

**BETTER QUEER THAN DEAD!  
POSITIVE IDENTITY IN LATIN AMERICAN GAY MEN IN CANADA**

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## **Dedication**

To my parents: Mirna and Jose.

Your courage to leave everything you knew behind in El Salvador to begin life anew with the hope of giving your children endless opportunities in Canada changed my life for the better. Your sacrifices did not go unnoticed. Thank you.

## **Abstract**

This study explored the lived experiences, narratives, and perceptions of Latin American Gay men in Canada. Participants included three foreign-born men, who immigrated to Canada in adolescence or early adulthood. The interview questions were designed to consider each participant's life through various developmental stages, including feeling different, *coming out*, and establishing a positive identity. Positive identity in gay men can be defined as (a) being fully out to family and friends, unless it is dangerous to do so, (b), being able to deal and cope with homophobia well, and (c) seeing oneself in a positive manner more often than not (Alderson, 2002). Voices are qualitatively presented to contribute to the vast number of quantitative data in the research literature regarding sexual minorities. Through narrative inquiry and analysis, themes emerged regarding (a) sexual identity, (b) ethnicity, and (c) positive identity. The findings and implications of this study can inform teaching and counselling practices with sexual and ethnic minorities and contribute to understanding the role that positive identity plays in the development of healthy, contributing citizens in our communities.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

In this narrative and auto-ethnographic study, I based my work on answering this question: What are the lived experiences, narratives, and perceptions of Latin American gay men as they journey towards building a positive identity? The data for this narrative inquiry was collected through audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews of three Latin American gay men living in Canadian cities. Participants are foreign-born and each indicated having a positive self-identity. The interview questions were designed to consider each participant's life through various developmental stages, including feeling different, *coming out*, and establishing a positive identity. Social contexts were explored through these stages, as competing identities developed to examine participants' lives in a recursive, not just linear, fashion. In the research process, I also share my own experiences of developing a positive identity to highlight the inner work required of an ethically responsible and professional counsellor. Through storying, taking transcript data and turning it into a coherent story, and examining the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of Latin American gay men, voices are qualitatively presented to contribute to the vast number of quantitative data in the research literature. The findings and implications of this study can inform teaching and counselling practices with sexual and ethnic minorities and contribute to understanding the role that positive identity plays in developing healthy, contributing citizens in our communities.

### **Better Queer than Dead**

Individuals in power make cultural norms and expectations (Anzaldúa, 2012). Cultures form our belief systems and determine how we interact or understand reality.

These belief systems become “dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through” the culture we live in (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 38). In Latin America, views of gender are traditional: men are expected to be verbally and physically aggressive, frequently drunk, and sexually dominant; women, on the other hand, are submissive, virginal, and maternal (Cantú, 2011). The *maricón* (*faggot*) paradigm is connected with an effeminate role that undermines gay men in a dismissive fashion, as it indicates a worthless and incomplete human (Perez, 2011). A common narrative shared among many Latin American men and boys includes the parental saying, *Mi hijo, mejor muerto que maricón* or my son, better dead than a *faggot*. This cultural norm often translates into stories of family rejection. Even though this phrase illustrates the possible wounds of rejected sons, what is more accurate is the fact that Latin American gay men internalize its message and express their experiences as sexual minorities apologetically for humiliating and shaming themselves and their families (Diaz, 1998). I am interested in sharing new narratives in which saying that it is better to be dead than *queer* is no longer acceptable. It is imperative that Latin American gay men know, hear, and see tangible possibilities that it is normal and healthy to be who they are. Although the term *queer* has derogatory origins, recently, some individuals have begun to reclaim the use of the word to move away from using labels that reveal little about the sexuality of individuals, but that indicate some aspect of sexual minority identities (Alderson, 2013). I want sexual minorities in Latin America to forget the it is better to be dead than *queer* rhetoric and to consider that nonheterosexual identities are healthy and normal. It is better to be *queer* than dead.

## Research Overview

Since you were little boys you've been told, "Hey, don't be a little faggot," explained Darnell, a football player of mixed African American and White heritage, as we sat on a bench next to the athletic field. Indeed, both the boys and girls I interviewed told me that *fag* was the worst epithet one guy could direct at another. Jeff, a slight white sophomore, explained to me that boys call each other fag because "gay people aren't really liked over here and stuff." Jeremy, a Latino junior, told me that this insult literally reduced a boy to nothing, "To call someone *gay* or *fag* is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that's like saying that you're nothing." (Pascoe, 2012, p. 55)

Sexual orientation is hard to define, and it often means different things to different people (Alderson, 2000). Depending on the varying identities of every human being, such as the culture, ethnicity, social status, religion, gender, and sex one belongs to, it is not surprising that it has been challenging to develop a universal definition (Alderson, 2013). Some researchers define it as a combination of sexual behaviour and sexual fantasies, but it is probably more complex than this (Alderson, 2002). As the high school students state in Pascoe's (2012) ethnographic study, it is clear that life in many cultures and societies adhere to strict, invisible rules that promote one sexual orientation: heterosexuality (Blumenfeld, 2010). What, then, happens to the child who is reduced to nothing?

Society defines its members and their roles in a variety of ways. From birth, each human being is assigned a sex, which is turned into an expected gender, which is often socially constructed (Lorber, 2010). Having a biological sex and belonging to a specific sex category does not always translate into the required sexual orientation that socially constructed gendered norms continuously and persistently impel. Nevertheless, the approved heterosexual sexual orientation is endorsed by the hegemonic global patriarchal system that subtly encourages sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia (Johnson, 2010). Blumenfeld (2010) suggests, however, that homophobia not only hurts sexual minorities,

but society as a whole because it inhibits the ability of heterosexuals to form close, intimate relationships with members of their own sex, particularly for men. It sets some individuals into unyielding gender-based roles that prevent originality and self-expression. It compromises the integrity of some heterosexual individuals by compelling them to treat others badly. It is used to silence, exclude and, on occasion, target people who are perceived or defined by others as sexual minorities, but who are in actuality heterosexual. It prevents some of the members of sexual minorities from developing authentic self-identities, and adds to the pressure to marry someone of the opposite sex, which in turn places unwarranted stress on themselves, as well as their heterosexual spouses and their children (Blumenfeld, 2010).

Some sexual minority individuals exert considerable effort and time trying to squeeze themselves into the required norms within the family system, within a peer group, within a religion, within a job, and, ultimately, in all of society: survival depends upon it (Alderson, 2013). As such, some of the members of sexual minorities struggle to achieve essential developmental tasks in adolescence because they are more concerned with hiding the truth about their sexual identity (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Despite attempts to hide a non-heterosexual sexual orientation, for some, it is impossible and so, they suffer constant bullying from peers, teachers, and/or family members (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Elze, 2003; Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). This leads to higher risks and difficulty in maintaining psychological and physical health (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Meyer, 2003; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). It is not surprising that some of the members of sexual minorities can suffer tremendously, as they are coerced into silence by

a secret code in a society that only recently has allowed them to give voice to challenging experiences. Initially plagued by denial, sexual minorities have broken free, subsequently finding deep meaning in their challenges (Alderson, 2000). Although there is hope that sexual minorities can develop a positive identity, research is limited when considering sexual minority identity formation, alongside another minority label: ethnic identity.

### **Definition of Terms and the Challenges with Terminology**

There are many terms and labels that accompany sexual minorities, or as some would say non-heterosexual identities. This includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, fetishistic, crossdresser, transsexual, or intersex to name a few (Alderson, 2013). Furthermore, a variety of acronyms exist to represent non-heterosexual identities, such as LGB, LGBT, LGBTI, LGBTQQI, and so forth. Not only are these acronyms cumbersome, they also exclude individuals who have chosen not to self-identify with any of the identity labels provided within the acronym (Alderson, 2013). In post-modern counselling approaches, in which I am interested, I am cautious to use labels and would prefer not to, as I value the personal meanings individuals place on their language use (Neimeyer, 2009). However, for the purpose of this study, I have elected to use the term *sexual minorities* to include individuals with nondominant or non-heterosexual sexualities. I acknowledge that some researchers suggest that the word minority implies exclusion or a lesser-than status compared to the mainstream population, yet I feel it is the most appropriate and inclusive term I have come across within the current limitations of the English language (Alderson, 2013). Identity labels are “social constructions [that] do not describe a person’s entirety” (Alderson, 2013, p. 3). In other words, these labels describe one aspect of a person, which suggests that a gay man is more than just his

sexual minority status, as he is also someone's son, brother, friend, or lover (Alderson, 2013; Hames-Garcia, 2011; Offet-Gartner, 2010).

Because of the challenges researchers have found in defining sexual orientation, in recent years, the term *affectional orientation*, which refers to the attraction and erotic desire for members of the opposite sex/gender, the same sex/gender, or both has emerged (Alderson, 2013). This reflects the idea that a human being's orientation extends beyond sexuality (Alderson, Orzeck, Davis, & Boyes, 2011, as cited in Alderson, 2013). It is important to consider the meaning of *philia*, as it includes the inclination to fall in love romantically with members of a particular sex or gender (Alderson, 2013). This reveals that identities and affectional orientation do not always match. For example, a man can have a homosexual sexual orientation, yet self-identify as a heterosexual who chooses to marry a woman before coming out and accepting his homosexual sexual orientation (Alderson, 2013). While some researchers insist that the term sexual orientation only focuses on erotic or sexual behaviour, for that reason, it should be replaced with the term affectional orientation. However, in this study, sexual orientation will be used.

*Sexual identity* refers to the label individuals use to define their sexual orientation and many individuals choose a label that reflects to whom they are sexually attracted (Alderson, 2013). *Gay men* are males who self-identify as having primarily homosexual behaviour, affect, and/or cognition and who have adopted the social construct of gay as having personal meaning in their lives (Alderson, 2013). Last, *positive identity* for a gay man refers to an individual who is fully out to his family and friends, except in the case where it may be dangerous to do so; who is able to deal and cope well with homophobia, and; who sees himself in a positive manner more often than not (Alderson, 2000). I

mention these terms to illustrate the importance and work still required to gain further and meaningful understanding of the complexities surrounding human sexuality.

*Race* is defined as a social, rather than a biological, construct that categorizes people by physical characteristics, such as skin color (Krieger, 2003, as cited in Ibañez, Van Oss Marin, Flores, Millett, & Diaz, 2009). *Ethnic identity* consists of self-identification, a feeling of belonging or commitment to a group, and a sense of shared values and attitudes within one's ethnic group (Phinney & Ong, 2007). This study seeks to explore the meaning behind the experiences of sexual and ethnic minorities, which is why I have provided definitions regarding sexuality, race, and ethnic identity. While, I originally assumed Latin Americans were individuals from Central and South America, it has been quite challenging to locate a distinct definition.

Latin America is a diverse and complex region for various reasons (Skidmore, Smith, & Green, 2010). Superficially, other ethnic groups may conceive of Latin Americans on the basis of unfounded and exaggerated stereotypes, such as the “Frito Bandito,” the Brazilian mulatta carnival queens, the “Latin lover,” or the famous revolutionary Che Guevarra. Upon closer examination, however, sharp differences exist within Latin America’s geography, physical features, ethnic and demographic diversity, languages, traditions, music, politics, and economics. Latin America includes twenty nations with mountain ranges, tropical forests, deserts, and grasslands that include individuals who are aboriginal, European, African, or Asian, who speak Spanish, Portuguese, Quechua, Aymara, French, English, Dutch, and over twenty Indigenous languages. Latin American societies exhibit disconcerting contrasts between “rich and poor, between city and country, between learned and illiterate, between the power lord of

the hacienda and the deferential peasant, between wealthy entrepreneurs and desperate street urchins” (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 5). Taking all of this into consideration, for the purpose of this study, *Latin Americans* are individuals who were born in one of the twenty countries that comprise Latin America and who are Spanish-speakers. I made this distinction, so as to include my own identity with its various labels, alongside those of participants.

Using the term *Latin American gay men* presents challenges as it implies a unity or homogeneity that simply does not exist (Cantú, 2011). I invite readers to question and be critical of conceptualizations of “normative discourse or knowledge production” that clumps unique experiences into general categories (Cantú, 2011, p. 148). It is clear that the experiences and challenges gay men face as Latin Americans are unique, multiple, and complex.

### **Multiculturalism and Diversity Rationale**

To appreciate the significance of this study, one must adopt a multicultural perspective. A multicultural perspective takes into consideration how specific values, beliefs, and actions are influenced by a client’s ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, political views, sexual orientation, geographic region, and historical experiences with the dominant culture (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). If counsellors are focused on the values of the dominant culture and are insensitive to variations among groups and individuals, they can be at risk for practicing unethically. It is essential for counsellors to be informed regarding non-dominant populations, as it is not an optional endeavour to develop multicultural counselling competencies, but it is a foundation for effective and ethical professional practice. And yet, despite the vast number of ethical codes that

encourage multicultural awareness, “ethical codes have many limitations, the most serious perhaps being that they tend to reflect the dominant culture’s values at the expense of minority values” (Ridley, Liddle, Hill, & Li, 2001, p. 186 as cited in Pettifor, 2005).

Moreover, researchers suggest that “culture must be located at the centre of all work with clients” (Collins & Arthur, 2010a, p. 204). Because every individual is unique, every interaction between practitioner and client involves a multicultural encounter. There is no distinction between multicultural competence and professional competence since all encounters are, on some level, multicultural interactions (Corey et al., 2011). Nevertheless, rapid globalization, including the “globalization” of the counselling profession, is increasingly moving towards cultural homogenization and is in danger of disrupting cultures or not meeting the needs of minorities (Gerstein, Heppner, Egisdóttir, Leung, & Norsworthy, 2011). But in Canada, multiculturalism is considered integral to the Canadian identity, as Canadians are, at times, internationally recognized as being accepting, inviting, and tolerant people. But Canadian multiculturalism is more likely a fluid concept that may not have kept pace with the realities of globalization and as such, social forces of assimilation are just as present in Canada as they are around the world, despite the politically correct rhetoric (Jun, 2010).

## **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

“Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.” (Brown, 2010, p. ix)

The most impactful experiences I have gained regarding sexuality and obstacles in developing a positive identity came through my life as a teacher and counselling graduate student.

**Teaching.** I began teaching in 2008. Since then, I have worked in five different high schools in Lethbridge and Calgary in public and charter districts. I have taught English Language Arts, Modern Languages, and English Language Learning, as well as in Inclusive Education programs to varied populations ranging from at-risk youth to gifted and talented students. Every school at which I have worked has been proud of its safe and caring or inclusive practices; yet, I often feel many minority or non-dominant groups are grossly excluded. Not surprisingly, sexual minority youth are not part of the conversation. Gay jokes amongst staff are common, and discriminatory phrases, such as “that’s so gay” are part of the vernacular. Although there are currently about forty Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Alberta public high schools, I have yet to have the experience of teaching in a gay-friendly school (Mertz, 2014).

With the recent controversy surrounding Motion 503, Bill 202, and Bill 10 in the Alberta Legislature, which silenced conversations about mandatory GSAs, should students want to form them, the schools where I have been have been relieved not to have to deal with discussions surrounding GSA implementation (Bellefontaine, 2014; Giovannetti, 2014; Mertz, 2014). It would be inaccurate for me to exclude the fact that there are groups of educators in each of these schools who provide safe spaces for

students informally, but in terms of school policy and regulation, sexual minority students are out of luck. Similarly, in the courses I have taught, I have never come across sexual minority characters presented in a positive light or curriculum that explored comprehensive sexuality. Such circumstances are discouraging because the literature is clear: students with access to positive spaces and supportive faculty have better experiences in school than those without such supports (Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012). Furthermore, supportive environments via GSAs are significantly associated with fewer suicide attempts, lower rates of victimization, and decreased homophobic remarks. Sexual minority students are less likely to be threatened or injured at school, or to skip school when compared to schools without GSAs (Black et al., 2012).

On the contrary, in schools without GSAs or without clear programs or safe policies for sexual minority youth, students are more likely to experience negative interactions, such as harassment and suicide attempts (Ploderl, Faistauer, & Fartacek, 2010). Therefore, school professionals must work to implement GSAs, inclusive curricula, and educational programs for teachers to learn how to include sexual minority students through visible supports (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009). Certainly, these are pertinent recommendations, but much of the literature has a significant lack of ethnic diversity. Participants in many studies are primarily from urban areas and generalizability to non-Caucasian sexual minority youth is limited (Black et al., 2012). Focusing on Latin American gay men in this study will broaden and reveal challenges unique to this population.

**Counselling Graduate Student.** As an emerging counsellor, I am developing my theoretical framework and identity around post-modern approaches, including narrative therapy, social constructionism, and constructivism. I am interested in listening to others' stories, identifying strengths and resilience in individuals by helping to provide a new perspective about their lived experiences, and most importantly, respectfully co-authoring empowering and alternate stories with clients. As an emerging researcher, I am interested in narrative inquiry and analysis. I believe there is much to learn from individuals' lived experiences in developing effective practice and meaningful counselling interventions. Consequently, it is no surprise that I believe it is important for me to share my own stories and experiences as an integral part of this research. After all, I asked my participants to share personally about their journeys in building a positive identity; I think it is valuable for me to be able to do the same.

One of the major elements lacking in my graduate counselling training was the absence of learning how to work with clients regarding sexuality and sexual minority concerns. With the exception of one lecture during a Gender and Culture course, sexuality never came up; this deficiency is troublesome. The World Health Organization (2013) defines sexual health as a:

state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. For sexual health to be attained, and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected, and fulfilled. (WHO, Health Topics, General Information, Defining Sexual Health)

In other words, sexuality is an integral aspect of the human experience (Byers, 2011). Sexuality concerns and issues often arise in the therapeutic process as primary

concerns or as related to other client challenges (Boogey, 2008; Ford & Hendrick, 2003; Wiederman & Sansone, 1999). Reissing and Di Giulio's (2010) survey of 188 practicing psychologists in Canada demonstrated that sexuality issues consistently occur within private practice and that the majority of psychologists use sex therapy techniques. Since sexuality is complex and integrated into all aspects of human functioning, problems involving sexuality are varied, and individuals may experience sexual problems at some point in their lives. Societal and cultural factors contribute to the pervasiveness of problematic sexuality, such as lack of sexual communication and education, resulting in poor knowledge and poor sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2011; Meritt, 2011; Ng, 2006).

Additionally, polarized attitudes continue to dichotomize sexuality, creating a culture of extremes, such as hyper-sexualization versus sexual oppression (Harris & Hays, 2008). The significance of sexuality establishes the need for counsellors to be prepared to address sexuality related issues in the therapeutic context. Not providing adequate curriculum in counselling programs in Canada decreases the level of preparation and effectiveness of counsellors working with sexuality related issues. This study will contribute valuable information and considerations for counsellors working with Latin American gay men.

Much of the literature on young adult sexual culture has drawn primarily from the perspectives of young, heterosexual women (Barrios & Lundquist, 2012). Researchers know much less about the ways in which men characterize their sexual experiences and social gratification in relation to sexual culture. The literature suggests that scholars know even less about the ways in which the experiences of gay men may influence their sexual and romantic opportunities. What is known about the behaviours of young, gay men is

largely structured around risk paradigms or research that views sexuality through the lens of health promotion and risk prevention regarding suicide, HIV/AIDs, and other STIs (Barrios & Lundquist, 2012). While this study does not exclude health promotion or risk prevention, it provides an opportunity for teachers and counsellors to consider the lives of Latin American gay men holistically.

### **The Implicated Researcher**

“If we wait until we are not afraid to speak, we will be speaking from our graves.” (Lorde, 1984, as cited in Alderson, 2000, p. xi)

I believe that life experience shapes every individual (Alderson, 2000). My identity and perspectives have developed and have been defined by the various situations through which I have lived. I spent the first six years of my life in El Salvador, in the midst of a civil war. It was not an unusual event in my childhood to be hiding under the bed when helicopters flew above my house or while soldiers littered their bullets around my neighbourhood. Not surprisingly, I have been fascinated with living with difficulty and its effects on human behaviour from an early age. Moving to Canada, I have spent the majority of my life belonging to a visible ethnic minority. I vividly remember the fear of going to school and not being able to speak or understand anyone or the sadness I felt as people made fun of the foreign food I ate at lunch. I remember writing an English final exam in high school and a teacher coming up to me, hitting my desk and yelling, “there are only thirty minutes left to finish writing this exam. I know you people have a hard time with this language! I thought I would let you know, so that you can start wrapping up.” I also remember being told that if I ever expected to accomplish anything in my life, I would have to work twice as hard compared to everybody else, just so that society

would consider paying attention to me. But, my faith helped me persevere. Growing up in the Roman Catholic tradition, my life has been filled with many special moments with priests, nuns, Cathedrals, and my spiritual family at religious celebrations. Yet, my life's cultural, religious, and secular joys have been haunted with a damning, shameful secret: I am a gay man. I have often felt that in the play of life, I have been cast as the lonely outsider. However, this loneliness has been overcome by quiet resiliency. By listening, I have discovered that every individual has his/her own set of struggles or challenges, none of which are greater than the others.

