next. The rectangular symbols in the map stand for important stages in the developmental process as well as noteworthy related processes and the circles represent what the co-researchers describe as factors that are particularly influential for them at particular stages and that affect both the rate with which they progress through the overall process and the direction of their movement at different choice points. At the start of development it is noted that, as is the case for two of the co-researchers, awareness of emerging homoerotic desire may be blocked by the presence of certain powerful physiological factors, such as serious illness or long-term drug use. Once any such blockages are resolved, the co-researchers move on to a stage of initial responding to their new desires, which seems to depend largely on whether they have been exposed to any culturally-available identities that are assigned to the sorts of desires they are experiencing. For some of the co-researchers, especially those who became aware of their desire very young, they had not yet had any contact with such concepts as homosexuality or bisexuality, but they nevertheless recognized their homoerotic desires as an important aspect of their psyche, and proceeded to attempt to explore and enjoy these desires while seeking to avoid any social sanctions that might be applied to them for overt homoerotic behaviours.

In the stories the co-researchers tell, everyone eventually encounters the idea of stable, long-term sexual minority identities, and moves on to the stage of consideration of whether any of the sexual minority identities they are now familiar with are acceptable for them to adopt for themselves. This step is influenced by a number of important factors that are described at length in the co-

researchers' narratives. These include the opinions of important social contacts and authority figures such as family members and peers as well as religious leaders and medical and psychological experts; the stereotypes they held of sexual minority group members, drawn from the surrounding culture; the examples set by role models from the minorities themselves, which could be positive and serve to challenge impugning stereotypes or negative and reinforcing such beliefs; and the individual's hopes and expectations for the future and the ways that they may be in conflict or accordance with one's beliefs regarding members of the sexual minority. The person's reflections on the question of the acceptability of the minority identity also interact in a reciprocal fashion with their process of ethical, spiritual, and existential development, with greater advancement in these areas seeming to correspond with greater ease in accepting a gay or bisexual identity. The individual's response to the question of the minority identity's acceptability could, of course, be positive or negative. A negative response seems to result in one of two outcomes, either the apparently unconscious deployment of psychological defense mechanisms to keep awareness of the potential sexual minority identity out of conscious thought, or determination to engage in sexual orientation change efforts in order to attempt to enhance heterosexual desires. In the cases of the co-researchers, neither of these negative responses seems to be extremely long-lasting. Either the defensive process ceases to function as one learns more about oneself and the possible minority identity and as one's attitudes shift, or the sexual orientation change effort apparently no longer produces results sufficient for the individual to consider it worthwhile. In both of these cases, the co-researcher seems to "cycle back" to the stage of reflecting on the personal acceptability of the gay or bisexual identity. Those who find the minority identity at least tentatively acceptable seem usually to proceed to a first engagement in a sexual identity self-disclosure or coming-out process. This important step seems particularly subject to the influence of positive and negative experiences in the person's contacts with sexual minority communities and their members. Finally, acceptance of the sexual minority identity and engagement in identity disclosures seems to be affected in a reciprocal fashion by successful identity disclosures to

others. As the co-researchers disclose their new minority identities to increasing numbers of significant others, their commitment to this process and certainty regarding the appropriateness of their sexual self-identification seems to increase.

Having returned to my research questions, considered the most prominent themes contained in the co-researchers' narratives, and organized them into at least a partial model of the process of sexual identity development for these co-researchers, I turn to some final reflections on the implications of my study for the counselling profession and some suggestions for further related research.

Implications for Counselling

I hope that this research project can help to advance psychotherapeutic practices with sexual minority clients in several different ways. I believe that the rich, complex, touching, and very diverse narratives obtained from these five co-researchers can serve to help mental health practitioners to approach their work with sexual minority clients with a greater appreciation and respect for the important struggles faced and challenges overcome in these life stories and for the dramatically different ways each individual may organize and give meaning to superficially similar experiences. As every reader takes something slightly different from the stories presented in this document, I hope that these narratives contribute to counsellors engaging with sexual minority clients inspired and uniquely informed by the resonations they experience in reading of how the members of this small group negotiate the process of sexual identity development and change. Finally, I believe my discussion of the common and important themes contained in the co-researchers' stories and my presentation of a partial model of sexual identity development based on them can give therapeutic practitioners new insights regarding the important milestones and influential factors the co-researchers identify in their experiences. While aspects of my discussion are no doubt particular to this group of co-researchers, I hope that what I am putting forward gives counsellors some helpful new avenues to explore and

new questions to ask and for them to consider in their work with sexual minority clients.

Suggestions for Further Research

It is my hope that further research on the process of sexual minority identity development and on fluidity of sexuality will be undertaken. The five co-researchers involved in this project tell stories that are in ways similar and yet so profoundly distinct, that it is apparent that gathering new narratives related to this process and working to integrate them into a coherent model of development can only serve to deepen our overall understanding and to expand it in new directions. With respect to the phenomenon of fluidity of sexuality, I find that change during adulthood in a reasonably well-established pattern of sexual desire seems to be rather elusive, and wonder if other studies might isolate clearer examples of this sort of fluidity experience. Further, it must be acknowledged that my co-researchers make up a somewhat homogenous group, and I hope that future research will be conducted to include the investigation of additional important aspects of identity such as ethnicity, class, and sex-gender and how they can impact upon experiences of fluidity of sexuality. The experiences of natal females and the ways that their sexualities develop and change over time are of particular interest to me. Whether or not it is possible to produce a resilient and comprehensive model of sexual identity development and change that encompasses natal females and males remains to be seen, and I regret that no natal women volunteered to participate in this project. The production of further research specifically on the experiences of transgendered people and the integration of the resulting insights into a broader model would also be a very valuable achievement. I believe that much remains to be discovered in the fascinating area of human sexuality and sexual identity development and change, and I hope that academics and mental health practitioners from various disciplines pursue it in the years to come.

Closing Comments

In looking back upon the totality of my research project; from my initial inspiration several years ago; to my review of essentialist and social constructionist arguments, philosophical writings, historical, cross-cultural, survey-based, and other empirical literatures; through the process of meeting with the co-researchers and exchanging ideas and stories with them; to my eventual presentation and interpretation of their narratives in these final chapters, I feel a certain pride and contentment in a work completed and some interesting discoveries made, as well as a humbling awareness of the vast research territory left to be explored. I believe that my analysis of the co-researchers' stories and my proposed partial model of sexual identity development constitute a modest addition to our knowledge of the ways that people negotiate the shifting, tremendously varied process of sensing, naming, coming to terms with, and hopefully embracing the profoundly important dimension of the self that is their sexuality. As is revealed in my discussion of the common and important themes emerging from the co-researchers' narratives, it seems that my interpretations of their experiences show more commonalities with essentialist than with social constructionist models of sexuality, but both remain relevant and each seems better able to account for different aspects of the co-researchers' storied lives. I hope to be able to make further contributions to this fascinating area of research in the years ahead.

Finally, and considering every aspect of this now completed undertaking, I feel especially privileged to have been entrusted with the narratives of five amazing individuals and to have been able both to learn from them and to present them for others to read and benefit from as well. I would like to end this project by offering my thanks once again to my five co-researchers for their generosity with their time and with their very striking and important stories.

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Appendix A

Definitions

Fluidity of Sexuality

Sometimes also referred to as erotic plasticity, this expression signified “...longitudinal changes in sexual identity, attractions, and behavior as well as contemporaneous inconsistencies among these domains” (Diamond, 2000, p. 214). I found that the terms sexuality and sexual orientation were sometimes used by different authors in different ways, and were best understood as composites of three main components: sexual behavior, sexual identity, and sexual desire. While fluidity could be thought of as occurring within any of these domains, the essentialist-social constructionist debate related to sexuality was primarily focused on sexual desire and whether it was in fact fluid or fixed within the individual’s lifespan.

Gender

I use the term *gender* to refer both to one’s sense of self as male, female, or neither, as well as the set of socially predominant beliefs, expectations, and stereotypes that delineate what is perceived as “masculine” and “feminine” behaviour in a particular social and historical context (Tasker & Wren, 2002).