It is clear that I am heavily implicated in uncovering stories of Latin American gay men, as I am a Latin American gay man. I have experienced first hand the detrimental effects gender, social construction, patriarchy, and heterosexism can have while attempting to develop a positive identity when one is considered deviant. Until recently, I did not feel confident to speak about my sexuality. Quite frankly, I think my sexual orientation is the least interesting thing about me. Regardless, my discomfort and hatred towards my own homosexuality led me to isolate myself as much as I could from all aspects of life and humanity. In my experience, having an ethnic and religious identity also inhibited my ability to come to terms with my sexual identity. However, I believe that my implication is not a flaw or an impediment in this study. It builds passion and genuine curiosity in discovering how I can learn more about identity formation as it is interrelated with being a sexual and ethnic minority, so that I can hopefully learn how to support and ease others' journeys. My implication is important to acknowledge so that I can consistently safeguard against my own biases.

While it was never my intention to pursue such personal subject matter as part of my graduate work, I eventually settled on this topic after considering several areas of interest during my research methods course. Going into the counselling psychology program, I knew that I was interested in working with adolescents and young adults in educational settings. Furthermore, I thought I would work with cross-cultural populations addressing trauma and the migration experience. However, I quickly realized that I was running away from that in which I am truly interested: ethnicity and sexuality. I have been working on my graduate studies my entire life; in order to make a meaningful contribution to counselling psychology, I need to work from within (Pinar, 1994).

In Chapter Two, a synthesis of the literature is presented where gender, socialization or socially sanctioned roles, and patriarchy set the foundation for understanding how males must meet the “male standard” enforced by other men, not just women. In Latin American societies, it appears that there is a belief that male dominant behaviour and social scripts are for the benefit of women, which feeds directly into the assumption that heterosexuality is the preferred sexual orientation (Diaz, 1998). Critical issues are presented for consideration, such as family views on homosexuality, the developmental identity formation process of adolescence, the development of an ethnic and sexual identity, peer acceptance, education, role models, victimization/bullying, medical concerns, and mental health issues. In particular, an examination of the “Latino Lover” or Latino male stereotypes, as well as religious expectations and adherence, give context to why it is important for teachers and counselling psychologists to understand this unique population.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Homosexuality can be a difficult sexual identity to accept and with which to come to terms. With strict, societal and socially constructed scripts defining sex and gender in a patriarchal, homophobic, sexist, and heterosexist culture, developing a positive identity may seem impossible for some gay men in Latin America. Gay men might face difficulty in identity formation and development as a result of few resources that provide hope in the midst of stigma. While adolescents require love, acceptance, and support of family and friends while developing their identities, some members of sexual minorities might fear losing these relationships if discovered. Furthermore, the school community often contributes to the negative voices gay adolescents must filter out. It is no surprise, then, that gay men seem to experience higher mental and physical health risks (McCallum & McLaren, 2010).

### **Sex, Gender, and Social Construction**

Human beings are affected by sex, gender, and social construction. Sex is determined through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males. Such criteria for classification include genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth (Jun, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, gender construction begins at birth with the assignment to a dichotomous sex category based on the genitalia presented (Lorber, 2010). Yet, there are individuals who develop male or female gender identity in the absence of gender-specific genitalia, which suggests that the anatomy of sex organs is not the crucial determinant in gender identity as once assumed by medicine (Jorge, 2010). Instead, one way this gender category is established and sustained is through the socially required, specific displays

that proclaim and identify one's membership in one or the other category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Entering the designated public bathroom or wearing blue versus pink or playing hockey versus ringette may easily execute such displays.

Gender category becomes socially or symbolically linked to a gender status through behaviour, naming, clothing, hairstyle, vocal intonation, and the use of other gender markers (Lorber, 2010; Woodford, Silverschanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012). Therefore, in this sense, one's sex category presumes one's sex and stands as proxy for it in many situations. But, sex and gender category can vary independently; in other words, it is possible to claim membership in a gender category even when the sex criteria is lacking (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Once others become aware of a child's gender, they begin to address that child of one gender differently from those of the other, and the child responds to the different treatment by feeling distinctive and behaving another way. As such, gender is the activity of managing conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's gender category (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Scientifically, current knowledge on:

human embryology has uncovered the molecular cascades, the cellular processes, and the timing of a plethora of biological events, which are required for the sexual differentiation of the body during the first trimester of intrauterine development and has allowed biomedical researchers and physicians to confidently talk about 'biological sex.' (Jorge, 2010, p. 311)

Consequently, human embryology principles that use scientific reasoning with regard to the sexual differentiation of the body are applied to gender identity formation in a manner that suggests that a human embryology of gender exists (Jorge, 2010).

Gender, interrelated with culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly "doing gender" (Lorber, 2010, p. 321). When human beings interact with

others in their environment, they assume that each possesses an essential nature that can be discerned through the natural signs given off or expressed by them. Femininity and masculinity are regarded as prototypes of essential expression, which can be conveyed in any social situation and that strike observers as the most basic characterization of the individual (West & Zimmerman, 1987). After all, gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of societal expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. This social dislocation makes people uncomfortable until divergent members regain successful placement in their required gender status role (Lorber, 2010). Moreover, gendered social arrangements are justified by religion and cultural productions, which are backed up by law in some places in the world. But, the most powerful means of sustaining the dominant gender role ideology is that the process is made “invisible [and] any possible alternatives are virtually unthinkable” (Lorber, 2010, p. 322). Cultural narratives are often considered as belief systems that provide implicit rules about what exists, what occurs, and what is significant (Woodford et al., 2012).

Not surprisingly, many roles are already gender marked, such as parenting and professions. While there are many other determinants to gender, the work adults do as mothers and fathers, as low-level workers and high-level bosses, shapes women’s and men’s life experiences, and these experiences produce different feelings, consciousness, relationships, skills, and ways of being that are called feminine or masculine (Lorber, 2010). Gender determinants, including but not limited to work, demand that humans perform gender in normative ways, which means males are masculine and females are feminine and that individuals must learn appropriate patterns of desire where males desire

females and females desire males (Blackburn, 2007). When people step out of these gender marked roles, special qualifiers are implemented such as the “female doctor” or the “male nurse” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 129). Western society’s values legitimize gendering of children by claiming that it all comes from physiology; however, gender and sex are not equivalent, and gender as a social construction does not flow automatically from genitalia (Jun 2010; Lorber, 2010).

Throughout life, the process and rules of gender are learned as one is taught what is expected, sees what is expected, acts and reacts in expected ways and thus, simultaneously constructs and maintains the gender order (Lorber, 2010). Rather than as a property of individuals, gender can emerge out of social situations, both as an outcome and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimizing one of the most fundamental divisions of society: men versus women. If one fails to do gender appropriately, the individual, not the institutional arrangement, is called to account for his/her character, motives, and predispositions that should adhere to “obligatory heterosexuality” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 144). This, in turn, involves members of society participating in a self-regulating process that monitors their own and others’ conduct with regard to its gender implications (West & Zimmerman, 1987). While new masculinities, an emerging social effort, and therapeutic approaches are fostering adaptive and diverse constructions of masculinity, traditional masculine behaviour remains central in the literature (Jones & Heesacker, 2012).

### **Patriarchy, Homophobia, and Sexism**

Despite changing attitudes toward gender, Western society functions under a patriarchal system. Patriarchy’s defining elements are its male-dominated, male-

identified, male-centered character, and that its culture about the nature of things, including men, women, and humanity, results in manhood and masculinity being most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal or secondary position of other (Johnson, 2010). Socialized gender construction ideologies are perpetuated by this patriarchal society as living in a patriarchal culture means one is encouraged to learn what is expected of individuals as men and women. One must understand the rules that regulate punishment and reward based on how one behaves and appears. To live under patriarchy means to take into account shared ways of feeling, such as:

the hostile contempt for femaleness that forms the core of misogyny and presumptions of male superiority, the ridicule men direct at other men who show signs of vulnerability or weakness, or the fear and insecurity that every woman must deal with when she exercises the right to move freely in the world, especially at night and by herself. (Johnson, 2010, p. 334)

Johnson (2010) also suggests that seeing the world through a patriarchal lens is to reiterate the idea that there are only two genders and that women and men are profoundly different in their basic natures. Men are made in the image of a masculine God with whom they enjoy a special relationship. Heterosexuality is “natural” while same-sex attraction is not. Further, every woman, heterosexual or homosexual, desires and needs a man to take care of her (Johnson, 2010).

But a strong emphasis on masculinity does not only demean women to a secondary level, as men also are under the constant and careful scrutiny of other men. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval, either from peers or from males in authority (Kimmel, 2010). As a result, some men test each other by taking risks in front of each other so that these other men can assess and grant manhood. To prove their

manhood, some men expose themselves disproportionately to health risks, workplace hazards, and stress-related illnesses. Consequently, masculinity is a homosocial enactment. Kimmel (2010) implies that women, on the other hand, become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale.

Homophobia is a fundamental principle of the cultural definition of manhood (Kimmel, 2010). Homophobia is defined as the fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex, which includes prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence brought on by that fear and hatred (Blumenfeld, 2010; Jun, 2010). Some researchers argue that homophobia is not necessarily fear-based, but rather learned and socially reinforced (Fine, 2011). Kimmel (2010) argues that homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men and more than not wanting to be perceived as gay. The word *faggot* has nothing to do with the homosexual experience. Instead, it comes out of the depths of manhood: “a label of ultimate contempt for anyone who seems sissy, untough, uncool” (Kimmel, 2010, p. 329). Homophobia in a man can be viewed as the fear that other men will unmask, emasculate, and reveal to the world that he does not measure up, or that he is not a “real” man. This fear is based on not wanting to be humiliated, which leads to shame, and that shame turns into silence and even self-harm. This silence, then, is exercised by ensuring that nothing even remotely feminine is revealed. The fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man, keeps some men exaggerating all of the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation of women (Kimmel, 2010). Ultimately, homophobia becomes a major component of heterosexism (Thompson & Zoloth, 1989).

## **Heterosexism**

Blumenfeld (2010) defines heterosexism as the overarching system of advantages bestowed on heterosexuals, based on the institutionalization of heterosexual norms or standards that privilege heterosexuals, and that may exclude the needs, concerns, cultures, and life experiences of sexual minorities. It is often an overt reality in a society that represents oppression by neglect, omission, erasure, and distortion. Heterosexism leads some sexual minority individuals to struggle constantly against their own visibility, and makes it much more difficult for them to integrate a positive identity (Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Unfortunately, it can become difficult not to internalize society's negative notions of homosexuality or any form of non-heterosexuality. Some members of the sexual minority community have also been socialized within the systematic framework of heterosexism that includes adopting negative external attitudes, myths, and stereotypes of inferiority, inadequacy, self-hatred, and a sense of otherness or feeling too different to belong (Blumenfeld, 2010).

Institutional heterosexism and organizational heterosexism have been supported by governmental heterosexism (Jun, 2010). In some parts of Western society, same-sex lovers and friends are still denied access to loved ones in hospital intensive-care units because of hospital policy allowing only blood relatives or legal spouse visitation rights (Blumenfeld, 2010). At times, they are denied housing and employment, or are summarily fired (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Despite evolving positive changes in the collective conscience, homosexual sexual orientation continues to be considered as being dangerous to humanity by some factions of society, even though it is most often expressed privately (Strickland, 1995). An individual's sexual orientation does not

interfere with his/her functioning in society, which is the reason homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973 (Alderson, 2013). Nonetheless, individuals with non-heterosexual orientations have been continuously devalued in their workplaces and pathologized within the medical and counselling professions (Clift & Kirby, 2012; Douce, 1998; Jun, 2010; Lucksted, 2004).

Furthermore, many people look to religious texts to support the social norms of heterosexuality (Blumenfeld, 2010). While many religious denominations have worked to end oppression toward a number of marginalized groups, including those who transgress heterosexual norms, religious textual passages have been referenced to justify and rationalize the practices that ostracize, harass, deny rights, persecute, and oppress entire groups of people based on their non-conforming sexual identities (Blumenfeld, 2010; Wolff, Himes, Kwon, & Bollinger, 2012). Although agreement concerning same-sex relationships and sexuality does not exist across the various religious communities, and while some denominations are rethinking their oppressive and harmful positions on homosexuality, others teach against such behaviours and, as a matter of policy or dogma, exclude people from many aspects of religious life simply on the basis of sexual identity (Blumenfeld, 2010). Conservative denominations, such as Catholicism and Evangelicalism, base their opposition to sexual minorities on their beliefs that non-heterosexual identities are connected with psychopathology and can be changed through therapy and early intervention. One belief from these religious communities insists that homosexuality develops in childhood due to poor connections with the same-sex parent (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). As a result, religion can both overtly and subtly endorse heterosexuality.

In addition, the medical model also supports heterosexuality. Despite improvement, some members of sexual minorities have been, against their will, “hospitalized, committed to mental institutions, jailed, lobotomized, electroshocked, castrated, sterilized, and subjected to ‘aversion therapy,’ ‘reparative therapy,’ ‘Christian counseling,’ and genetic counseling” (Blumenfeld, 2010, p. 373). Thus, instead of considering homosexuality as a manifestation of emotional and physical attractions along a broad spectrum of emotional and sexual possibilities, some sectors of the medical and psychological communities continue to pathologize homosexuality in medical and psychological terms (Blumenfeld, 2010). There is no evidence to indicate that sexual identity is amenable to change from any type of therapeutic intervention. On the contrary, available evidence suggests that such programs can produce harmful psychological outcomes (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Although a number of practitioners within both the psychiatric and psychological professions hold genuinely enlightened attitudes towards sexual minorities, many remain entrenched in their negative perceptions of same-sex attractions and gender minority expression, and these perceptions affect the manner in which they respond to their patients and clients (Blumenfeld, 2010).

Due to the expected norms established by sex, socialized gender construction, and a patriarchal, sexist, and heterosexist system, homophobia manifests itself and operates on four distinct but interrelated levels: “the personal, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the cultural” (Blumenfeld, 2010, p. 378). This societal structure contributes to the higher levels of psychological, physical, and sexual violence in both childhood and adulthood experienced by some sexual minorities (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005).

### **Identity Formation, Development, and Stigma**

With the societal script fixed clearly into the collective psyche, some homosexual men may experience alienation and a psychology of difference in their identity formation (Strickland, 1995). Developing and living in an environment of hostility towards homosexuality, some sexual minority individuals internalize anti-homosexual views (Allen & Oleson, 1999). Internalized homophobia is considered as the most important roadblock to the adjustment to a positive identity (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Cass, 1979; Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1988; Martin, 1982; Troiden, 1989). The problematic elements of coping with a non-heterosexual identity include the pain of the dissonance between one's ideal life and one's reality and the fear of being seen or exposed as undesirable in the eyes of others (Allen & Oleson, 1999). As a result, this dissonance between an internal negative view of homosexuality and an emerging non-heterosexual identity tends to create an overwhelming conflict in a man that delays the process of accepting his sexual orientation and that instead often leads him to focus on passing as heterosexual (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Martin, 1982).

Allen and Oleson (1999) suggest that there is a pronounced relationship between internalized homophobia and internalized shame in gay men. It also supports the statistical significance of an inverse relationship between internalized homophobia and self-esteem. Shame in gay men can be a detrimental factor in the development of their healthy individual psyche. Shame can be seen as a mediator of attachment, the principle regulator of healthy narcissism causing global negative reactions towards the self, and an affect that diminishes the positive affects of joy and interest (Allen & Oleson, 1999). The results from internalized shame may form the foundation, which all other experiences of

the self are organized. Consequences may include a pervasive feeling of worthlessness, poor ego integration, and rigid or primitive defensive processes (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Kaufman, 1991).

Some researchers argue that, in order for a person to lead a productive, psychologically healthy life, certain developmental tasks must be mastered during adolescence (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). These tasks include adjusting to the physical and emotional changes of puberty, establishing effective social and working relationships with peers, achieving independence from primary caretakers, preparing for a vocation, and moving toward a personal sense of values and definable identity (Davis, Anderson, Linkowski, Berger, & Feinsten, 1985; Dempsey, 1994; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Eventually, the goal of adolescence is the emergence of a secure identity, a positive sense of self, and the capability to merge with another in a truly intimate relationship (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). In addition to possible internalized homophobia, some sexual minority adolescents deal with developing an identity within the context of social stigmatization, often without support of family, peers, schools, and service providers (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Schneider & Dimito, 2008).

The stigma that surrounds non-heterosexual identities can make identity formation difficult because it creates problems of guilt and secrecy, discourages sexual minority adolescents from discussing their emerging sexual orientation with either peers or family, and makes it difficult for these adolescents to gain access to other sexual minority youth who could serve as a peer group (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Radkowsky and Siegel (1997) posit that unlike other minority groups, sexual minority

adolescents are unique in that they are sometimes unable to develop a sense of group identity that is important for coping with discrimination. Dank (1971) states that:

It is sometimes said that the homosexual minority is like any other minority group; but in the case of early childhood socialization, it is not, for the parents of a Negro can communicate to their child that he is a Negro and what it is like to be a Negro, but the parents of a person who is to become homosexual do not prepare their child to be homosexual – they are not homosexual themselves and they do not communicate to him what it is like to be homosexual. (p. 182)

It seems that some sexual minority youth have limited to no opportunities to learn how to manage their sexuality in a positive manner since homophobic introjection precedes homosexual awareness, which in turn affects identity formation (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Furthermore, stereotypes are self-validating because only those who appear to be gay, considering the accepted societal stereotype, are labeled gay, while those who do not fit homophobic stereotypes are left hidden. As such, some sexual minority youth are deprived of peers, positive role models, and support groups that could disconfirm negative and frightening stereotypes. Instead, they only have stereotypes and myths from which to learn what it means to have a sexual minority identity (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Hence, integrity and self-respect become difficult to establish while significant aspects of personality are hidden and regarded with shame. Homosexual identity formation cannot be completed until the time when same-sex attachments can be acknowledged, explored, and accepted (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Radkowsky and Siegel (1997) argue that two categories exist for the stigmatized individual: the discredited sexual minority adolescent has a gay sexual identity that is suspected or known versus the discreditable individual who is able to hide and may spend an enormous amount of energy constantly monitoring what should be unconscious and automatic behaviour. Martin (1982) states that “at a time when

heterosexual adolescents are learning how to socialize, young gay people are learning to conceal large areas of their lives from family and friends” (as cited in Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997, p. 195).

Despite the social stigma that is learned and internalized and that leads to self-hate and self-derogation, Eliason and Schope (2007) suggest that homosexual individuals can move from questioning their sexual identities to accepting the deviant label with all the potential social consequences. As cited in Eliason and Schope (2007), various studies have been conducted that support this claim and that outline models and stages that lead to achieving positive identity formation: Plummer (1975) explains this process through sensitization, significance, coming out, and stabilization. Cass (1979; 1996) uses confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and integration. Coleman (1982) states it as pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, and integration. Minton and McDonald (1984) suggest using ego development theory that includes egocentric, sociocentric, and universalistic stages. Troiden (1989) uses sensitization, confusion, assumption, and commitment. Isaacs and McKendrick (1992) label it as identity diffusion, identity challenge, identity exploration, identity achievement, identity commitment, and identity consolidation. Siegel and Lowe (1994) suggest turning point (aware of difference, identify source of difference), coming out (assumption, acceptance, celebration), and maturing phase (reevaluation, renewal, mentoring). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) and Fassinger and Miller (1996) identify the stages as awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis.

These researchers propose stage models where development proceeds from one level to the next (Alderson, 2003). While Floyd and Stein (2002) suggest that quantitative

studies have generally supported the sequencing of these stages, Dubé (2000) argues that these models do not describe the majority of sexual minority males who do not use sexual behaviour to arrive at a gay identity. More importantly, these models are based on White gay men and have been overgeneralized to other sexual minorities with one fixed integrated gay identity across all situations. Research, however, suggests that there are many and varied pathways to developing a gay identity (Dworkin, 2000).

Alderson's (2003) ecological theory of gay male identity encompasses developmental stages along with process-based elements that explain identity formation and recognize psychosocial influences, both internal and external, which might affect an individual. He posits individuals have unique experiences within these influences before consolidation of identity can take place. Societal, parental/familial, cultural/spiritual, and peer influences impact behaviour, cognition, and affect. Individuals find a connection to themselves, the Gay world, and then reconnect to the Straight world. All of these elements are consistently at play with each other. Moreover, it is not a destination with one end result; gay identity is fluid and continuously evolving (Alderson, 2003).

Regardless of the theory, it is evident that developing a positive gay identity requires working through internal and external stigma in order to live an authentic, congruent life (Alderson, 2002). No matter how well developed an individual's positive identity becomes, Radkowsky and Siegel (1997) argue that, at some point, the heterosexual privilege of marriage, children, social acceptance, and a kindred feeling to parents, siblings, and heterosexual friends, needs to be mourned. Even when one achieves self-acceptance, a continuous process of negotiating whether to disclose and risk harassment or other discrimination or whether to remain hidden and subject to the false

assumption of heterosexuality remains. As such, for the sexual minority individual, the most important developmental task is to reject negative societal values in order to create a self-identity that includes a positive affirmation of diverse sexual identities (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

### **Family**

Discovering that someone in the family is a member of a sexual minority has a profound impact on the course of family life (D'Augelli et al., 1998). In addition to the difficulty in developing a personal identity, the integration of identity into the family can be an obstacle (D'Augelli et al., 1998). Generally, some sexual minority youth experience a lack of parental, sibling, and extended family support that can exacerbate many of the developmental problems or struggles they experience (Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Because many parents assume that their children are heterosexual, they see no need to educate them about sexual minorities and, unintentionally, negatively influence perceptions of available resources (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). As such, the fear of rejection may result in two reactions: on the unconscious level, these adolescents withdraw emotional investment in the family in order to minimize the significance of possible rejection; consciously, they withdraw from family interactions in order to minimize the likelihood of discovery. Regardless, both reactions distance the sexual minority adolescent from his/her family (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

When parents find out that their child is gay, their reaction can cause the adolescent immense difficulty (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Most parents initially respond negatively (Conley, 2011; Tharinger & Wells, 2000) and proceed through stages similar to those of the grieving

process, as parents realize that they have suffered a loss of the child they thought they knew, and the loss for the future they hoped for him/her (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Another difficulty a sexual minority adolescent may experience is understanding that his/her parents need to grieve before they can accept their child as s/he truly is; essentially, the young adolescent is being asked to parent his/her parents at a time when s/he most needs his/her mother's and father's love and support. Moreover, parents may experience shock and denial, attempt to persuade their child to recant his or her sexual orientation, or they may seek a therapist to try to change their child's sexual orientation (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Additional consequences may include verbal or physical abuse and violence in the home (Tharinger & Wells, 2000) or being asked to leave the family home in a literal act of shunning, itself a powerful punishment (D'Augelli et al., 1998).

Waldner and Magruder's (1999) study argues that family relations can significantly and negatively influence identity expression, as sexual minority children who report getting along well with their families may believe it is too costly to violate heterosexual norms and values by expressing a sexual minority identity. Less positive family relations decrease identity disclosure and identity expression. Perceived resources are important as they positively affect identity expression by offering support that may mediate the effects of family relations and which might make it less costly to express a sexual minority identity. This is an important element for adolescents because same-sex dating and interaction with other sexual minority individuals provide the necessary resocialization experiences needed for healthy adult relationships (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). It seems youth who self-identify as members of sexual minorities may act in ways

that increases their parents' awareness, provoking inquiries that lead to disclosure (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). More importantly, youth with aware parents showed less internalized homophobia, which may reflect the longer period of time that they were aware of their sexual orientation, as well as the greater family support they report; in contrast, youth who were less gender atypical in childhood were more able to avoid parental discovery of their sexual orientation but remained living in fear of rejection (D'Augelli et al., 2005).

Due to society's negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, it is not surprising that parents are not likely to be pleased to learn of a child's sexual minority orientation. Parents' concerns about the physical, psychological, and social welfare of their sexual minority children are valid and emerge from examples of injustices suffered by individuals who do not conform to societal norms (Conley, 2011). Further, this discovery leads to guilt and self-recrimination because values, concerns with conformity, and religiosity may inhibit parental acceptance. Parents are more concerned with gay sons than other non-heterosexual identities because the literature suggests that society is far more accepting of lesbian women and hate crimes toward gay men are more frequent (Conley, 2011). Parents may also be concerned with their sons' health, as gay men are more at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS. Parental concerns are warranted, but the best outcome is for parents to eventually discard their expected heterosexual identity for their child, re-evaluate and modify their own values about sexual minorities based on education and intimate acquaintance with a gay person, and accept the gay family member (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

## **Peers and School**

D'Augelli et al. (1998) contend that the risks of disclosure occur at a time at which the young person's family relationships are undergoing changes associated with adolescence, where the peer group becomes increasingly important as a place to experiment with new roles and to be exposed to new ideas (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Although the developmental challenge of adolescence is often conceptualized as disengagement from childhood patterns, this individuation generally occurs in the context of family and peer relationships; the family provides stability and support as peer bonds strengthen. The turbulent process of blending family and peer relationships is much more difficult for those who experience same-sex attraction. While it is clear that one cannot fully presume family support if one discloses a sexual minority identity, the same is also true in regards to peer relations (D'Augelli, et al., 1998). For sexual minority adolescents, peer relationships are often insecure, unfulfilling or of low-quality (Bos, Sandfort, de Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). The necessity to hide their intimate feelings in order to prevent discovery keeps many sexual minority adolescents isolated from their peers (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

The research suggests that verbal harassment in the form of rude jokes and comments is the most common form of victimization, reported by 70 percent of gay and bisexual boys and perpetrated by both peers and teachers (Elze, 2003; Huebner et al., 2004; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). In addition, physical abuse and violence can occur so much that it leads to increased absenteeism or dropping out of school (Grossman et al., 2009; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). First, whereas traditional bullying of sexual minority youth is strongly evident in schools, conditions that foster the bullying of gay

youth appear across the entire social ecology, including peers, teachers, religious authorities, coaches, as well as social or school policies, laws, institutions, and the media (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009). Similar to disclosing to parents, sexual minority youth fear losing social support if they disclose their sexual orientation, as often times such self-disclosure leads to further victimization. Furthermore, bullying is generally underreported and staff members are ill equipped to intervene (Elze, 2003; Mishna et al., 2009). Nonetheless, researchers, policy makers, and educators are increasingly acknowledging the pervasiveness of bullying and taking action to intervene. The absence of a curriculum that includes sexual minority characters, stories, role models, and history in the schools maintains sexual minority issues hidden. Some teachers are afraid to hold classroom discussions, as they are not well versed in dealing or confronting such a topic (Cooley, 1998; Elze, 2003; Marinoble, 1998). Nevertheless, this avoidance contributes to the violent culture that glorifies and contributes to all bullying, and that specifically target sexual minority youth who are victimized in the media and by social institutions (Mishna et al., 2009).

Other factors to consider that add to sexual minority victimization include the tendency that direct aggression involves primarily male-male interaction (Richardson & Green, 1999). Gay males are more likely to report victimization by bullying compared to heterosexual males, and gay males are less likely to report that they bullied others compared to heterosexual males. Therefore, one must be aware that sexual minority youth may be at higher risk for victimization by bullying and perpetrating bullying themselves (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010). It is also evident that sexual minority youth need to be integrated successfully into their heterosexual peer

networks to assist their feelings of well-being in school (Elze, 2003). In the same way, Elze (2003) reports that youths' integration with peers and their perceptions of their school environment, such as observing teachers and administrators who act on their behalf, exert a greater effect on their comfort in school as sexual minority students. Last, empirical findings suggest that the impact of victimization is demonstrated through the effects of self-esteem: victimization leads to lowered self-esteem, which in turn exacerbates psychological distress (Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, & D'Augelli, 1998).

Sexual minority youth from ethnic minority groups also face unique challenges at school that reflect multifaceted factors that make up their life circumstances (Holmes & Cahill, 2003). Verbal harassment is not only concentrated on their sexual identity, but also on their ethnicity. In addition, they face racism from within the prevalently White sexual minority community, homophobia from their own ethnic group, and, most likely, a combination of the two forces from the larger community. Having to choose between various aspects of one's identity, along with feeling like there is no one in the community with whom to relate can be oppressive and depressive (Holmes & Cahill, 2003; McCallum & McLaren, 2010).

### **Mental and Physical Health**

Sexual minority youth have been shown to have a higher risk of emotional distress including depression, anxiety, and suicidality compared to heterosexual youth (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003; Nadal et al., 2011; Rosario et al., 2004). A potential explanation for the elevated emotional distress is that sexual minority youth experience a unique set of stressors related directly to being sexual minorities within a heterosexually oriented society (Rosario et al, 2004). One aspect of sexual minority related stress is

external in nature and involves the experience of violence, verbal abuse, rejection, and other stressful life events perpetrated by other individuals against persons who are, or are perceived to be, sexual minorities (Rosario et al, 2004). Other aspects of sexual minority related stress are chronic and internal in nature, involving internalization of society's stigmatization of homosexuality (Rosario et al, 2004). An additional internal and external stressor lies in the fact that gay youth expect stressful events and implement high vigilance as a result (Meyer, 2003).

There is a high prevalence of suicide risk among sexual minorities (Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle, 2000; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001). Most suicide attempts by gay individuals occur during their youth, at the time they are struggling with their sexual identities, something their heterosexual counterparts do not experience. Some studies report that suicide is the leading cause of death among sexual minority youth (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). A consistent finding in research regarding gay suicide provides relation between suicide attempts and precocious sexual identity development, including earlier awareness of sexual orientation, earlier occurrence of first same-sex sexual experience, and more same-sex sexual partners (Hershberger, Pilkington, & D'Augelli, 1997). Another factor examined by this study includes the fact that earlier disclosure of sexual orientation took place among suicide attempters when compared to non-attempters. Attempters were more generally open about their sexual orientation, but that openness carried a consequence of losing friends and support. It is important to note that, while the literature heavily verifies statistics of increased suicide risk of sexual minorities, the net effect and conclusions are based not on same-sex attractions but on self-identification (Savin-Williams, 2001). Less

victimization is associated with higher degrees of family support, which in turn is associated with greater self-acceptance by the individual, which results in fewer mental difficulties (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995).

Mental health challenges are also accompanied by a variety of health risks. First, like their heterosexual counterparts, gay males begin their sexual encounters shortly after pubertal onset (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). This is important information as sex education classes almost universally ignore homosexuality or non-heterosexual identities (Bittner, 2012; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Fisher, 2009). Not having appropriate sexual health education or peer groups where gay individuals can develop romantic relationships, boys participate in risky sexual behaviour, which could lead to HIV (Garofalo, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2008). Moreover, alcohol and substance abuse have been found to disinhibit sexual restraints, which increase the risk of HIV infection, and are also thought to increase the risk of suicide (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Sexual minority youth are at risk of alcohol and substance abuse, as they may be more prone to using in an attempt to numb their anxiety or depression or to serve as an antidote to the pain of exclusion, ridicule, and rejection by peers and family (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). They also experience homelessness more frequently, either because they are evicted from home or because they run away, which increases their vulnerability to physical and sexual victimization, higher rates of addictive substance use, more psychopathology, and riskier sexual behavior including prostitution (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Reck, 2009). The need for economic sustenance means that many of these youth will turn to prostitution in order to survive (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

## **Masculinity and Latin American Culture**

Inside, I felt that I was battling contradicting emotions, but the terror I felt in the face of discovering – never mind admitting – my homosexuality was such that I didn't even give myself the time to seriously stop and analyze what I was feeling. Culturally, I had always been taught that love and attraction between two men was a sin, so instead of facing what I felt, I buried it because it scared me... Latin culture has always had a very sexualized connotation, but that sexiness that others seem to perceive is completely normal for those of us who are from that part of the world... I don't know if it has to do with the fact that I am Latin or if it has to do with the global image of the "Latin lover," but I always had the feeling that certain things were expected of me, among which was the fact that I was supposed to seduce – and allow myself to be seduced by – women. (Martin, 2011, p. 55, 142, 254)

Cleaver (2002) suggests that there is a crisis in masculinity in Latin America.

Changes in the economy, in social structures, and in household composition are resulting in this crisis. Some examples of the varying degrees of these crises include low attainment of boys in education, economic changes resulting in the loss of men's assured role as breadwinner and provider to the family, women's increased incorporation into the labour force, the increase in proportions of female-headed households, and the absence of male role models for boys in families (Cleaver, 2002). Part of the crisis is a result of the lack of alternative meaningful roles for men, sometimes resulting in dysfunctional and anti-social behaviour (Bujra, 2002). At other times, men and women are aware of and may publicly assert traditional gender roles; however, in private, these roles may be negotiated. Ultimately, the subject of masculinities reflects the difficulty of being very precise in defining just what constitutes gender relations as distinct from all other forms of social interaction (Cleaver, 2002). Gender identity includes activities, traits, and values culturally and historically associated with men and women, hence "masculinities are configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale

institutions and economic relations as well as face to face relationships and sexuality” (Connell, 2000, p. 29).

The strict definitions of masculinity, as the head of the household and protective figure, lead some gay men to live irresponsible sexual lives. Diaz (1998) outlines six internalized sociocultural factors that are manifested in the sexual lives of Latin American gay men, as a result of the various cultural socialization processes. These factors include machismo, homophobia, family loyalty, sexual silence, poverty, and racism. Machismo is the extreme and almost exclusive focus on penetrative sexual practices to the extent that sex without penetration is not considered sex. There is a perception that men have low sexual control where a state of high sexual arousal is used as a socially-accepted justification for unprotected sex and the surrender of regulatory control in sexual encounters. It encourages individuals to use their sexuality and sexual behaviour as an appropriate place to prove masculinity (Diaz, 1998).

As in Canadian contexts, derogatory language and linguistically gendered terms exist in Latin America that target gay men, which is one method individuals compete and put each other down in this machista culture. *Loca* (crazy woman), *pato* (duck), *maricón* (*faggot*), *culero* (*faggot*), or *pájaro* (bird) demonstrate linguistic accentuation of a gendered aspect that is dehumanizing (Vidal-Ortiz, 2011). These terms connote the idea of taking something in, which presumably means that, like women, gay men are penetrated. This notion of taking something in translates into the active/passive system of social stigma which de-masculinizes gay men. The impact of man/non-man frameworks is essential in understanding this language use (Vidal-Ortiz, 2011). In other words, homosexuality is determined by the role one performs in the sexual act. An individual

who takes the penetrating role is not stigmatized with a homosexual label; only the passive penetrated individual is considered gay (Perez, 2011).

Homophobia leads to a strong sense of personal shame about same-sex sexual desire, so much so that fear of rejection in sexual encounters takes precedence over health concerns. This leads to serious problems in self-identification as a member of a group at risk, with denial of personal vulnerability to HIV, and increased feelings of anxiety about same-sex encounters. This anxiety can turn into increased use of alcohol, drugs, and other intoxicants in preparation for sexual activity. When considering close personal involvement with homophobic families, family loyalty leads Latin American gay men to live closeted lives with low levels of identification and social support from a peer gay community. There is minimal influence of normative changes in the gay community on sexual behaviour because families are seen as the main social-referent group. This forced separation between sexuality and social/affective life or relationships promotes anonymous, hidden encounters in public cruising places (Diaz, 1998).

Sexual silence takes precedence in many Latin American families. Problems in talking openly about sexuality result in difficulties with sexual communication or safer sex negotiation in sexual encounters. Furthermore, despite a heterosexual or homosexual orientation, increased sexual discomfort exists with all matters pertinent to sexuality. This leads to psychological dissociation of sexual thoughts and feelings, decreasing the likelihood of accurate self-observation within the domain of sexuality (Diaz, 1998).

Poverty leads Latin American gay men to feel a decreased sense of personal control over their lives, thus experiencing fatalistic notions regarding health and personal well-being. Increased unemployment, drug abuse, and violence undermine the

consideration of HIV infection as a major concern. Men experience situations of financial dependence by living with their families, through exploitative relations with older men, and prostitution, where the personal power for self-determination and self-regulation is seriously undermined (Diaz, 1998).

Racism increases personal shame about being Latin American that manifests with serious negative consequences on self-esteem and personal identity. Minority status stressors are related to the development of both severe personality disorders and psychological challenges in ethnic minorities (Liang, Salcedo, & Miller, 2011). Further, because personal looks, financial power, and educational achievement are highly prevalent in the mostly White and middle-class gay community, Latin American gay men lack participation in the mainstream gay community and its activities due to feelings of rejection and a lack of social recognition. Racist stereotypes about Latin American men being passionate and exotic create pressure from non-Latin American gay men to practice risky sexual behaviour (Diaz, 1998). Men, with darker skin, who are rejected for sex may feel less powerful in the relationship dynamic and less able to ask for condoms or give up the use of condoms altogether to attract a desired sexual partner (Ibañez et al., 2009).

The Latin American culture is predominantly Judeo-Christian, with Catholics and conservative Protestants representing the majority of the population (Fankhanel, 2010). Consequently, this may cause challenges for Latin American youth working through self-acceptance and the coming out process. In addition, Garcia (1998) indicates that Latin American gay youth encountered major conflicts with their mothers when expressing their sexual orientation and identity. Religious beliefs aggravated this conflict, which often led to a sense of guilt. Last, dealing with the stigma of being Latin American, a

non-dominant ethnic group, is less stressful than dealing with a gay identity, which led individuals to move in and out of these circles in a manner that allowed them to explore their integrated self. Because linear gay identity development models depend on the resolution of issues for growth to occur, they cannot provide full explanations for the gay identity development of Latin Americans (Garcia, 1998). Any interventions employed should address the different needs associated with both processes in developing an ethnic and sexual identity. Not surprisingly, positive interpersonal relationships with peers and family members are crucial to developing a healthy sense of ethnic and sexual identity (Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009).

### **Sexual Minority Counselling Interventions: A Different Way of Working**

In this section, I am experimenting with a different mode of working. While addressing the various texts, I attempt to include a life writing approach to the experience of reading the relevant literature. Life writers engage in writing autobiographically to remember where “we have been, attend to where we are, imagine where we might go” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 97). It reminds us that everyone has a story to tell, which creates a sense of self-identity, self-worth, and respect for individual uniqueness (Butler & Bentley, 1997). Each reference will include a description, significant quotations with anecdotal responses in italics, and an overall reflection.

Alderson, K. G. (2002). *Breaking out: The complete guide to building and enhancing a positive gay identity for men and women*. Toronto, ON: Insomniac Press.

Description: Alderson’s self-help book provides cognitive-behavioural exercises that help gay men and lesbian women develop a positive identity. Section one provides exercises that help individuals overcome various challenging aspects of having a sexual minority identity, including internalized homophobia, denying same-sex feelings, leading a “split

life,” suffering from conflicts regarding spiritual and religious beliefs, feeling isolated and alone, facing rejection from others, and feeling invisible. Section two provides exercises about how to enter the gay community and how to reconnect with the straight world. Section three explores how gay adolescents are similar to any other adolescent, but how they may experience heightened bullying, suicidal ideation, social anxiety, homelessness and/or suffer rejection just to name a few. Finally, section four discusses the progress gay individuals have made in Canada, the USA, and around the world.

#### Significant Quotations:

“As a therapist, I believe the most important quality is congruence, which means being who I am and being real in all of my dealings with people. In essence, I strive to be a person who changes little while fulfilling various life roles. I like to think that the “Kevin” you come to know through my writing is not markedly different from the “Kevin” that others get to know, whether it be my lover, children, friends, colleagues or clients. To give a false impression of myself is to deny them the opportunity to see the person I am” (Alderson, 2002, p. 7).

*This speaks loudly to my experience. For the last several years, I have felt like a hypocrite. My immediate family has known about my sexual identity for over ten years now, but most of the conversations regarding this topic focussed on how I could change it. I have often felt like a chameleon – changing my answers, my viewpoints, my experiences depending on the individual in front of me. However, editing my life is not a natural or desired quality. I continue to struggle with congruence. I feel that I am more open with people about my sexuality, especially if I see an opening for disclosure. I, ultimately, want to be a person like Alderson describes. Regardless, defining congruence in my life is something I am still uncovering and discovering.*

“ In effect, we are emotionally abused and spiritually raped during our childhood years” (Alderson, 2002, p. 10).

*In my work as a teacher, I often heard students indiscriminately use the word “rape.” “That teacher’s marking raped me.” “Biology 30 raped me.” “That exam raped me” and so forth. I don’t like that expression as I believe that sexual abuse and aggression is not something of which to make fun. Regardless, when I read this quotation, it struck a chord with me. Being a religious and spiritual person, and since my Catholic faith has been the most difficult obstacle to break down in terms of accepting my sexuality, I finally discovered language and imagery that accurately describes what happened to my spirit at the hands of the Church. The emotional abuse is easy for me to express – I have several examples from my parents, friends, and teachers. But the spiritual abuse goes*

*much deeper into my psyche. It paralyzes me and prevents me from living my life authentically. Unfortunately, fear of eternal damnation is not something I have been able to overcome yet.*

“Individuals who have attained a positive gay identity have developed a high self-regard for themselves as gay persons. They view their gay status as equal to straight status. If given a choice, they would not prefer to be straight over gay, for they have come to value their uniqueness and the richness of life that comes from being themselves. They have integrated their gay identity with their other identities, and having accomplished this, they are “out” in most areas of their lives, except when it is dangerous to do so. They have largely overcome their own internalized homophobia, which frees them to fully love others of the same gender” (Alderson, 2002, p. 13).