Heterosexism

Most broadly, *heterosexism* might be conceptualized as “the belief that everyone is or should be heterosexual” (Rhoads, 1995, p. 69). More specifically, the term denotes

An ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community. Like racism, sexism, and other ideologies of oppression, heterosexism is manifested both in societal customs and institutions, such as religion and the legal system...and in individual attitudes and behaviours. (Herek, 1990, pp. 316-317)

Homophobia

Related to heterosexism, *homophobia* refers to negative and hostile attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and feelings directed toward gay men and lesbians (Herek, 1985). This phenomenon involves both affective and cognitive components (Herek, 1985) and “operates on four distinct but interrelated levels: the personal, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the cultural” (Blumenfeld, 1992, p. 3). The inclusion of the root word phobia in this term is not intended to suggest that homophobia ought to be considered a phobic disorder in the classical sense. While a homophobic state could assume a truly phobic character in certain individuals, that is certainly not the case in any but a tiny minority of instances. The word is used here, despite the fact that its utilization could generate some confusion, because “it is steadily gaining currency among sexual minorities,

heterosexuals, and the mainstream press” (Blumenfeld, p. 15). However imperfect the term might be, it seems to be generally well understood (Stein, 1996).

Queer

An often confusing and conflict-ridden term, *queer* is sometimes “used as a ‘people of color’ –like shorthand for *gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender*, a politically volatile expansion of the identity category to include all sorts of sex and gender outsiders” (Gamson, 2003, p. 543). It is also commonly used by social constructionists “in its more distinctive sense, as a marker of the instability of identity. [This usage of the word] queer marks an identity that, defined as it is by a deviation from sex and gender norms either by the self inside or by specific behaviors, is always in flux...”. (Gamson, p. 543) I employed the word primarily in the first of these two senses, although the authors quoted throughout this document varied in their usages, primarily favouring the latter form.

Sex

The term *sex* is used to denote the physical dimension of being either male, female, or intersexed. This concept includes “the sum of the structural...characteristics of living things that are involved in reproduction by two interacting parents and that distinguish males and females” (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Sexuality/Sexual Orientation

I found that the terms *sexuality* and *sexual orientation* were sometimes used by different authors in different ways, and were both best understood as composites of three main components: sexual behavior, sexual identity, and sexual desire. This definition allowed one to avoid what the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) described as a confusingly inadequate distinction between these discrete but related terms.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Introduction and Rapport Building

- Ensure that the setting is comfortable. Welcome the co-researcher.
- Thank the co-researcher for their time and for agreeing to participate.
- Invite the co-researcher to ask any questions regarding the study that may have occurred to them.
- Remind the co-researcher of their right to decline to answer any question and to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.
- Discuss the format of the semi-structured interview and what to expect:
 - We will be tape recorded and I may write down occasional notes to assist my recall later in the interview.
 - I may ask a series of shorter, more specific questions after the co-researcher feels they have fully described their experience and told their personal story.

Main Interview Question

I am interested in your personal experience of change over time in your sexuality, by which I mean your sense of your own romantic and erotic attractions, desires, fantasies, and behaviours, and the ways that you describe or classify your sexuality as an aspect of your identity (if, indeed, you do so at all). I would like for you to describe your experiences of these aspects of yourself and how they have changed throughout your life. Please do so in your own words and in whatever order fits for you. There is no right or wrong way for you to approach this—just tell me your story as it happened and however it comes to mind.

I am especially interested in your sense of how things happened and how you felt about these changes in your life as they occurred. Please tell me about all aspects of the memories, feelings, sensations, images, and thoughts that you connect with your personal experience of change in sexuality. Feel free to include elements

of your experience that occurred prior to, during, and after you became aware of the changes in yourself, even up to the present, with what it feels like to reflect back on your experiences today.

Please try to focus on your experiences themselves and not on any analyses of or opinions about such events that you may have gathered from books, articles, television, personal discussions, or other sources. Your story will not be judged in any way and your anonymity will be completely protected at all times, so please try to tell me about your experiences as honestly, fully, and naturally as you are able.

Now, with all of that being said, *can you tell me the story or stories of how you've experienced your sexuality and any changes in it over the course of your life?*

Supplemental Themes/Prompts

- Experiential aspects of the change(s):
 - Emotional
 - Cognitive
 - Physiological
 - Behavioral
 - Social/Interpersonal
 - Spiritual
 - Overall process—how long did the changes take? Were they steady or intermittent? Change in only one overall direction or back and forth?
- Meaning/significance of the change(s)—any spiritual or philosophical insights associated with the experience(s)? Any new understandings they've arrived at?
- Group associations/affiliation—how were their experience of each of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual communities before, during, and after the experience(s)?
- The identity construct—how certain are they of any current identity label(s)? How important are they to them? Why?

- Contextuality of sexuality—is the person's sense of their own sexuality largely transcontextual or are there contextual variations?
- Any experience of counselling or psychotherapy relevant to their change(s) in sexuality?