*Developing my own sense of a positive identity as a gay man is something relatively new to my life journey. Until recently, it is not something that I knew existed and it is not something I thought was possible for me. However, there are many aspects I really like about being gay. First, I think I am more sensitive to the suffering of other people because of my experience as a gay man. I strongly believe in equality and I am deeply offended when I see privileged individuals intentionally and unintentionally abuse women and individuals from various minorities. While I sometimes wish I wasn't a gay person in a heterosexist world, I do know that I would not like to be a straight man.*

“Richard avoids mirrors because whenever he sees himself in one he feels uneasy and disappointed. In Richard’s mind, the mirror doesn’t lie, and what he sees makes his stomach churn with disgust. His hips seem too large, his torso is too long, his muscles are small and undefined, his nose is slightly crooked and he is ten pounds overweight. Looking at the small amount of fat on his waist bothers him more than most people could imagine. It’s like a curse, living in his body. The few aspects of his looks that he likes are overshadowed by every flaw that seems so pronounced. More disturbing is how his reflection symbolizes to him the deep feelings of dislike he has for himself. He feels ugly, inside and out. Only his closest friends know that he is gay. In most settings, Richard is aware of his behaviour and the way he comes across to others. He censors anything that might appear “gay,” doing his best to ensure that others think he is straight. Richard wants others to see him as macho. This means that although he loves creative pursuits, he avoids telling most people of his interests. Attending ballets, operas and plays is a definite taboo. Richard intentionally deepens his voice and holds back from showing any side of himself that others might think is “feminine.” To add to his persona, he castigates others who display the slightest degree of effeminacy” (Alderson, 2002, p. 35).

*This long piece of text stuck out to me because I relate closely to Richard. I still struggle looking at myself in the mirror. Every time I stand in front of it, I face an intense inner battle to simply look up. While I seem to be increasing my ability to look at myself, it is still excruciatingly difficult to see any goodness, both inward and outward, when I stare at myself. I also thought back to most of my life and how hard I worked at hiding the things I really enjoyed. Reading, classical music, dance, theatre, figure skating, gymnastics, boy bands, singing, talking. Even now I am embarrassed to admit that these*

*are some of my interests. I ended up avoiding having superficial conversations with others by intensely and purposefully isolating myself. I also remember feeling badly because I was consistently told I was like a girl. I didn't want to be a girl, but I have always admired women way more than the men in my life. I felt that they were more intelligent, more kind, and more authentic - I wanted to have those qualities too. Regardless of my secret admiration, I still knew that something was wrong with me because I would much rather spend time with the women in my life than the men.*

“Today is the beginning of my life. It is for you as well. Do you like what you see in the mirror today? You are God’s creation. Be thankful for what he has created. You are exactly as God wants you to be” (Alderson, 2002, p. 216).

*As a counselling psychology student, I am most interested in narrative therapy. When I read this statement, I felt like this should be part of my new inner monologue. For too long I have destroyed my inner being with hateful rhetoric, so it is time for me to start making this my new story. I want to be grateful to God for what He has made in me and I want to feel the freedom and assurance of knowing that my sexuality is not a mistake.*

“I am still learning what it means to have a positive gay identity because new challenges face me everyday, as they do you. We never arrive – we just keep moving closer to a destination off in the mirage. Our growth must never end” (Alderson, 2002, p. 217).

*I think this is an important distinction to make regarding positive identity for sexual minorities. Like the counselling process, there is no magic wand to take bad memories away or to change a person. I think regardless of sexuality, personal growth is something that should never stop. This also makes me think that I need to be more gentle with myself. I need to acknowledge the victories I have made in the last little while and accept the times when I did not have the strength to see myself in a positive light. I am excited, however, that the dark moments seem to be decreasing.*

Reflection: This is a strength-filled, valuable resource. The author speaks candidly about his own experience and struggle in accepting his sexuality. He provides information regarding his theoretical background: humanistic, feminist, and cognitive-behavioural. He teaches readers how to use the solutions section of each chapter that focus on changing thoughts through a beliefs chart and how to question existing, maladaptive beliefs.

Anderson, S. C. (2009). *Substance use disorders in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender clients: Assessment and treatment*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Description: Anderson's book attempts to connect the most recent literature and research regarding substance use disorders with the differing challenges that arise when working with sexual minorities. In this comprehensive resource, Anderson covers topics dealing with the lack of definitions regarding substance use, sexual orientation, and gender identity, which have made it difficult to assess its prevalence and etiology.

Significant Quotations:

“Most LGBT people internalize to some degree the negative messages perpetuated by society, resulting in feelings of shame regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity... They may become depressed or highly anxious, turning to alcohol or other drugs to self-soothe and medicate their pain” (Anderson, 2009, p. 42).

*I am happy to report that, somehow, I did not turn to alcohol or other drugs to self-soothe the struggle of accepting or understanding my sexuality. I am grateful that I turned my difficulty into immersing myself fully into school or music. However, I have immense compassion and understanding for individuals who have turned to substances. I am interested to know how this process takes place. I am not sure if individuals consciously decide to turn to substances or if it happens because of environmental factors and through modes of survival. I know that, for me, it was something that never crossed my mind. I hope that further education and acceptance of sexual minority challenges decreases the number of individuals who turn to drugs to self-soothe.*

“The Latino population in the United States is quite diverse, but all subgroups place a high value on close, supportive extended families. The Catholic Church is quite influential, and supports a traditional family structure and condemns homosexuality as a sin. Gender roles in Latino families are relatively rigid, and most families do not discuss sex or sexuality. Men are expected to be virile and hypermasculine, and extramarital relationships are quite common. Traditionally, women are expected to be sexually pure, self-sacrificing, and subservient to men. Latino males have high rates of bisexual behavior, with masculinity associated with the valued penetrator role and a feminine stance associated with the passive, denigrated role of being penetrated (Gonzales & Espin, 1996). According to Gonzalez and Espin, ‘Strong familism, rigid sex roles, religiosity, and sexual silence may combine to strongly stigmatize homosexual behavior in Latino culture, because these factors tend to correlate with measures of homophobia’” (Anderson, 2009, pp. 143-144).

*This reflects many aspects of my experience. Coming from a Latin American family, the Catholic Church was one of the major areas where I spent my time. In many aspects, I think I developed my perspective of the world and of life in general from the lens of the Church. I used to think that the Catholic Church was the only faith that existed. I also believed that it had the “fullness of truth” and that it was really the only way to salvation.*

*How embarrassing! However, when the societal and familial culture endorse such a belief, it is very difficult to think outside of the box when there are not any alternatives to consider. The strong and well-defined gender roles were explicitly distinct in my household. When I was not meeting the expectations for a boy, I suffered the consequences. My parents tried to implement a “training program” where my overly feminine qualities or gestures would be corrected. Unfortunately for them, the program did not work. My parents were open to talking about sex and sexuality for educational purposes. They explained the process, but always pushed for sex until marriage. Any questions related to my sexuality or my identity as a non-heterosexual being were strictly off-limits – not by anything they said, but by their silence.*

Reflection: There are many strengths to this resource. Anderson makes note that substance use disorders in relation to sexual minorities is largely under-examined in clinical literature and professional research. As a result, she provides resources and models regarding a large variety of issues. In particular, when addressing practice with individuals, she brings to light different identity development models that members of the sexual minority community experience. Such information is important for practitioners to know in order to build a strong working alliance (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Cass, 1979). Furthermore, the interventions she highlights are empirically supported treatments – motivational enhancement therapy, contingency management, the matrix model, and community reinforcement. In addition, Anderson discusses how internalized homophobia, alienation, poor support structures, and high levels of depression contribute to substance abuse and why specialized research is required (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

Balsam, K. F., Martell, C. R., & Safren, S. A. (2006). Affirmative cognitive-behavioral therapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. In P. A. Hays & G. Y. Iwamasa (Eds.), *Culturally responsive cognitive-behavioral therapy: Assessment, practice, and supervision* (pp. 223-244). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Description: Balsam, Martell, and Safren discuss the importance of culturally sensitive, affirmative CBT in treating lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. They provide a list of relevant terminology, developmental issues and challenges specific to the sexual minority

community, discuss sexual minorities in therapy, as well as the strengths and limitations of CBT with this population. Last, they provide two case studies that illustrate two CBT interventions: imaginal exposure and cognitive restructuring.

#### Significant Quotations:

“Unlike people of ethnic and cultural minorities whose families typically share their minority status, LGB individuals often grow up in a household that lacks LGB role models and in which gender norms for behavior are enforced...Another distinguishing feature of this group is that unlike many other minorities, LGB people have the option of concealing or disclosing their stigmatized status. The process of becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation and disclosing this to others is referred to as *coming out*. It is important to understand that coming out is a continuous process over the life span, as LGB individuals negotiate their identities and decisions about disclosure on a day-to-day basis” (Balsam et al., 2006, p. 225-226).

*The first portion of this quotation makes me a little bit sad. Reading this basically provided language to my experience growing up. Because I belong to an ethnic minority as well, I know what it is like to be prepared to enter a society that may not be as welcoming or accepting of different ethnicities through the support my parents provided. While I did not enjoy these conversations with my parents, I appreciated them as they helped me to know that I was not alone. Not having sexual minority role models around as I was growing up made my adolescent experience really lonely. I did not know what being gay would mean in my life. I did not know that there were so many gay people to start with and I certainly did not know that there were so many gay people who were happy, enjoying their lives, and who did not have a problem with being gay. I simply did not know that people liked being gay. Furthermore, although I made every effort possible to try to conceal my sexuality, it is not something that I could do successfully. My peers often made fun of me and because I had not disclosed my sexuality to my family, I suffered this tormenting alone. As an adult, I have been in control of what I disclose. Although people perceive my homosexuality, most of the time, it is not something I have to discuss unless I choose to.*

“LGB adults are more likely to attend psychotherapy and take psychiatric medications than their heterosexual counterparts. This finding may be due to a number of factors, including cultural acceptance within LGB communities of therapy and the self-exploration and personal growth associated with the sexual identity formation process” (Balsam et al., 2006, p. 226).

*I chose this as a significant quotation because I feel disappointed that my counselling program barely addressed sexuality concerns. Some professors mentioned that the majority of programs in both counselling and medicine are not addressing care of sexual minorities. However, admitting the lack of training is not really that helpful. I hope that in the future, I can contribute to developing curriculum that addresses working with*

*sexual minorities. I am also a little bit worried that the lack of training will result in harmful responses to sexuality concerns by my current cohort colleagues. While I think that most of them are inclusive and sensitive to multicultural issues, many of them do not recognize their heterosexual bias and its effects on sexual minorities.*

“Key to LGB affirmative therapy is the assessment of the role of sexual orientation in the presenting problem” (Balsam et al., 2006, p. 229).

*Because the majority of counsellors working with sexual minorities are heterosexual, many make the assumption that they will be most concerned with accepting their sexuality. While this may be true, it is not always the case. Sexual minorities are still human beings with various problems that can surface through depression and anxiety arising from other reasons. As with all clients, I think that it is crucial to ensure that a thorough intake interview has been made, in order to best meet the needs of every individual.*

Reflection: This chapter highlights several key points when working with sexual minorities. When addressing terminology, the authors make a special note that terms such as sexual orientation and sexual identity may not be universally applicable to all cultural backgrounds. For example, for Native Americans, the term “two-spirit” is used; for African-American men, they may be living “on the down low;” and some Latino men who have sex with men as the active partner may not consider themselves to be homosexual. This is important as it emphasizes the need to clarify how the client sees him/her-self (Rosario et al., 2004). In addition, the authors make reference to the fact that coming out is a continuous process over the life span, as sexual minorities edit their day-to-day lives and make varying decisions about disclosure depending on external circumstances (Balsam et al., 2005).

Diamond, G. M., Diamond, G. S., Levy, S., Closs, C., Ladipo, T., & Siqueland, L. (2012). Attachment-based family therapy for suicidal lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents: A treatment development study and open trial with preliminary findings. *Psychotherapy, 49*(1), 62-71. doi: 10.1037/a0026247

Description: The goal of this article was to adapt attachment-based family therapy (ABFT) for use with suicidal lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents and to obtain

preliminary data on the feasibility and efficacy of the treatment with this population.

Basing its study on the ABFT theoretical foundation, researchers attempted to see if the effects of ABFT to rapidly and intensively improve trust and safety in the adolescent-parent attachment relationship could be replicated for sexual minorities. Working with clients for one year, researchers increased the amount of time spent with parents alone to help them reconcile their religious beliefs with their child's sexual orientation, address fears about disappointing or being rejected by their own family of origin or community, and address concerns for their child's welfare.

#### Significant Quotations:

“In contrast, when parents accept their youth's LGB orientation as an integral and valued aspect of their child, they validate and are positioned to support, guide, and advocate for their child as she or he negotiates the challenges of growing up with a minority sexual orientation” (Diamond, 2012, p. 63).

*I could not agree more with this statement. As an adult, I am still looking for my parents' validation and acceptance of my sexuality. They have never explicitly rejected me. They have always gone out of their way to ensure that I knew that I felt loved. However, their initial reactions to my sexuality were not accepting. They made it seem that being gay was a curse – that it was something that was their fault and that it could be fixed. Although they have made progress in their own journey regarding accepting my sexuality alongside their religious beliefs, their acceptance is conditional. They accept my sexuality as long as I remain single and do not experience all the aspects of life they get to naturally enjoy because of their heterosexuality. While they experience the joys and struggles of marriage, they stubbornly refuse to welcome even the idea of a relationship in my life. As such, I am often left feeling disappointed and hurt by their comments. I do not understand why they want such a lonely and difficult life for their child. They often talk about how one of their biggest concerns for me has been understanding what being gay would mean in my life. How would I be treated? Would I be physically abused? Would people accept me? The irony in their comments is that I have been severely hurt emotionally by their ignorant responses more so than the bullying I have experienced from peers, colleagues, and/or students. Other people do not have access to my narrative the way my parents do. I have explicitly shared how difficult being gay has been for me in a Catholic, Latin American home. I realize that it is my way of begging for their validation and acceptance. I have come to realize, though, that such acceptance is perhaps impossible. They are victims of heterosexist, Catholic rhetoric and socialization, and at this point, I think I simply have to be happy with the fact that they didn't kick me out of their lives.*

“LGB adolescents are at higher risk for suicidal ideation and attempts than their heterosexual peers. This study, to the best of our knowledge, was the first to examine a treatment specifically designed for, and administered to, suicidal LGB youth. Results of the treatment development phase suggest that substantial time is required alone with parents to help them work through their own fears, disappointment, shame, and anger associated with their child’s sexual orientation. Only after working through these emotions did we find that parents were able to empathize with their child’s plight and become available to hear and attend to their child’s attachment concerns and needs” (Diamond, 2012, p. 67).

*A few years ago, I almost committed suicide. I have often had suicidal ideation throughout various stages in my life. When I realized that I was gay as a teenager, I remember feeling the pressure of what that meant as I went to sleep each night. At that point, I had decided that I would have to take this horrible, damning secret to my grave. There was no way that I could ever tell my family because being gay was the worst possible thing that could happen to a person. This eventually turned into wanting to die. I didn't want to deal with the alienation or with the pressure of being different anymore. I didn't want to deal with the hushed conversations and whispers behind my back. “Is Ricardo gay?” “He has to be gay. There is no other explanation.” I still don't want to deal with having to defend my right to simply be who I am without shame. It is so annoying to consistently defend myself to my parents, my Catholic friends, and society in general. How lucky heterosexuals are to have such a position of power and judgment – they can sit back and take their time in deciding whether or not they are okay with me being gay. If only I had a choice!*

Reflection: Sexual minority adolescents often experience alienation and fear of rejection from their families. This can sometimes extend the coming out process and increase the negative effects of self-loathing and denial (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Therefore, developing a treatment plan that helps alleviate the parent-child tension through the coming out process is crucial. As the study suggested, these are preliminary results and further research is required with larger samples.

Finnegan, D. G., & McNally, E. B. (2002). *Counselling lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender substance abusers: Dual identities*. San Francisco: The Haworth Press.

Background: The overarching goal of this resource is to address the needs of sexual minorities who are substance abusers. Authors address language problems when referring to sexual minorities, provide background information and terminology, examine

counsellor competence, societal prejudice and oppression, and suggest direct treatment plans when developing a positive identity.

#### Significant Quotations:

“It is important to keep in mind the tremendous diversity among lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people. The range of diversity is as great as it is among the non-LGBT population. Therefore, it is inaccurate to refer to or view someone as *the* lesbian, *the* gay man or *the* bisexual or *the* transgendered person. Each person must be regarded as a unique individual, distinct from all others in his or her group” (Finnegan & McNally, 2002, p. 5).

*I love this quotation. Some of my Catholic friends have often made comments about their fears of me falling into the “gay culture.” As a gay person, I would like to know what the gay culture is. Is there a manual? I sure hope so because, so far, I have not seen it. I am assuming that they are referring to a life that includes irresponsible drug use and sexual activity. I was a victim of such thinking previously. After all, the only gay characters or individuals I knew behaved in such a manner. However, I don’t fit the criteria. I have learned that there are all types of gay people and that I am not going to like every gay person just because they are gay. I am glad that my own personal prejudices and stereotypes are being erased. Such awareness is providing me with hope.*

“In this heterosexist, homo/bi/transphobic society, LGBT people are subjected to much bad treatment, ranging from verbal to physical harassment and abuse. In this racist, Eurocentric society, people who belong to a racial or ethnic minority are subject to oppressions ranging from subtle attitudes to blatant insults, from verbal to physical assaults. If a person belongs to both a racial/ethnic and a sexual/gender identity minority, he or she is the target of double, triple, or multiple oppressions” (Finnegan & McNally, 2002, p. 68).

*I often feel out of place wherever I am. I’m either too White for some Latin American people or not White enough for Caucasians. Plus, the gay factor interferes with many people accepting me as a friend. I was bullied a bit when I first moved to Canada because I could not communicate very well. My grasp of the English language was so limited; I was forced to rely on another student who spoke Spanish and English. However, that student did not always translate my words accurately. I think he enjoyed the power he had over me. For some people, my accent or the colour of my skin is a barrier that they cannot get over. As such, I have experienced the effects of prejudice in my life as a student and teacher. People, upon first meeting me, do not take me seriously or do not consider me to be a credible human being with any valuable degree of intelligence. For some, being gay automatically inhibits them from accepting me into their lives. They cannot understand it, and therefore, they completely avoid entering into any form of dialogue.*

Reflection: Sexual minorities are frequently unrecognized and underserved populations regarding substance abuse that are specific to them and that need to be understood by clinicians (Anderson, 2009). It is important to recognize that when working with sexual minority substance abusers, counsellors must have an awareness of multiple factors such as sexuality, addiction, trauma, physiology, social and religious morals, and cultural attitudes. Encouraging this self-awareness in practitioners is important as they may cause more harm to sexual minority groups if not explored (McAuliffe, 2005).

Kort, J. (2008). *Gay affirmative therapy for the straight clinician: The essential guide*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Description: This is a comprehensive resource where the author combines theoretical research along side his personal practice and personal experiences as a member of the sexual minority community. Kort describes gay affirmative therapy, what it is like to grow up gay or lesbian, covert cultural sexual abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder from growing up lesbian or gay, developmental insults, coming out, and helping families of lesbians and gays. The text provides a glossary of terminology for those not familiar with the sexual minority community and also provides various stages or models specific to this population, including identity formation, grief and loss, disclosure, and dating.

Significant Quotations:

“Historically, lesbians and gays were told that their only salvation was to seek good psychotherapy and that they really had to *want* to change. If they weren’t highly motivated, they were told, psychotherapy would fail, condemning them to a life plagued by depression that would ultimately end in suicide” (Kort, 2008, p. 1).

*Because of my religious background, I, unfortunately, have a lot of experience with these kinds of comments. My aunt, who works as a school counsellor, once told me that every gay individual she knows who chooses to live the “gay lifestyle” suffers tremendously and lives miserably. Because I care about her, I choose to hold my tongue. If I had the freedom to speak to her candidly, I would love to ask her what she suggests I do. It is shocking to me that she would speak to me in such a harsh manner. I wonder if she thinks*

*those comments are helpful, but deep down, I cannot help but think that she is purposefully being cruel in an attempt to force me to change.*

“Reparative therapy asserts that gay men weren’t adequately taught how to behave as boys, and lesbians weren’t taught how to be girls. It holds that gay individuals can be “changed” to become straight by eliminating homosexual desires. The male and female ideals touted by these therapies are sexist and outdated. Making people with homosexual desires ashamed for being the “kind” of male or female they are is a form of covert sexual abuse” (Kort, 2008, p. 55).

*The aunt I wrote about previously is also a firm believer in reparative therapy. In fact, she brought me a book that suggested multiple areas or places I could go to in order to receive such helpful treatment. It enrages me to know that my parents also feel I should attend such “camps” or “healing centres.” However, I am so happy to read that the majority of credible psychological and psychiatric associations reject and disapprove of such forms of “therapy.” I am happy to read that I have been a victim of covert sexual abuse. I am not happy to have gone through those kinds of experiences, but I am pleased to know that my aunt and my parents are wrong in their thinking.*

Reflection: One of the strengths of this resource is the author’s personal experience with the various factors influencing sexual minorities today. Consequently, he makes a strong case for exploring individual biases or stereotypes that may exist in counsellors. He provides a self-reflection questionnaire, addresses myths about the sexual minorities, and briefly explores antigay therapists and therapies. This is an important point as many professional organizations do not classify homosexuality as disordered and clinicians should consider ethical dilemmas before encountering this population.

Savage Love. (2010-2012). *It gets better project*. Retrieved from

<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>

Description: The *It Gets Better Project* website is meant to encourage youth, as they struggle with the various aspects of growing up as a sexual minority. The website is most commonly known for the hundreds of videos that have been posted by sexual minority adults and couples who share their experiences of what it was like to be a sexual minority as an adolescent, and more importantly, to share how much their lives have changed for the better. Many times,

these individuals will talk about how they now have families and many friends who accept and love them. In addition, many heterosexual allies share their experiences of support towards sexual minorities. Ultimately, the goal of this website is to reduce suicide among sexual minority youth.

#### Significant Quotations:

“I remember sitting in my bedroom when I was younger, laying on my bed and just feeling this dread in my chest, like knowing someday I have to tell my family or I have to tell somebody. And that alone was enough to terrify me.”

“I grew up at the dinner table, hearing conversations about how gay people should die of AIDS, how gay people were less than straight people. And it really caused me to not feel very safe at home. And at the same time I didn’t really feel safe at school either.”

“There were days where I was pretending to be sick because I was too afraid to go to school.”

“So the thing about things getting better is it doesn’t just happen once. Like it’s not one day you wake up and go, ‘oh my God, things are better.’ Things keep getting better over and over, and in really small ways. Things got better the first time I said to myself, ‘okay, I admit it. I’m gay.’ Like that was a huge step. Things got better the first time I told a friend, and now just somebody else other than me knew.”

“All through high school I knew I was gay but I hid it from everyone. I told myself that I’d kill myself after my parents were dead because I didn’t want to break their heart.”

“I would go to bed at night and I would pray to God that I wasn’t gay.”

“It just seems like so much control to give really ignorant people who don’t actually care that much about you. In a lot of cases, you’re caring more about their opinion than they’re caring about you.”

“I went through a really deep depression feeling that I wouldn’t be loved by my family anymore.”

“If you’re a parent out there and you’re watching this, talk to your kid. Just love them. Tell them everyday that you love them. That’s why I was able to come out.”

“But as you grow you realize that being gay is a part of who you are and what makes you unique and what makes you great. You realize that it is something you don’t want to let go of.”

*Although a book of the many stories of sexual minority adults and straight allies has been compiled, I decided to take quotations from the website that spoke personally to me. I came across this site a few years ago when bullying and youth suicide in the sexual minority community took the media spotlight in the United States. Although the website targets teenagers, I had never come across so many happy stories regarding the gay community. I did not even know that so many “out” gay people existed. I didn’t know that gay people lived such normal lives in so many different places. I simply assumed I would have to live in Vancouver or Toronto to find people like me. Some of the individuals from the videos live in extremely rural locations. This made me think that if individuals are secure in their identity, they can live wherever they want, regardless of the social conscience. In addition, these videos exposed me to the diversity in the gay community. It opened my eyes to see that being gay is not just about being a stereotype. I saw gay couples with children, couples who are accepted by their families, and people who were generally very happy with their lives. It gave me hope.*

Reflection: This is an important resource to be aware of especially when working with sexual minority youth who are struggling to come out to their family and friends, and who perhaps live in rural areas where there may be less exposure to non-heterosexual identities. One of the valuable recommendations researchers make is to provide sexual minority youth with role models who have been through a similar process and/or experience (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). This website is a possible tool that can begin the process of self-acceptance and hope for the future. Obviously, this is not an academic, well-researched source. It is more of a tool that is implicitly supported by the literature. The number of hits to the site, plus the amount of people wanting to submit videos, suggest that individuals have positive stories to share.

Super, J. T., & Jacobson, L. (2011). Religious abuse: Implications for counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. *Journal of LGBT issues in counseling*, 5(3-4), 180-196. doi:10.1080/15538605.2011.632739

Description: This article examines the importance religion plays in the lives of many individuals, including sexual minorities. It explores that many may approach their religious groups or organizations when dealing with coming to terms with a homosexual identity. However, a gay-affirmative approach may not be exhibited, leading an

individual to experience abuse or further negative thoughts and feelings about sexuality. The article goes on to explore the differences between religion and spirituality and how they are not necessarily interchangeable. Furthermore, it explores how a religious divide exists between congregations regarding their positions on homosexuality. The article addresses how religious abuse can affect individuals by negatively damaging their self-esteem, by stifling their journey towards a positive identity and self-acceptance through cementing a belief that they are evil and unlovable, and by leading individuals to develop anger towards religious institutions. The article concludes with implications for counsellors by providing guidelines that help sexual minorities overcome religious abuse using a spiritual framework.

#### Significant Quotations:

“Religion is often the place an LGBT individual may turn to understand and navigate their sexual orientation identity development. However, religious abuse may occur when a religious group or leader, whether intentionally or unintentionally, uses coercion, threats, rejection, condemnation, or manipulation to force the individual into submission of the religious views about sexuality. The abuse may result in great harm for the victim by causing low self-esteem, guilt, shame, spirituality loss, substance abuse, or thoughts of suicide” (Super & Jacobson, 2011, p. 180).

*When I first came out to my family, my mother naturally directed me to the Catholic Church. In her life, the Church has been an amazing grace. It was a place she could go to for comfort, support, guidance, and community. Therefore, I know that her suggestion to pick up my cross and follow Him did not come from a bad place. After all, that is what she has done her entire life and it has certainly bore fruit. In many aspects, I, too, can say that my relationship with the Catholic Church has been a fruitful one. It was a place where I could belong. My sexuality was not often questioned there, and I had the opportunity to develop strong friendships. However, immersing myself in the Church, when I was trying to figure out what it meant to be gay, has been the biggest mistake of my adult life. By obeying my mother, I ultimately set myself up to be burned at the stake. The overwhelming, destructive inner narratives I have unfortunately memorized are a result of my experiences with the Church. “Gay people are sick.” “Gay people need to be loved and accepted, but we can never embrace their lifestyle.” “You’re going to get AIDS.” “Any gay people I know who live their lives openly live miserably.” I have more statements, but I think those get my point across. It is not surprising that I have incredibly*

*low self-esteem, an abundance of guilt, shame, and thoughts of suicide, and confusion regarding where to go to find God. I am a spiritual orphan.*

“When an individual is in a situation that leaves that individual feeling overwhelmed, confused, or at a loss of control they often turn to a higher power, a sacred source, or their religion for guidance, assistance, and support. When individuals find guidance or support from their religion it can create curative effects such as decreased anxiety, increased self-esteem, or greater integration of their sexual and religious identities. However, when the individual encounters condemnation, rejection, or guilt, the person may develop psychological distress regarding their religious beliefs or about their spirituality. Furthermore, LGBT individuals often experience this rejection and judgment, also referred to as religious abuse, leaving them feeling hopeless, confused, and condemned” (Super & Jacobson, 2011, p. 180-181).

*This sums up my experience very well. In other circumstances in my life, such as losing my cousin to cancer or moving to other parts of the world, I turned to God and my Catholic faith for guidance and comfort. When I was initially trying to accept my sexuality, I turned to the Church. Unfortunately, in this situation, it ended up destroying my self-worth and self-esteem. It increased my psychological distress way more than I could have ever thought. I am still suffering from the abuse in my inner dialogue. However, I am hopeful that I can reconcile my religious or spiritual identity with my sexuality.*

“The traditional family is at the heart of conservative Christianity, and similar religious groups view the acceptance of same-sex relationships as a threat to core family values” (Super & Jacobson, 2011, p. 183).

*I don't understand this. I know many people who believe this statement. I am a gay man and I strongly believe in core family values: love, respect, care, fellowship, support, community, unity. How can my personal relationship with another man threaten core family values? Am I going to go door to door destroying heterosexual marriages by being gay? I just don't understand.*

“The confusion over sexual identity development can seem ambiguous and is often denied or hidden. Thus, the condemning messages from religious groups and leaders affect LGBT individuals beyond their cognitive processes to their core beliefs in defining human experiences. The view religion takes on sexuality often leaves LGBT individuals distant from their God with uncertainty on how to navigate the philosophical divide between their religious and sexual identities” (Super & Jacobson, 2011, p. 184).

*I think this is an important quotation. I have made significant progress in building a positive identity in the last few years. However, I am not sure if I will ever be able to fully let go of the fear I have of going to hell because of my sexual orientation. I am no longer willing to let that fear stop me from living well as an openly gay man. But in the back of my mind, I cannot help but wonder what will happen to me when my time comes to leave*

*this world. The religious rhetoric that dominated my childhood discourse is something I am not sure I will be able to forget or erase.*

Reflection: This is an important article because many LGBT individuals experience painful memories or rejection from their religious communities (Yip, 1997). The article provides a specific model to work through this type of abuse. It seeks to identify and name the abuse; it assists clients in defining their sexuality within a spiritual framework, and it helps alleviate the conflict and symptoms through specific techniques.

### **Summary, Considerations, and a Call for Research**

Developing a positive identity can be a difficult task to accomplish for some sexual minorities, as there are many barriers along the way. The literature examining sex, gender, social construction, patriarchy, homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism is extensive. Being part of a society and culture that is sometimes inflexible and strict leads some sexual minorities to experience various obstacles. Identity formation and development in the face of stigma, fearing rejection from family, peers and the education system, as well as being more prone to mental and physical health risks can make achieving a positive identity a long, exhausting journey. Nonetheless, it is certainly possible.

Despite the obstacles, attitudes are changing and for the first time in history, gay men are experiencing ever increasing amounts of tolerance and acceptance in many countries throughout the world (Alderson, 2002). Same-sex marriage is becoming legal, same-sex couples can adopt children in certain places, and there are openly sexual minority role models emerging in the media and public life. Further, Canada now has a cable television station dedicated to the sexual minority community, conservative Alberta wrote sexual orientation into its Human Rights Legislation, and the Canadian military

allows openly gay personnel to join the forces. Still, beyond the Western world, gay individuals are still fighting to change global attitudes that respect diversity and equality (Alderson, 2002).

Most of the studies used for this review had one major limitation: its samples were based heavily on White populations (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Berlan et al., 2010; Blackburn, 2007; Omizo, Omizo, & Okamoto, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Strickland, 1995; Worthen, 2012). Few studies included ethnic/racial similarities and differences, where aspects of identity formation, coming out obstacles, and attitudes toward sexual minorities were explored (Rosario et al., 2004). As such, I am unsure how a positive identity develops when considering gay men from other ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, I found very few qualitative studies (Mishna et al., 2009) where bullying regarding sexual minorities was explored. Consequently, this research has three main goals:

1. to provide qualitative knowledge of experiences to inform the development of emerging teaching and counselling interventions regarding ethnic and sexual minority populations;
2. to investigate the lived experiences, narratives, perceptions of Latin American gay men and;
3. to qualitatively contribute voices and narrative data to the vast number of quantitative studies on sexual minorities in the research literature.

In Chapter Three, an overview of the culture-infused research lens, as well as characteristics of qualitative methods used to explore the stories of Latin American gay men, is presented. Information regarding the interview, transcription, and storying processes will be explored, along with underlying theories and ethical considerations.

## Chapter Three: Research Lens, Method, and Data Analysis

### Culture-Infused Research

Because of the nature of this study, I wanted to take special consideration in defining what I have understood regarding how to conduct culture-infused research. I believe that it is crucial to make known the lens from which I am reading, evaluating, and selecting the most appropriate research methods, how I will attempt to build culturally sensitive relationships, and how I will view data through the lens of culture. This is important, as it will directly affect how I interpret the data, engage in the writing process, and identify and implement potential benefits of the research (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

**What is Culture?** Culture can be a difficult term to define. When I think of my own experiences with culture, I feel it is often associated with birthplace, as I am consistently asked from where I am originally. When I disclose that I was born in El Salvador, individuals usually respond that it is wonderful to have a different cultural perspective in their midst, as if the colour of my skin automatically produces distinctive insight. Yet, culture includes demographic variables such as age, gender, and place of residence; it can include variables such as social, educational, and economic background, formal and informal affiliations, and ethnographic variables of nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion (Pederson, 2000). I prefer to prescribe to this broad definition of culture in my personal interaction with others. Furthermore, Diller (2007) argues that culture may be used as the lens in which life is perceived and that each culture, regardless of its similarities and differences, generates a phenomenologically different experience of reality. As a student of post-modern therapies, this informs the idea that, when I listen to people's stories, I am more interested in the nuances in their construction of the world

than in evaluating the extent to which such constructions are true in representing an external reality (Neimeyer, 2009). Because every individual is unique, every person can be considered to have her or his own culture; consequently, every interaction can be seen as a multicultural event (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011).

Like any human being, I bring a variety of attitudes, values, biases, beliefs, behaviours, and culturally learned assumptions to every interaction. As a counsellor, I have learned that it is my ethical responsibility to provide professional services that demonstrate respect for the cultural worldviews, values, and traditions of culturally diverse clients, which includes every individual with whom I work (Corey et al., 2011; Sinclair & Pettifor, 2001). In turn, it is important that culturally appropriate research be conducted so that counselling professionals can better understand and serve the populations that they serve. Like every counselling interaction, all research is a cultural endeavor and ethically sound research is culturally infused (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

**Cross-Cultural Research.** Offet-Gartner (2010) asserts that, traditionally, cross-cultural research has been defined as research conducted by a member of a dominant cultural group with and about members of a non-dominant cultural group. Subsequently, some research with non-dominant populations is inaccurate, insensitive, and not overly practical for the people it studies, as it followed the assumption that research can and should be unbiased. The notion that researchers need to be objective should be discarded and replaced with an acknowledgement that researchers must declare their cultural selves and biases (Offet-Gartner, 2010; Parker, 2004).

The suggestion that researchers should acknowledge their biases stems from the reality that the dominant cultural group, which has administered the majority of

counselling research, belongs to an elite body, whom share an unearned privilege (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Collins & Arthur (2010b) suggest that the inherent unearned privilege this group holds includes the pervasive and both overt and covert ways in which European, male, heterosexual, able-bodied Canadians experience advantages, opportunities, entitlements, and immunities. They are bestowed dominance and control, and are positioned at the top of the economic, political, and social hierarchy, often without conscious awareness or acknowledgement (Collins & Arthur, 2010b). Research that does not examine privilege is limited in its applicability, causes misconceptions, and has, in the past, been used in damaging ways. Moreover, the danger with research that is founded in a lack of cultural awareness is that the knowledge and interventions developed as a result may further affirm and perpetuate oppression through racism, unjust stereotypes, and hatred (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

**Whose Voice?** Perhaps the greatest apprehension of who conducts cross-cultural research is the question of whose voice is represented within the study (Offet-Gartner, 2010). A significant problem emerges when only a few individuals are studied and what is learned is then applied to all who hold similar membership. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that no single voice represents any group and any attempt to minimize individual people to a definitive list is unethical (Offet-Gartner, 2010). bell hooks's (1990), a feminist, social activist, whose name is deliberately written in lower case letters, indicates that voice and research shed light onto the danger of not paying attention to how participants' voices are represented:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it becomes mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself

anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speak subject, and you now at the center of my talk. (pp. 151-152)

In addition to the question of voice, research has quantified and described non-dominant populations' reality but has done little to improve it (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Culture-infused research, as a means of recognizing the centrality of culture in all research, strives to ensure that each step in the research process is reflective of and responsive to the cultural identities and experiences of all stakeholders in the process: researchers, participants, and consumers (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

**Stages of Culture-Infused Research.** Offet-Gartner (2010) suggests six steps that are essential in developing a culture- infused research study. This includes undertaking (a) a broad and inclusive definition of culture, (b) an awareness of one's own cultural identities as a researcher, (c) an understanding of the cultural identities of the researched, (d) an understanding of the historical context of the particular culture, (e) an understanding of the impact of acculturation on the group, and (f) ensuring that the cultural group and individuals involved all benefit from the research. Because I genuinely desire to work from a culturally infused perspective as both a counsellor and researcher, I believe it is valuable to briefly examine my own mindful process as a researcher in the development of this study.

Working from a broad and inclusive definition of culture is not something that poses a challenge for me. I already discussed how I see the term, perhaps from my own position as an ethnic minority. However, this relates closely to the next step, which includes cultural self-exploration. Offet-Gartner (2010) states that such self-exploration involves inquiry into what attitudes, biases, beliefs, and values a researcher holds, where they came from, their salience, and their potential to impact the research project being

contemplated. Lack of awareness impacts the research question one chooses, the methodology and procedure one follows, the mannerism and attitudes displayed towards participants, and the way in which the final product is written (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

Individuals may be curious why I am exploring my own biases when I have already established the fact that I belong to the group I am researching. Unlike the rhetoric that cautions why this type of research is important, I am not a White, heterosexual male who experiences the benefits of unearned privilege. Regardless, this does not excuse me from having my own culture or worldview regarding the gay male, Latin American population.

I come from a family that highly values education. Moving from El Salvador, my parents consistently reminded me to take advantage of the opportunity they had provided for me by living in Canada. In my experience, El Salvador is a Latin American country ruled by appearance and social status. The more education a person has, the better that person is. As such, an educated Salvadoran does not necessarily have to implement basic human decency to those less monetarily fortunate. Even though I am embarrassed to admit this, to a certain extent, I adopted this belief system in my childhood. This elitist attitude is not something of which I am proud, but it is a fact that I have come to accept and be mindful of in my interaction with other people with whom I share my ethnic background.

One might think that once I moved to Canada and started to experience racism from the position of a minority that my attitude would have changed. Unfortunately, when interacting with individuals from the Latin American community, the majority of people came from small villages and lacked education. Once the Latin American community discovered that my family was from a middle class social status back in El

Salvador, few individuals invested time and energy in developing close friendships with us. For me, this resulted in having few Latin American influences in my life. I have one Latin American friend and she often reminds me that I have been *white-washed*.

Growing up in a small community in Alberta, I have experienced more German cultural events than I have from Latin America. I have sometimes said that I forget that I am not White, until others remind me. Nevertheless, I have the tendency to see the majority of Canadian Latin Americans as being lazy, uneducated, disrespectful, unable to learn the English language, and as the main reason as to why I have to work twice as hard to disprove stereotypes from members of the dominant culture. I am not saying this is true, but it is my own personal observation of how members of the dominant culture spoke about Latin Americans as I grew up.

In terms of Latin American male homosexuality, what I heard and saw from my immediate and extended family influenced my opinions. Gay males are often considered to be females, or at least, they give the impression that they want to be women. They dress in women's clothing and taunt straight males any chance they get. Even now, when I encounter Latin Americans and they discover I am gay, some will say that they are surprised by my normalcy. When I ask them to elaborate on what they mean, it is often followed with arguments about my relatively masculine clothing or the fact that I am not making moves on every man I see. Although, I have never agreed with this idea of male homosexuality, I know that I have seen this type of representation of homosexuals when I have visited Latin America, either on TV or on the side of the road.

The point of this acknowledgement is to bring forth the possibility that even though I belong to the group I am studying, I am afraid my childhood negative attitudes

might emerge and that participants may perceive my possible discomfort. Furthermore, I am afraid that, as in past interactions with Latin Americans, participants will recognize my abated pride for my ethnic background. My hope is that, by being mindful, I can add new experiences of how I see Latin Americans and learn more about how I can integrate that part of my identity into my life amidst some privileged White Canadians. By my own example, it is clear that cultural similarity does not guarantee objectivity or true representation when it comes to research findings, as researchers may, in fact, be too close or too far to see the significance of everyday nuances or accepted practices. They may also believe that they need to protect information that they gather, or their participants may feel they are not as free to disclose certain information for fear of reprisal, recrimination, or loss of confidentiality (Offet-Gartner, 2010). It is my intention to address these possibilities should they arise in my interactions with participants.

The next stage of using a culture-infused lens invites researchers to develop an understanding of the worldviews of those with whom they intend to study (Offet-Gartner, 2010). I have been able to examine this step through both informal and formal means. Informally, I have had conversations with family members and their friends about life in Latin America, as well as being able to travel and spend time in Mexico, El Salvador, and Peru. This has easily taught me that there is no such thing as a universal Latin American culture. There may be some similarities, but there are various distinctions from what it means to be Mexican, Salvadoran, or Peruvian. In addition, if I focus on one Latin American country, Peru, there are immense differences in the worldviews of individuals from mountainous villages versus the rainforests of the South versus the citizens who live in the upscale district of Miraflores in Lima. Formally, I explored the work of various

researchers as presented in the literature review to develop an understanding of masculinity and the Latin American heteronormative and gay culture. However, ultimately, there is no single conclusive set of rules or values that can be utilized to guide the researcher in understanding exactly what constitutes the Latin American culture; homogeneity in any culture is more myth than reality (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

The fourth culture-infused research step is to learn about the realities of that culture's history (Offet-Gartner, 2010). How has and is it being treated locally, nationally, and globally? In addition to informal conversations, similar to those I had in learning about worldviews, I investigated the work of Prevost & Vanden (2011) to gather information regarding Latin America's early history, society, religion, culture and thought, political economy, revolution, social, and political movements, as well as democracy and authoritarianism. At the same time, however, I took caution when exploring this material by reading it with a critical and enquiring mind, remembering that history has often been written to serve the needs of the powerful and dominant group (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Hence, my informal conversations assisted me in going as close to the margins as much as I could considering the people and resources available to me, which led me closer to the lived experiences of those I am seeking to understand (Offet-Gartner, 2010). The informal conversations enabled me to gain stories of the history, as well as the stereotypes and myths of various groups, along with a willingness to address them, to hear the experience of them, and discuss their impact with participants if they arise. Not taking this step would be similar to condoning and repeating the oppression and injustice this community may have encountered historically, even if the intent is not there (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

The fifth step in culture-infused research includes the concept of acculturation, which is the process by which one culture may be affected by another (Offet-Gartner, 2010). I believe this step will be challenging and essential, as I will be exploring the lives of Latin Americans immersed in Canadian culture. However, as it has already been made clear, acculturation will be varied depending on whether participants have lived in a metropolitan city, such as Toronto or Vancouver versus small communities in Alberta or Newfoundland. Ascertaining the impact of acculturation directly from each participant will be the most appropriate choice to make (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

The sixth and final culture-infused step, and perhaps that most important, is to consider how the study group involved will benefit in a tangible way (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Selfishly, it would be much easier if I just completed this work with the sole purpose of meeting the requirements for my Master's thesis. Yes, that is important! However, I do believe that my research must serve for more than just fulfillment of the researcher's agenda. As such, I hope that the collaborative conversations I had with participants will inform how the Latin American gay community will be able to reap the benefits of this work in sustainable and obtainable ways. It is important to examine and change the systems and discourses within which we function, especially if individuals are experiencing harm or are excluded from discussions because they are deemed unimportant (Offet-Gartner, 2010). The goal of qualitative methods is to work collaboratively with research participants to improve the quality of their everyday experiences (Chase, 2011).

## **Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research uses text, among other data, as empirical material instead of numbers. It starts from the notion of the social construction of realities under study, and is interested in the perspectives of participants in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the research question being explored (Flick, 2007). Support for using qualitative rather than quantitative methods for cross-cultural research is extremely strong at present (Offet-Gartner, 2010). I am not saying that qualitative methods are better but rather they happen to be more experiential and flexible than experimental or objective methods. Qualitative research allows a focus on relationship, cultural context, and sees participants as the experts in their own experience. In addition, qualitative methods are more constructivist and collaborative which present a greater respect for, and may provide for a truer representation of participants' lived experience. In turn, this can make the findings much more meaningful for the community, as well as those who wish to deliver services to them (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Qualitative research often focuses on change and traces a process, rather than examining patterns of human behaviour or viewing experiences as being fixed (Parker, 2004).

Because counsellors traditionally value their work from a scientist-practitioner model, some psychologists believe that if one is going to study something scientifically, then s/he must have to measure it (Michell, 2004; Parker, 2004). Nonetheless, Harré (2004) argues it is qualitative research that is properly scientific, and that it is only in relation to methodological debates in that strand of work that individuals can start to explore how quantitative research might measure up to it. I am not in a position to enter

that debate, but I do want to outline why I think a qualitative approach is best suited for my particular study.

Harré (2004) and Parker (2004) suggest that there are three main elements that make qualitative research a valid science. First, qualitative methods allows for reflexivity by seriously taking a crucial aspect of the nature of its object of study, human action, and experience. The human being is able to reflect on its behaviour and to engage in second-level reflection on those reflections. This is why the reflexive work of the researcher is also a crucial part of any genuine scientific study and why I have taken the opportunity to present my personal learning and growth as part of this thesis.

Second, the nature of the material that is studied needs to explore its layers of meaning. Qualitative research focuses on the way in which meaningful qualities of the human experience or subjectivity are represented to others. The accounts that people give for what they do may or may not correspond to what they actually think about those things. But the discovery or production of meaning is a necessary aspect of the scientific study of human psychology.

Last, the level of analysis and the claims that are made from work in a particular domain need to be stated with specificity. Qualitative research often engages in intensive case studies that are not directly generalized to populations, or in studies of collective activity that are not directly extrapolated to individual members. The scientific task in this work is to account for specific nature and limits of the account, and for what may be learned from it. Ultimately, the task for qualitative researchers is to consider how to account for the reflexive capacity of human beings, the meaningful nature of the data they

produce, and the way that claims are made about individuals from aggregated descriptions of behaviour from particular populations (Harré, 2004; Parker, 2004).

To investigate the lived experiences, narratives, and perceptions of Latin American gay men, I have selected a qualitative approach that will contribute voices to the available quantitative data. Using a qualitative method will allow the researcher to understand the meaning of the events, situations, and actions that are involved with and of the accounts the participants give of their lives and experiences. It will allow one to understand the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions. It will provide the opportunity to identify unanticipated phenomena and influences. Last, one is able to understand the process by which events and actions take place and potentially develop causal explanations (Maxwell, 1996).

### **Narrative Inquiry and Analysis**

Narrative inquiry is commonly autobiographical in nature. Although some may consider this narcissistic, research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry overview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them. It is a distinct form of discourse, which explores meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience (Chase, 2011). Social constructivism is the fundamental primary base of narrative research (Moen, 2006). Its principles stem from the belief that people grow and develop through social interactions and that society has a continual influence through a person's life. "The aim of the study of narrative meaning is to make explicit the operations that produce its particular kind of meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6).

Narration has become a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves as it appears to yield a form of understanding of the human experience, both individual and collective, that is not directly amenable to other forms of exposition or analysis (Kerby, 1991). Kerby (1991) further suggests that it is generally acknowledged that our understanding of other cultures and persons is primarily gained from, and in the form of, narratives and stories about and by those people. Psychologists who conduct narrative research focus on the relationship between people's stories and their personal well-being or identity development and questioning how narratives make personal growth possible ground the field of narrative therapy (Chase, 2011). Recognizing that historical, cultural, biographical, and social conditions influence the stories people share about themselves, narrative therapists posit that the stories people share affect how they live their lives. The aim of narrative therapy, then, is to help people resolve problems by discovering new ways of storying their situation (Chase, 2011; White 2007). Since I am exploring the lived experiences of gay men from Latin America, with a distinct culture imbedded into Canadian society, this methodological approach will meaningfully extrapolate participants' knowledge.

**Interviews.** Narrative interviewing researchers require emotional maturity, sensitivity, and life experience (Chase, 2011). The way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds shapes the relationship and the ways in which participants respond and give accounts to their experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because stories appear so often within interviews, narratives are considered one of the "natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals attempt to organize and express meaning and knowledge" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 153). In order to uncover participants' stories,

semi-structuring an interview, but treating it as a guide, was the most helpful and useful method to follow their experiences (Chase, 2011).

**Developing Interview Questions.** To develop the semi-structured interview questions, I took into account Pinar's (1994) method of *currere* and Fowler's (2006) eight orbitals of inquiry as an overarching framework. Pinar (1994) suggests exploring the self from a regressive-progressive-analytical-synthetical manner. First, regressive returns to the past to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present; second, progressive looks toward the future in the same sense that the past is always present; third, analytical, which invites conceptualization that detaches from experience for deeper understanding and; last, synthetical, which asks participants to look at oneself concretely, as if in a mirror, and integratively and holistically.

Similarly, Fowler (2006) expands on this framework by looking at the past, the future, and within. The first orbital, *naïve storytelling*, breaks silence by asking individuals to find language to consciously tell an experience, considering specific details, critical incidents, and the outcome as it focusses on what is being told at the elementary story level. Second, *psychological de/re construction* notices the thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions in the story, the teller, and the listener. Third, *psychotherapeutic ethics* pays attention to originary knowledge, epistemologies revealed by the story, ego interests, transference and countertransference, relational patterns and issues around professional ethics and morality. Fourth, *narrative craft* implements an analysis of the elements of craft, structure, language and convention. Fifth, *hermeneutics* looks for messages beneath the surface text, concealment, interpretation, and insight. Sixth, *curriculum pedagogy* invites one to determine what can be learned and known about teaching and learning

through the experience. For the purposes of this study, curriculum pedagogy was adapted to consider the working or therapeutic alliance. Seventh, *poetics of narrative teaching self* seeks truth, justice, freedom, wisdom, and understanding for the self. Last, *restorative education* notices actions of care, healing, social justice, and peace inside diversity.

**Pilot Study.** Pilot studies allow researchers to focus on particular areas of the research design that may have been unclear previously (Janesick, 1998). I had the opportunity to conduct a pilot study using my own personal experience with the help of my thesis supervisor. Once a semi-structured interview was developed, I took the role of participant and went through the entire interview experience. This process was useful, as it allowed me to examine and critique the quality and practicality of the questions, which strengthened the interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Upon reflection of my own experience as an interviewee, I edited and included questions to reflect Pinar (1994) and Fowler's (2006) narrative approaches more closely and to examine Latin American influences, as well as counselling experiences more deeply. The semi-structured interview includes thirty questions, clustered under three categories: feeling different, *coming out*, and positive identity. The majority of the questions are open-ended; the interview guide provided many secondary questions, prompts, or probes that were not asked, as participants disclosed information on their own. Nevertheless, I opted to include those secondary questions to help prompt my own memory and to help me focus during the interview. For a close reading of the semi-structured interview guide, please see Appendix F.

## **Data Collection**

**Ethnography.** All social research is a form of participant observation because researchers cannot study the social world or the social context individuals experience without being part of it (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). Although participant observation is not necessarily a particular research technique, it is a mode of being-in-the-world that characterizes qualitative researchers. In collecting data for this study, I was interested in exploring the nature of positive identity in Latin American gay men instead of setting out to test hypotheses about this specific population. Ethnographical research calls for the investigation of a small number of cases in detail, which involves the explicit interpretation of meanings and functions of human actions, which is essentially collected through verbal descriptions and explanations (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998).

**Case Studies.** Ethnographic case studies, to some extent, parallel actual experience, as it feeds into the most rudimentary processes of awareness and understanding (Stake, 1998). Undertaking a case study is not a methodological choice, but rather, it is a choice to make a concentrated inquiry. In exploring the lives of Latin American gay men, this holistic view that, human dilemmas are situational and influenced by various factors, is appropriate, as I am not interested in making generalizations. I am more concerned about understanding as much about each case as I can by letting each participant tell his own story. I am also aware that as much as I want to give voice to each participant's story, in the end, I, as the researcher, decide what will be reported (Stake, 1998).

**Purposive Sampling.** Finding participants who are willing to share their personal stories can sometimes be a challenging undertaking (Polkinghorne, 2005). It requires

vulnerability and an immense amount of courage, especially since these stories often include painful memories and are shared with a stranger. In order to ensure relevant stories are provided that answer the posed questions, purposive sampling is a common approach used for choosing participants for qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2005).

**Participant Recruitment.** To find Latin American gay men, I e-mailed the Diversity Club or Pride Centre coordinators of thirty-four Canadian universities (Appendix A). This initial contact included information about the purpose of the study, the specific requirements needed to participate in the study, as well as contact information for myself, my thesis supervisor, and the Chair of the Human Subject Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge. Contact information was provided in case anyone had questions and/or concerns. In addition to this e-mail, I asked these centers to consider posting *A Call for Research Participants* (Appendix B) in their office spaces, social media networks, or newsletters. The majority of these clubs and centres replied with positive feedback and willingness to post the call for research participants, but admitted that the ethnic group for which I was looking did not participate in their organizations.

**Participant Selection.** Eventually, four willing participants contacted me via e-mail, which led me to conduct a brief screening interview on the phone that identified and verified they met the requirements for this study (Appendix C). The participation stipulations included having a homosexual orientation, being foreign-born or Canadian-born, but having foreign-born parents, that would have incorporated Latin American cultural implications and experiences throughout his life, as well as being between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. The age of participants was limited because I am most

interested in learning how and why individuals are able to develop a positive identity in the early part of their lives. Further, participants had to self-identify as having a positive identity, which can be defined as: being fully out to his family, and friends, except in the case where it may be dangerous to do so; as being able to deal and cope with homophobia well; and with seeing himself in a positive manner more often than not (Alderson, 2000). In the screening interviewing process, three individuals met the requirements of this study. One individual was in the process of figuring out his non-heterosexual sexual orientation, and for that reason, I excluded him from participation. Once participants were selected, I made arrangements to conduct face-to-face interviews in a safe space of their choice, as the conditions under which the interview takes place also shape the outcome (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

**Interview Process.** Data for this narrative inquiry was collected through semi-structured interviews as well as through observational notes (Appendix G). Before conducting the semi-structured interviews, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and I thoroughly engaged in discussions of informed consent. Each participant signed an informed consent form (Appendix E). In an attempt to build rapport, an interview overview or guidelines handout was collaboratively read, with opportunities given to participants to discuss any concerns or ask any questions (Appendix D). I spent some time with each participant sharing my own experiences to help build comfort and create a more equitable relationship (Chase, 2011). Using a semi-structured interview, I had the flexibility to probe further or clarify questions answered vaguely or in a confusing manner. I implemented basic counselling skills, such as empathic understanding and listening, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity so

that participants felt at ease as much as possible when sharing personal matters candidly. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately two to two and a half hours. This allowed me to patiently encourage participants to explore memories and gain deeper understandings of their experiences (Chase, 2011). During the interview, I wrote observational notes to record my impressions of participants' body language, facial expressions, pace, and visible emotions. I also kept a research journal that tracked various processes of this research, including reflections pre and post interviews, the trips I took to meet participants, what I noticed through transcribing each interview, and through interpreting each transcription (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

Simply interviewing and observing does not guarantee that the research is qualitative, but rather, researchers must also interpret the beliefs, experiences, and behaviours of participants (Janesick, 1998). After I transcribed each semi-structured interview, I began the process of determining how I would present the information gathered. I was most concerned with finding a way of understanding participants' actions, of organizing events into a meaningful whole by connecting and seeing the consequences of those actions and events over time (Chase, 2011).

### **Stories**

“But stories! Stories are the vehicle that moves metaphor and image into experience. Like metaphors and images, stories communicate what is generally invisible and ultimately inexpressible. In seeking to understand these realities through time, stories provide a perspective that touches on the divine, allowing us to see reality in full context, as part of its larger whole. Stories invite a kind of vision that gives shape and form even to the invisible, making the images move, clothing the metaphors, throwing color into the shadows. Of all the devices available to us, stories are the surest way of touching the human spirit.” (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1996, as cited in Alderson, 2000, p. xiii)

Sometimes, we assume that others experience the world from the same point of reference or, in other words, in the same way we do. If this is true, then we can understand each other better. However, I feel this is simply not true and I wanted to pay careful attention to make sure I did not take my own subjectivity for granted (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998). For this reason, I selected to present participants' stories through first person narratives.

**Testimonios.** Chase (2011) suggests that Latin American *testimonios*, as part of the narrative inquiry tradition, serve as emergency narratives that include aspects of poverty, marginality, exploitation, repression, or survival. The voice that reaches out to readers, through the first person point of view, demands to be recognized with a story that requires our attention. Speaking once silenced voices and making those experiences visible for others to consider drives the collection and publication of narratives about many forms of social injustice (Chase, 2011). Latin American gay men have experienced poverty, have been marginalized, exploited, and repressed, and have focused their energy on simply surviving. As such, the stories presented are written in a manner symbolic to *testimonios*.

**Storying Stories.** Placing its practice within a narrative inquiry framework, the process of storying stories draws its principles from the broad areas of feminism, postmodernism, and qualitative research (McCormack, 2004). This procedure uses narrative analysis to gather descriptions of actions and events as data, which are then used to create stories through an emplotment process. In addition, analysis of narrative invites researchers to seek stories as data and then analyze those stories for themes that hold across those narratives. This research process “seeks personal experience stories and

generates stories by composing stories about those experiences” (McCormack, 2004, p. 220). Storying stories explores how individuals make sense of their experience while looking to the wider cultural and social resources in the midst of their everyday lives. It makes the assumption that these understandings are constructed and reconstructed through the stories individuals share (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

After transcribing the interviews of the three Latin American gay men for this study, I adapted McCormack’s process of storying stories.

Table 1. Adapted Summary of McCormack’s Process of Storying Stories

Stages	Steps	Tasks
Stage 1: Construct an interpretive story by composing a personal experience narrative	Step 1: construct a personal experience narrative	Reconnect with the conversation through active listening. View the transcript through multiple lenses: language, context, and moments. Locate the narrative processes in the transcript.
	Step 2: complete the narrative – add a prologue	Compose an orientation and choose the title.
	Step 3: construct an epilogue to close the narrative	Reflect on the personal experience narratives in the light of the research question(s). Add an epilogue to summarize these reflections and close the narrative
Stage 2: Participant feedback and approval	Step 1: Communicate with participant	Return transcript and constructed story to participant for comments and feedback. Respond to participant’s comments. Redraft story based on participant’s comments.

First, I reconnected with each participant and the conversation we shared by actively listening to the audio-recorded interview. While listening, I focused on paying attention to the language participants used. Which phrases did they repeat? Which point of view did they use when sharing their experiences? I took notes of these phrases and words in my research journal. Next, I re-read the transcript and highlighted aspects that reflected feeling different in green, *coming out* in orange, and having a positive identity in yellow. Once these stages were identified in the transcript, I began looking for specific stories that illustrated those moments in their lives. I looked for characters, time, place, setting, and life lessons. For an example of this process, please see Appendix H.

Once I had uncovered several stories from the transcript, I wrote the first person narrative in chronological order to reflect participants' experiences across their lifespan. After the story was completed, I developed a title and wrote a prologue from my point of view to provide context regarding the specific participant and to share what I was thinking and feeling going into the interview. Data for the prologue was completed using my journal entries from my research journal. Following the prologue, I wrote an epilogue to describe my experience of listening to the participant's story in relation to the research question. Last, based on the experiences of each participant, I selected an epigraph from a novel featuring gay men as protagonists to reflect significant moments in a participant's life.

After completing all of these elements, I sent the transcript and story to each corresponding participant (Appendix I). I invited participants to provide feedback regarding the stories in an attempt to give them opportunities to include their respective voices to my interpretation of their lives (Chase, 2011; McCormack, 2004). However,

this was not a mandatory step in participating in this study. Only one participant responded to this invitation and his comments were complimentary in nature; the other two participants opted not to respond.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Completing narrative research and presenting detailed first person narratives presents an ethically complex undertaking. I often struggled to consider how to care for participants' stories and how to share their experiences in meaningful and ethical ways (McCormak, 2004). It is for that reason that I gave participants the option to collaborate and negotiate the final product of their interviews. In retrospect, I would have preferred to make collaboration a mandatory step to participate in this study, as I feel it would have increased the integrity of each story.

This study was approved the Human Subjects and Research Committee of the University of Lethbridge. No identifying information of participants was used in this study. Participants had the opportunity to select a pseudonym, but each declined. Regardless, high regard for confidentiality of their identity was given and I made sure all names of people and places were changed. They were also informed that they could withdraw participation from the research at anytime. Audio-recordings and transcripts will be destroyed as per the University of Lethbridge's Human Subjects Research Committee procedures. Because sharing such personal stories could bring up painful memories, participants were given the contact information of professional counsellors in their area should they require support after their interviews.

In Chapter Four, the storied stories are presented. My own personal story from the pilot study begins the chapter, followed by the stories of each participant in the order each man was interviewed.

## Chapter Four: Storying Stories

This chapter consists of four stories. First, I present my story that was conducted as a pilot study. The storied stories of each participant follow. Each story begins with an epigraph from a sexual minority-themed novel that captures one aspect of the storyteller's experience. In the prologue, I provide a brief context of the speaker and I share my thoughts about how I felt before meeting the corresponding participant. The story middle is written in first person and, with the exception of my own story, it is the account of one of the participants. Finally, the epilogue includes my thoughts post-interview and what I learned from these conversations.

### Ricky's Story

Gay isn't wrong *or* right. It just *is*. What's wrong is hating yourself because of it. You're going to spend more time with yourself than with anyone else in your life. You want to spend that whole time fighting who you are? Do you really think that's what God wants? If she didn't want people to be gay, then why were we born this way?

-Alex Sanchez, *The God Box*

**Prologue.** Standing in the aisles at London Drugs looking for an audio-recorder, I started to have doubts about whether or not going through my thesis interview questions was a good idea. I am deeply interested in hearing other people's stories around positive gay identity and Latin American culture, but I am not so sure if I want to share my own. Regardless, I know that my thesis supervisor is waiting to conduct this pilot interview and I do not seem to be able to move. I know I should not worry, but I am afraid I might cry or lose my composure. Furthermore, I do not know whether or not I want to think back to my own journey as a gay person. I worked extensively hard to bury those memories or to pretend that they did not happen, so bringing them up is foreign territory.

Because of my increasing distress, like always, I begin to pray to try to build a sense of peace and tranquility within me. My supervisor's gentle presence soothes my anxiety, and trying to figure out how to use the surprisingly expensive audio-recorder makes us laugh and settle in. I tell myself to take deep breaths if I need to or that I do not have to express memories that I am not comfortable sharing. More importantly, I tell myself that I made up the questions and that this is an opportunity to see how I can make the interview more effective for my study with my future participants. With that in mind, I feel calm, focussed, and ready for this narrative interview to begin about my own story, not as a researcher, but as a human being.

**From Bearing Crosses to Simply Being.** As I stood on the bridge crying and looking down at the water, something inside me said, "Ricky, you deserve to be happy. You deserve to love and be loved. You deserve to live well." And so, instead of jumping off the bridge and ending my life, I ran home. While running, I could not help but wonder how I had ended up on that bridge that night. What led me to think that committing suicide was my best option?

I was born in Latin America in the middle of conflict and war. Some of my earlier memories include waking up to the noise of gunfire, minor explosions, and helicopters flying over my neighbourhood. Whenever such attacks took place, I knew my parents, my sister, and I would huddle together on one of our beds and pray. I remember my nanny taking my sister and I to a park close to our house. While it was a rare excursion, the fun was abruptly cut short when soldiers and their prisoners occupied the playground. Again, we ran home as fast as we could and begged God to spare us. Not long after that, I saw my first dead body on the street. While electricity and running water were

unreliable, I knew very well that everyone had to obey the government-imposed curfew and be home by 6 p.m. A sense of dependable safety was unknown, but anxiety and fear were daily realities.

The adults in my life were clearly stressed and fatigued by the political turmoil in our country. Although they never expressed their concern to me, their silence spoke volumes. My grandfather never missed the news. Spending so much time at his house, I was familiar with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) as much as a four-year-old could be. I knew that the men and women who were part of the FMLN were responsible for the conflict and that they were cowards who hid their faces behind bandanas or balaclavas. The crimes for which they were blamed and that were explicitly displayed on my grandfather's television haunted my dreams. They lit busses on fire, killed families during the night, and massacred teachers, professors, peasants, and priests. I did not learn about what actually took place between the government sanctioned death squads, the FMLN, liberation theology, or the exploitation of the poor until my third year of university in a history of Latin America course.

In the middle of this communal suffering, the one thing that I vividly remember is learning to put all of my trust, faith, and hope in Jesus. If I was scared, all I had to do was pray for Jesus' body and blood to cover me and I would be safe. When my cousin, Metzti, got cancer when she was ten months old, my immediate and extended family rallied together and prayed even more than before. Now we were praying for the war to end and for Metzti to be healed. We no longer solely went to mass on Sundays, as we started going to different prayer groups based out of the Charismatic Renewal. While my mom attended lectures on the Holy Spirit, my sister and I learned spiritual songs and began to

nurture our personal relationship with Jesus. He was not simply God's son; he could also be my friend. And so, Jesus became my best friend!

All I wanted to do was play church. Every tortilla turned into a host. If I was lucky enough to get the attention of my nannies, it was an opportunity to stand on a podium and preach a homily. When I collected leftover bullet shells from our backyard and played war with my friends, it was another opportunity to take the role of army chaplain. While my friends were violent, heroic soldiers, I went around blessing people performing last rites. When my little brother was born, I promoted myself to bishop and the minute he could walk, I would dress him up as a priest and make him walk in front of me for daily processions of Corpus Christi. Because my parents were immersed in various Catholic and Christian movements, they appreciated and encouraged my priestly imagination. However, there was something particular about my behaviour that they did not welcome and that I did not know how to control.

At age five, I distinctly remember my mother quickly correcting me after running down the street. She took me aside and let me know that little boys do not run with their hands in the air. Apparently, only little girls run like that and I was never to act in such a manner again. As I play that image in my head, all I see is a little boy who was happy and excited to be outside. I never really understood what I had done wrong, but it was clear that whatever it was, it had captivated my mother's attention in a negative light. At the same time, I, too, knew there was something peculiar or different about me. I loved playing with my sister's Barbies, wearing my mother's high heels, and wearing my dad's shirts, so that I could pretend I was wearing dresses. I was not reprimanded for playing in this manner because, even at this age, I knew I had to keep it a secret. If my parents were

away and my sister and I were left with our nannies, I knew I had an opportunity to play without any stress or anxiety of upsetting my parents. Even though I looked forward to these rare opportunities, I also felt deeply embarrassed that I had these ‘girly’ interests.

Moving to Canada at age six, a new layer of shame developed. In this case, I felt immense fear that I could not understand what people were saying around me. I had to rely on a classmate who had moved to Canada from El Salvador a few years earlier. However, despite my non-existent English language skills, I knew that he rarely, if ever, translated my ideas or thoughts accurately to the class. Instead, my peers giggled and mocked me. Consequently, I began resenting the fact that I was Latin American, that I spoke a different language, that the food my mother put in my lunch was unlike my classmates, and that the other Latin American kids in my school were always getting in trouble.

Living in a small city in Southern Alberta, I noticed how some of my teachers looked at me and the other English as a Second Language (ESL) students. These teachers were not rude or unwelcoming necessarily, but I consistently felt that they were annoyed by our presence. I did not want to be part of that annoying group. I wanted to excel in school and so I focused my energy on trying to become as White as I possibly could. I did not know it at the time, but my quest eventually turned into internalized racism. Regardless, removing the ESL label was an easy task; it did not take long for me to learn English and to navigate my way through the various Southern Alberta customs and norms. I quickly became a student leader and someone teachers could trust while still maintaining a likeable and comfortable presence with my classmates.

At ten years old, however, the feminine qualities my parents had pointed out previously, and of which I thought I had concealed and grown out, came into the sharp awareness of my male classmates. Perhaps because we were beginning to move into our adolescence and our grade six health classes focused largely on the differences between boys and girls, my friends felt it was necessary to consistently point out how refined and delicate I was. At the last sleepover birthday party I was invited to, I, like usual, went to bed early. This was not because I was actively choosing to get some rest, but rather, as hard as I tried, I could never stay awake much later than 10 p.m. for most of my childhood – a weakness I disliked. As my friends continued to laugh, play games, and fool around, I woke up in the middle of a conversation focussed around me. “Ricky never breaks any rules.” “He doesn’t like playing soccer with us anymore.” “He’s always hanging out with the girls.” “He sits like a girl.” “He talks like one.” He runs like one.” “He acts like one.” “Maybe he is a girl.” I was mortified. I lay frozen in my sleeping bag and cried as quietly as I could, so that they would not notice I had heard them.

I do not know why I cried. I was definitely not sad. I was not angry or upset with my friends, but I was confused. What was I doing that made me come across like a girl? I knew that I was spending too much time with my female classmates and I was upset that I was not trying hard enough to be like the rest of the boys in my class. I had tried to keep up with them and all of the various sports that they were into; I asked my parents for a hockey stick, a football, a volleyball and even though I had absolutely no interest in watching or playing these sports, at least I had the equipment should the need arise. For the most part, despite my lack of interest, I could still force myself to fit in with these masculine interests. However, at this point, my male friends were starting to look at girls

and talk about them in a way that did not make sense to me. I knew I was supposed to like girls, but I could not relate to the other boys when they talked about wanting to look at our female classmates' 'boobs.' When they asked me which girl I liked, I could answer confidently, but I most certainly did not want to touch her or kiss her or see her naked. I wanted to hear her thoughts and have meaningful conversations – something my male friends disliked and teased me about.

By the end of grade seven, I was also harboring a shameful secret from everyone I cared about in my life. With puberty in full swing, I was getting sexually aroused by the male actors in the movies I was watching. When I watched *Legends of the Fall*, I could not take my eyes off Brad Pitt. I never wanted to be any of the girls that he interacted with, but I did want him or someone like him to hold and kiss me. I did not know if this was normal and I wanted to ask someone if what I was feeling was common. However, I had absolutely no reference point about two men being in love with each other and that being accepted as healthy and ordinary. Was that even possible? To make matters worse, my excitement around male actors was also transferring into my interactions with some of the boys in my class.

Being in junior high, gym classes became gender segregated and I despised going into the change room. It was a perfect unsupervised opportunity for my male classmates to harass me. It was in the boys change room that I first heard the words fag, gay, queer, pussy, cocksucker, homo, fruit, fairy, and so on. The lack of supervision did not matter that much anyways as, Mr. Anderson, my teacher, either joined in with the name-calling or laughed whenever he was around. The verbal abuse was not solely directed at me, but this 'change room talk' spiked my anxiety. During a wrestling warm-up, I remember

being heckled for my proficiency with a medicine ball. My classmates yelled out that it was not surprising I was good at wrestling, as I probably enjoyed touching them.

Eventually, I could not participate in this unit since nobody wanted to be paired up with me. My confusion and embarrassment amplified and my daily conversations with Jesus focussed exclusively on begging Him to fix me.

A glimmer of hope emerged one day when a Christian sexual health educator came to my school. This was the first time I had heard an adult use the word gay, but the only thing she said was that, sometimes boys might think they are attracted to other boys, but that is not part of normal and healthy sexual development. She went on to say that the reality was that a boy who thought he was attracted to another boy simply admired him. I was elated! The whole day I thought about how maybe nothing was wrong with me and that I just admired Brad Pitt and wanted to be like him and the masculine boys in my class. Deep down, however, I knew that could not be the answer, as my feelings seemed more intense than just mere admiration.

Yet another hopeful moment took place when my dad asked me to join him for a ride to the landfill to complete some weekend chores. I had heard my parents talk about how it was time for them to have a conversation about sexuality and puberty, and although I was not looking forward to feeling the discomfort around this topic, I was genuinely hoping my dad would share that puberty included having feelings for other boys. Our conversation could not have gone more wrong. My dad gently and openly shared about how I was going to start seeing girls in a different way. I was going into a time of my life where I would want to kiss them and have sex with them and I was free to have as much fun as I wanted. However, I had to practice safer sex and if I ever got a girl

pregnant, I would have to marry her. I laughed half-heartedly and agreed. Silence consumed the rest of our car ride and I could not wait to get home to cry alone in my room, as it was clear to me now that I was abnormal and damaged. I felt disillusioned because I knew my dad was trying to reach out and connect with me, but no matter how hard I tried, I simply could not relate to him.

In many ways, that car ride was the beginning of a colossal chasm between my dad and I. Because of my 'girly' behaviour, I was always a little afraid of him because I felt I was consistently annoying or disappointing him. He loved arm wrestling or play fighting with me, which I often went along with, but secretly, could not wait to get away from. Usually, these interactions led to him calling me a coward because I could only play along for a short amount of time. On one occasion, I started to get teary-eyed and he angrily took me outside and made me write a list with him about the differences between boys and girls. I was twelve years old and I was writing these differences down as if I was in a sociology of gender class. I was an expert at knowing the differences. Could he not see that I knew the differences, but I was simply a failure at living out my expected role as a boy? I did not want to be aggressive or insensitive or violent or crass. In fact, I could not be, even if I tried. I did not want to flirt, kiss, heckle, or sleep with girls. Was that not clear by now? I grudgingly obeyed him and kept writing until our conversation ended with him telling me that he was trying to look out for me. He did not want other people, especially other men, to make fun of me. He warned me that if I did not actively make an effort to change my behaviour, it would certainly happen and he did not want to see me get hurt. Among the many things my dad did not realize that day was that this was

already happening. I was already being humiliated and tormented by my classmates. School was not a safe place for me, and now, I realized that I was also not safe at home.

Ultimately, my dad was right. The bullying and anguish left the boys change room and infiltrated its way into my classes, the lunchroom, the school bus, and pretty much anywhere I went. While I had once found solace in some female classmates, they too, had had enough with having to put up with a guy in their close group of friends. I did not really feel like I fit in with them anyways, as I am not a girl. I was just a gay boy who would have done anything possible to be normal. Most friendships ended quickly once potential new friends heard that I was referred to as the gay kid in our class.

Consequently, in order to survive, I withdrew. I stopped talking at school and made concerted efforts to listen to what my classmates said about me in order to suppress the inflections in my voice, any feminine mannerisms, or anything that caused anyone to tease me or call me gay.

Unfortunately, I learned that pretty much anything I liked, whether it was the sports I genuinely enjoyed or the books I read or the music I listened to, would all lead to me being called gay. I, unequivocally, despised being called gay and I avoided as many social events as possible to prevent this kind of harassment. If people did not notice me, they would not be able to make fun of me and I would be safe. My goal was to be invisible and, for the most part, I succeeded. My desire for invisibility did not come without a price, however, as I learned how to mute any visceral response; I was consumed with trying to have the right response at the right moment with the right group of people. But, what some classmates approved as masculine, others labeled gay. I

became petrified to share my ideas, thoughts, and opinions because I did not want to provide more ammunition to my peers. It was easier and safer to give up my voice.

As such, I focused on spending time with my nieces, getting good grades, participating in Church activities, and performing in choir or musical theatre. I decided that the only way I was going to make it through life was to be a quiet observer. I loved listening to my siblings' stories about their friends and the movies they watched or the games they played. I envied their ability to simply fit in, but I was grateful to have them in my life, as they were the only people who did not seem to notice or care about my peculiar gender behaviour. I had accepted that there would be nothing normal about my life. I would never date. I would not get married. I would never have kids. There was absolutely no way I could envision a hopeful future, as all of the narratives with which I was presented did not fit me. I would never live an authentic life. Usually, these realities in my life did not affect me too much. But on the occasions when the bullying heightened or when I felt exhausted from being on guard, I closed my room door and cried. My conversations with Jesus continued but the dialogue changed; it seemed clear that Jesus was not going to fix me. Instead, I prayed for the strength to make sure I took this reprehensible secret to my grave and for the selflessness to sacrifice my life for Him in order to earn salvation.

When I was eighteen, however, my quest to take my secret to the grave took an unexpected turn when I met Mitch. He was the first male who had showed any interest in being my friend since I was in grade seven. Moreover, he seemed to be sensitive and gentle and he did not talk about girls the way I heard other guys talk about them. He was anything but athletic and I loved how he laughed at himself when he tripped and fell

while walking. I absolutely adored spending time with him and I could never get him or the thought of cuddling with him out of my head. I had never felt like this about someone before and there was this uncanny sense of safety whenever I was with him. As exciting as it was to feel like this for someone, it also caused immense anxiety and fear about what Jesus would do to me for feeling like this for a person I actually knew. This went further and deeper than my previous crushes on male actors, as Mitch pierced through all of my thoughts and dreams. Many times, friends have asked me if there was one person I was afraid of coming out to, such as my mom or dad. The reality is that coming out to myself, as I navigated through the feelings I was experiencing for Mitch, was the most challenging coming out experience. I had spent the majority of my life attempting to avoid or correct my thoughts and feelings about other men. However, with Mitch in my life, I could not escape the truth. I had to admit to myself that I was gay. And so, I stood in front of the mirror and with hatred and shame in my heart, I blurted out, “Yup, Ricky. They’re right. You’re a fag.”

Nevertheless, it did not take long for Mitch to come out to me. Even though I had been waiting for the day to let him know that I was gay and that I had feelings for him, I delayed my disclosure because if I came out to Mitch, then being gay would be an absolute reality. I do not remember much from the moment I finally did come out to him, except that I cried and felt an immense sense of relief. As Mitch listened to my stories, I realized that I did not have to explain what it was like to carry such a secret; it was the first time in my life I understood what it felt like to belong. Afterwards, I experienced many firsts. I had a hand to hold. I went on my first date. I had my first kiss, and I fell in love. I remember feeling that this was the first time I was actually living my own story,

instead of simply observing it. I wanted to tell the world what Mitch meant to me, but at the same time, I was still exceedingly ashamed of being gay and I did not want anyone to know about my sexuality.

My family did not even know I was gay, so I thought I would come out to my older sister, Clara, to evaluate her reaction and then consider whether or not I could tell her about my boyfriend. Clara cried. She did not reject me, but she warned me that this news would be challenging for my parents to hear considering their religious and ethnic background. She asked many questions and apologized for not being there for me throughout my various struggles and assured me that, no matter what, she loved me and I was always and would always just be Ricky to her. I did not tell her about Mitch until ten years later, but that first candid conversation with her led me to build the courage to open up to my mom.

I am not entirely sure if there is ever a right moment to come out to anyone. I did not know at which moment the conversation about me being gay would transpire with my mom. I had tried to plan it, but something or someone always interrupted my attempts. So, for my mom and me, it happened in the parking lot at Wal-Mart. I did not get in the car with the idea of coming out to her, but I could not focus on anything except me imagining her reaction, both good and bad. Just as we began to get out of the car, I asked her if she had ever wondered why I did not have any male friends or why I did not socialize like my sister or brother? She closed the door and admitted that she had just accepted that I was different. I had always been different since I was a little boy. Then, she asked me if I was going to tell her that I was gay? I vehemently denied being gay and attacked her for asking me such a ridiculous question. I asked her why she would ask me that and she said

that she had never really thought about me being gay, but that my current questions were making her wonder if that is what I was trying to do. At this point, I took back what I had said previously and divulged my secret. Like my sister, she cried and told me that she loved me no matter what. As relieved as I was for hearing that I would still be loved in the same manner, what I was pleading to hear from both my sister and my mom was that it was okay to be gay. I wanted them to validate my experience as being normal. I, unfairly, expected them to tell me that the dominant story I had heard my entire life was not the only story that could be told. I wanted to hear that there was room for Mitch and me and that I could remain friends with Jesus.

As per usual, my mom went right to the Church and prayed about what to do with this new revelation. After mass, she told me that the Gospel message had been unbelievably appropriate and that she felt God was being merciful to us. She told me that I had to pick up my cross and follow Him. I had no idea what she was trying to say to me, but I immediately lashed out at her, and demanded that she explain how I was supposed to pick up my cross. I had spent enough time in Church to know the teaching around homosexuality. The Catholic Church teaches that it is not sinful to have same-sex attraction, but that if that disordered attraction leads to sexual acts or intimacy, one has potentially committed a mortal sin. A mortal sin is based on severity of the action, awareness of the severity of the act, and providing full consent in acting it out. Although Mitch was raised Catholic, I envied his lack of knowledge regarding Church teaching and his apathy with all religious aspects. I knew exactly what I was doing and every time Mitch kissed or hugged me, as natural and instinctual as it felt, I envisioned being engulfed by the flames of hell. To make matters worse, I felt responsible for Mitch's soul

because I was not stopping our behaviour. My mom did not know about my relationship with Mitch, and because I was so stressed and exhausted about carrying my dilemma on my own, I listened closely to her counsel about picking up my cross.

Unfortunately, I chose to pick up my cross and go back to my original plan of sacrificing my life for Jesus. I ended my relationship with Mitch and then packed my bags to live a Catholic missionary year in Australia and New Zealand. With a team of twelve, I worked with youth and families in schools and parishes sharing the gospel message of God's unconditional love for each human being. As if through divine intervention, every presentation or retreat began with the same chant: "If you love the Lord, you gotta pick up your cross and follow Him." It served as a constant reminder of my mother's words and to the reason I was there. More importantly, I did not mind this process of so-called evangelization, as my Catholic brothers and sisters on my team accepted me in a way that my high school classmates had not. I experienced genuine friendships and fellowship, the fear of eternal damnation dissipated, and few people questioned my sexuality.

Nonetheless, one of the major themes of that year included the mission's formation program for young men, in particular in building men of God. While the female program leaders took the women out for coffee, the male program leaders took the men to remote locations to model strong, Catholic, masculine behaviour and to literally cover us in mud. Such behaviour included chanting, images of spiritual warfare, being knighted with spiritual swords, playing rugby, having a wild heart, and being servant leaders. For the most part, the requirements for being a Catholic man of God barely described any part of me. As part of the training process, I remember performing skits or

practicing personal testimonies for the staff and the constant critique I received was that I really needed to work on being a strong man of God. I had to be careful about how I stood or walked or moved my arms, as at times, it seemed like I was moving into a plié position or as if I was in the middle of a contemporary dance routine. Having extensive experience at being humiliated in front of other people, I quickly accepted the staff's criticisms and tried to implement their suggestions. Additionally, however, they were concerned about some of my language use as it was too feminine – this was new. I was accustomed to being accused that I walked gay, sounded gay, dressed gay, liked gay things, but now the words I used were gay? The more I opened myself up to these Catholic men of God requirements pre-ministry, the more I tore myself apart and the more I hated myself. The message was clear, however, and I was not allowed to use stories or words that outlined my emotional connection to Jesus. I was expected to describe my relationship with Him as an adventure because it was of utmost importance that I represented Catholic men as being 'manly,' not gay.

Eventually, lectures about the crisis of masculinity in the Church and homosexuality took place. Frank, the executive director of this program, spoke at length about how there are many confused men in the world who think they are gay, but that in fact, there is no such thing as a gay human being. He went on to explain that God only created sexuality and that His perfect design only includes heterosexuality.

Homosexuality, on the other hand, is a result of Satan's lies. I sat and wondered what I had done to inherit Satan's lie in my life, but I did not have to wait long for the answer. Frank indicated that men who struggle with same-sex attraction made the choice to go against God's plan and lust for other men anytime from being in the womb up to age five

or six. It is because this choice is made at such an early age that it seems as if the individual was born gay and had no active choice in it. Young male fetuses or children make this choice because their mothers are too overbearing or their fathers are absent.

I wish I could say that I laughed at how ridiculous his words sounded to me that day as I sat in his lecture. But that is one problem I see with religious faiths; every outlandish teaching or concept is possible if one has a little bit of faith. It cannot be proven, but with trust in His will, it can be believed. If the teaching is challenged, then, challengers are often charged with having little faith. While I wrestled with Frank's idea, I, eventually, believed him with my entire heart and then went on looking for reasons about how my mother had been overbearing and how my father had been absent in my life. I began to hate my parents and I quickly and easily justified my choice for same-sex attraction as a result of their behaviour. Furthermore, I detested myself for choosing to have same-sex attraction and for, ultimately, being responsible for most of my shameful and hidden suffering in my life. On the surface, I went on to have the time of my life travelling and performing that year, but internally, this was the beginning of cruel, persistent, and rancorous self-hatred and bullying. You are a loser, a fag, a pussy, a fairy, an embarrassment, a coward, a loser, a liar, a hypocrite, a piece of shit and so on. I would wake up feeling this and, as I noticed my feminine behaviour throughout the day, the chorus of self-loathing would play on repeat in my head.

When I returned to Canada, I tried to play the role of a strong Catholic man as best as I could. I dated a girl and signed up for another year of Catholic formation at a Bible School in Northern Alberta, and eventually ended up in university to become a teacher. I lived with Catholic and Christian men and women; I joined prayer groups, pro-

life movements, and Bible studies; I facilitated Catholic Catecheses for male university students, and I went to mass as often as I could during the week. My university friends and roommates accepted me as their friend and our conversations often focussed about our prayer lives or what Jesus was doing in our lives. Having a mutual understanding that we are all sinners, my friends spoke about how they struggled with lust, masturbation, pre-marital sex, gossip, or substance abuse. I never felt safe enough to share what my struggles were because if I opened up at all about what I was going through, I would have to disclose that I was gay. I could not let my friends in on my secret, because as compassionate and understanding as they were about almost every sin, they were not tolerant of homosexuality and, in fact, regularly mocked or made derogatory comments about gays. Consequently, I practiced phrases and reasons that could get me out of any awkward conversations, as to why I was not struggling with sexuality, mainly that I was on my way to becoming a priest. Getting through university included becoming the perfectly rule-based Catholic, stomaching judgmental comments about gays, and then calling my mother almost every night sobbing, and begging her to give me an answer as to why this was the cross I had to carry. How could a beneficent God want this for His creation?

When I graduated from university, the time finally came for me to go to the seminary and I was ecstatic about being able to get away from secular society and enter a life of service with the Companions of the Cross. I strongly believed that, as a priest, individuals would question my sexuality privately within their own conversations, but they would be respectful and prudent enough not to ask me about it – my ultimate desire. Spending time with this order of priests reminded me a lot of my mission in Australia and

my studies at the Bible School. They wanted strong men of God and I knew exactly how to act that part. However, when the one-on-one interviews began, I did not anticipate being bombarded with question after question about homosexuality. “Have you ever had sexual thoughts about other men?” “Have your masturbatory fantasies been about other men?” “Have you ever had a homosexual liaison?” “Have you ever looked at homosexual pornography?” “Are you homosexual?” Naturally, I lied with every question and after the litany of homosexual questions concluded, I could not help but laugh. Fr. Todd, the vocations director, also laughed and apologized for all of the gay questions, but he said he needed to make sure that I was not homosexual, as there was no room for individuals with same-sex attraction in their order. I finished the interview and passed with flying colours. While I should have been happy that I was offered admission, I went right into the household chapel and cried. Up until this point, the only possible future I had envisioned for my life was in the Church. I felt it was the only way I would be able to escape the peer questioning and bullying about my sexuality and the only way I would earn salvation. Regrettably, by the end of that interview, I knew I would not be able to lie about my sexuality my entire life. How was I going to survive? Why was this happening to me? What had I done to deserve this life? I sat paralyzed in front of the Blessed Sacrament and told Jesus I hated Him over and over again.

At age twenty-four, I began my career teaching high school English, English as a Second Language, and Modern Languages. I threw myself into my job and into learning my students’ narratives. It was clear that having a romantic relationship and starting a family were not in the cards for me, but I could try to be the best teacher I could be. Over the next three years, I taught every course in the English Language Arts high school

curriculum; I helped re-design the high school ESL programming for my school district; I developed ESL and modern languages courses; I was the teacher supervisor for Sr. Boys Volleyball, Students' Council, and the Interact Club; I took a group of students to Peru; I was elected department chair, and I became an award-winning teacher. Students wanted to be in my classes and my colleagues respected my work ethic.

However, at the end of the day, I was relentlessly isolated and lonely. Like my entire adolescence, there were murmurs in the hallways as students and colleagues questioned my sexuality, but I knew how to steer through or avoid their questions or taunting. When students bullied me by leaving eraser-made penises with derogatory comments on my desk, I would take a few days off and sit in self-blame. While my family encouraged me to discuss these situations with my administrators, I refused, as I did not want any attention on me regarding homosexuality. Therefore, I did what I knew best: I withdrew. But, it was only a matter of time before I would not be able to survive any longer on my own, because at age twenty-eight, I ended up on a bridge in the middle of the night ready to end my life.

While my initial reaction to the bridge incident was one of confusion and wonder, it was also the moment I knew I was going to survive; I knew I was going to be all right. For the second time in my life, I began the coming out process. Since coming out to my sister and mom, I had only opened up about being gay to my brother, Carl, and brother-in-law, Juan. Despite my stress and nerves when I told them, both men reacted in a similar way; they said okay and went on with their lives. There was absolutely nothing dramatic about coming out to Carl and Juan. Instead, they were more concerned as to how I felt about being gay. Did I accept myself? Had they ever offended me with any

derogatory comments? Their questions and concern were pivotal moments in my personal understanding that rejection was not the only possibility in living my truth.

I did not have the opportunity to come out to my dad because my mom decided to tell him without my permission shortly after I came out to her. Nevertheless, even though I consistently spoke about my sexuality with my mom, my dad and I had an unspoken rule that that was not something we could discuss. On a weekend family getaway to Banff, my dad and I spoke about the gigantic elephant in the room. I was afraid I was going to turn into the little boy that would get scared and teary-eyed and who would then be called a coward. However, this time, my dad did not call me a coward. He was gentle and he apologized for his contribution in making my life miserable; at the same time, he emphatically encouraged me to let go of my fear or resentment and simply be myself. He asked if I had heard of Lady Gaga and her song “Born This Way” and to let go of my Catholicity. My mother echoed his comments and told me she was so grateful that God had given her a son who was gay, as she would have remained misguided, ignorant, and unexposed to a beautiful aspect of humanity.

As my parents spoke, I did not cry, as I had anticipated I would going into that conversation, but rather, I was in shock. Were they trying to trick me? I asked them about all of the horrendous things they had said about homosexuality previously, most of which had haunted my inner narrative for such a long time. I could not just let go of the ideas about going to hell, contracting HIV/AIDS, or avoiding children in case I molested them. My parents explained that they had said those comments before they had seen me suffer consistently for the last ten years and, ultimately, before they could examine homosexuality outside of a Catholic lens. They asked for my forgiveness and offered

their remorse for not knowing how to provide a safe and welcoming home for their gay son. I wish I could say that that night erased all of the negative and harmful comments they had carelessly spewed at me previously. It did not. But, it was the first step in restoring our relationships. My parents, throughout my entire life, have always told me that they loved me and perhaps, because they said it so often, I did not pay close attention to them. However, their words and gentleness through those conversations led me to believe them; my parents actually love me, just as I am!

Coming out to my friends was definitely a more challenging experience, as the majority of them are staunch Catholics. I did not know how to start this conversation with anyone, but lucky for me, my friend Lucy, who had attended the Bible School but had since left her faith, made it easy for me. On a weekend visit, she awkwardly expressed that she was not going to leave my apartment until I admitted I was gay. Despite my uneasiness, I took advantage of this opportunity and began sharing about what my life had been like. I had always envisioned judgment and rejection, but Lucy empathically listened and validated my feelings. This experience helped me to build the courage to come out to Gina, my colleague, who I felt could also be another safe person. Not having a religious background, Gina was more surprised and offended by the experiences I had gone through in Australia and the Bible School than by the news of my homosexuality. To notice their empathy, compassion, and acceptance gave me a taste of what my life could be like if I worked through my shame and self-loathing. I did not know how to go about this necessarily because I was an expert at mutilating my heart and being.

When I began the graduate counselling program, my classmates and I were encouraged to seek out our own personal counsellor through Student Counselling

Services, as an opportunity to experience what our future clients would go through, but more importantly, to work on our own baggage. I made an appointment right away, but my experience was anything but positive. The counsellor was clearly knowledgeable, but he seemed more interested in talking about himself. By the end of my intake interview, I knew that his wife was having a baby, that he loved P90X, that he worked from a positive psychology and cognitive behaviour therapy lens, and that he was a devout Evangelical Christian. After I had told him that I had a faith background, he spoke about how we could invite the Holy Spirit to guide our conversations. I instantly knew that this counsellor was not the right fit for me and left as quickly as I could. I was disappointed and angry about this experience because I had not gone to a Christian counselling center. I was under the impression that the university counsellors did not operate from a Christian lens, but then again, being in Southern Alberta, perhaps that is the norm. Regardless, I was looking for a new narrative, not more of the same old story. I did not want to see another counsellor ever again.

Thankfully, however, with a little encouragement, Gina suggested I visit her counsellor. Based on my previous experience and with a new developing confidence, I walked into Isabelle's office and bluntly said, "I'm a gay person and I don't want to be. Can you help me?" Her response was one of empathy and kindness. But, also, she quickly enquired as to what kind of help I wanted. She explained that if I wanted to become heterosexual, she was not the person to work with, but that if I wanted to explore how I could come to terms with my sexuality and celebrate who I am, she was willing to go on that journey with me. This time, I knew I had found the right counsellor. This initial session was almost three hours long and she was simply curious about my

experience. She did not ask me about my sleeping patterns, eating habits, exercise routine, or any previous mental health concerns. She remained focussed on my concern and asked me what it was like. I told her story after story after story about how I was exhausted of hiding, but also immensely afraid of coming out to my Catholic friends. Her most memorable question throughout that session was, “what’s the worst thing that could happen if you did come out?” It became clear to me that the worst thing that would happen is that they might shred me to pieces, reject me, and stop being my friend. However, as I sat in silence thinking, I realized that they could not bully me or reject me any worse than I had bullied or rejected myself. I called myself terrible names everyday and I knew my family supported and loved me and that I, at least, had two friends who would stick by my side. Moreover, Isabelle suggested that it was time that I gave myself the gift of Ricky, the teacher, to me. She told me that based on what I had shared, my teaching self was gentle, empathic, compassionate, kind, curious, accepting, and nurturing. It was time to use those qualities on myself. When I left her office, I felt empowered, motivated, and excited about the possibilities ahead.

What followed was purposeful and confident editing to my life story. Coming out on a larger scale was challenging and painful at times; however, I was not a victim losing friends or needing approval anymore. As I navigated through difficult conversations, I realized that I could not enter into dialogue with individuals who were so engrained in their own unexamined privilege that, no matter what I said, I would still be seen as the other, the disordered, the sinner. I listened closely to my friends who expressed concern about the gay lifestyle or about what could happen to our friendship if I decided to ‘activate.’ I firmly understand that they are free to think, feel, and believe whatever they

want, but so am I. Fortunately, I now refuse to be submissive and let others dictate my life; I refuse to let institutions scare me into behaving in a manner that makes them comfortable. *I* am in the driver's seat now carefully selecting who or what *I* want to have in *my* life. I am free!

This new perspective included my relationship with the Catholic Church. In the same way I let go of friends who were concerned for my soul or who made it clear that they loved me, but did not believe same-sex relationships are valid, I, through years and years of conflict, let go of the Church. It is not the Church that contributed to my well-being; it was my personal relationship with Jesus. The Catholic catechism, dogmas, and traditions have no place in my heart. Even so, Jesus is also an undefined and undetermined being in my life. The theology of the Christian church confuses me, as I do not like this idea that a loving God would have to sacrifice His only son in order to save humanity. Could there not be another way? I am not sure if I will ever reconcile with Jesus or with any church community and I have learned that that is okay. I wasted too much time trying to squeeze myself into a faith community that did not embrace me and I realized that, through fear, the Catholic teachings and individuals were suffocating and silencing me. I no longer have time for people or institutions that are not willing to celebrate me just as I am. I no longer have time to run away and withdraw in order to feel safe or in order to make others feel comfortable. I no longer have time not to be myself. I do have time, however, to laugh, to sing, to dance, to read, to teach, to listen, to love, to speak, to non-judgmentally discover who I am and, ultimately, to live well.

At age thirty, I sat in my living room floor and began downloading songs from iTunes to put on my iPod. I wanted music to help me concentrate while studying,

researching, and writing my thesis. I noticed, however, that as I searched songs, I kept saying to myself, “Nope, that’s too gay. What will you say if someone asks to see your iPod? You can’t possibly have Ricky Martin on it. People will make fun of you.” I started to laugh and thought, wait a minute, I have been here before. I regularly have the tendency to make choices based on what other people might think of me. But I do not want to do that anymore. I want to make choices based on what I want. So, what would I do if someone called the music on my iPod gay? I guess I would say, “Yup, just like me, and I love it!” I downloaded Backstreet Boys, NSync, Justin Bieber, 98 Degrees, Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, Justin Timberlake, One Direction, and pretty much every song I secretly and shamefully listened to as a high school closeted gay adolescent. Only this time, the speakers were blaring and I was smiling.

**Epilogue.** Through the process of developing interview questions, answering those questions, and storying my interview, I rediscovered my voice. Going into my thesis, I would have indicated that I could not participate in my research, as I did not have any sense of what positive gay identity entailed. But, through reading and learning about identity development, masculinity, and the challenges that some homosexual adolescents face, I realized that I am not doing too badly. I am a resilient survivor and I have a lot of which to be proud.

I feel that one of the most important steps I had to take, as part of developing a positive sense of self, was acknowledging that many events in my life were dreadful. They should not have happened and it was wrong for them to have happened. Validation can be a powerful source of restoration and, as I heard others in my life express support, remorse, and admiration, I began to slowly accept that I have good qualities that others

value. I also had to take some time to grieve. I mourned my muted childhood and adolescence where I missed out on friendships, the relationship I could have had with my father, and the heterosexual life that I desperately wanted to live. Furthermore, I learned that developing a positive gay identity is just like coming out: a lifelong process. There are good days and bad days, but now, I have a strong support system to help me through the challenging moments. I am not alone anymore.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful aspects of changing my life story occurred when I realized that I had so much power in choosing the steps I was going to take to live the life I wanted. I took a few risks as part of this process, mainly through my counselling practicum placement and courses. At my practicum interview, despite nerves and doubt, I decided that I was going to be honest about my sexuality and the difficulties I had experienced feeling comfortable in my own skin. Unlike anything I had ever experienced, one of the counsellors was so moved by my transparency, she cried and offered me a position as she felt that I was exactly what they were looking for, what their center needed, and the kind of student she wanted to supervise. Excuse me? Had I heard correctly? She wanted me in particular because of what I could offer as a gay man? I never anticipated that my most gaping wound could be useful for helping others.

Similarly, the other counsellor who interviewed me insisted that I submit proposals to conferences about my thesis topic. I had absolutely no idea about what she was talking about or as to how to go about that process. Furthermore, I felt that I did not have that much to offer, as I am just a graduate student. Regardless, with intense encouragement, I submitted proposals and ended up presenting parts of what I was learning around my thesis topic at counselling conferences in Ottawa, Vancouver, and

Guelph. I could not believe that I was travelling around Canada sharing my story and that people were interested in hearing it. Some individuals approached me asking if I would collaborate with them in the future around sexuality and ethnicity, as what I shared regarding about homosexuality and Latin America was similar in India and for Muslims. At each conference, I was in disbelief, but also inspired that I could find affirmative meaning stemming from my previous suffering.

My counselling practicum course offered me a place to start disclosing my sexuality in a safe environment. I knew that my peers would not reject me, but I did not foresee how much they would reach out to me to encourage, support, and love me through this stage of my coming out process. My peers cried with me and expressed admiration regarding my ability to be vulnerable and open about my struggles. I feel that my transparency invited them to be vulnerable with me and I connected with some of them in an almost sacred manner. I realized that I am not that different from most people. Everyone struggles to develop a positive sense of self regardless of his/her sexual orientation. For me, that was the greatest obstacle to overcome in feeling good about myself. For my peers, it was depression, anxiety, eating disorders, attachment, perfectionism, and so on. But we could all share in the experience of not feeling good enough or feeling isolated and like the only one in the world who was going through a specific challenge. I firmly believe that one is not more challenging than the other; they are just different. I prefer to connect with others now based on those similarities of experience.

One area that I still struggle with is identifying closely with members of the sexual minority community. I do not have any peers that are gay and I usually feel a little

bit out of place when I attend gay events. The few experiences I have with gay individuals have included a bit of bullying or rejection, which I am not willing to tolerate. For some, my clothes are not gay enough or are too gay; I did not even know that socks could have a sexual orientation! Others are in disbelief that I am not interested in sleeping around or participating in the hook-up culture. And then, some feel that I should be walking around with a rainbow flag and announcing my sexual orientation loudly and with pride everywhere I go. I joke about how I am still waiting for the manual on the gay lifestyle or how to be a good gay man to arrive in the mail. But until that happens, I would rather focus on just being me.

I once thought that having a positive gay identity meant that I would have to be out to every person with whom I interacted. But, I have realized that not disclosing my sexuality does not necessarily mean I am not comfortable with myself. It could be that it is not safe for me to be out or that I merely do not want to share that part of my life with specific individuals. The majority of my family in Latin America does not know I am gay. Perhaps they suspect it, but with the exception of one aunt, no one knows my truth. Although their consistent derogatory remarks about homosexuality or their deep concern as to why I am not making a better effort to find a wife bother me, out of consideration for my parents, I painfully accept not disclosing my sexuality for now. I hope that, one day, I can share a hopeful story about my extended family's ability to re-learn perceptions about homosexuality and how their gay grandson, nephew, or cousin helped them get there. The bottom line is, as a mentor and friend has often suggested, I am learning what it means to live a private life, without the need for secrecy.

## Alex's Story

Because that last glorious Tuesday, Ginger, the guy he loves, met him at their special place in the cemetery, halfway between their houses. Their breaths misted in the cold air, little white ghosts dissipating in the light of the tall lamps that lined the graveyard, the ache evaporating when they finally touched, their lips colliding, eating, so much time had drained away since they last met. The dead boy pulled away, burrowed into the front of his shirt and brought out a heart-shaped locket in a pool of gold chain, the dead boy smiling so hard his face nearly cracked heart-like in two, the metal heart a hot star in his icy hand.

-Suzette Mayr, *Monoceros*

**Prologue.** “Ricardo?” “Excuse me?” “Hello?” “We’re here!” “Alex, what does he look like?” “Have you seen my friend, Ricardo?” Those were the first words I heard, as I waited for my first participant to arrive outside of the hotel I was staying at in a large city in Eastern Canada. It was the gay pride festival and there were pink triangles, rainbows, and pride flags sprinkled all over this major road. This particular morning, the festivities included a five-kilometre run raising awareness and funds for HIV/AIDS research. Alex and his friends had participated in the run and he really wanted me to join them for a celebratory brunch. “It’ll be good for you,” he had told me on the phone, “because you’ll get to see what we’re like before you interview us.” Alex and Lucas had answered my research participant call and Alex had taken the initiative to schedule dates and times for the two interviews to take place. I was nervous and excited and I did not really know what to expect. Nothing could have prepared me for this morning’s events.

As I heard my name, I walked over to a Toyota Corolla where I saw four Latin American men in running gear laughing and teasing each other, while they called for me. I must admit that part of me considered going back into the hotel and cancelling. But, they saw me and waved me over. I got in the car and met Alex, Lucas, Jorge, and Sergio. They were all energetic, hyper, and joyful. They spoke over each other in French,

Spanish, and English, they sang Latin American music sporadically, they roared with laughter at inside jokes, and each asked me if I was enjoying my time in their city. Alex tried to control the group and checked in to see if I was okay. “Don’t be afraid. We’re just excited because it’s pride week.”

During the quick ride to the restaurant, I learned that Alex, Lucas, and Jorge were best friends and like family to each other. Sergio had flown in from California that morning for the week’s pride events and the three amigos had picked him up and offered to make his stay unforgettable. They were all curious about my thesis research and wanted to know about why I had picked that topic. I gladly shared a little bit about myself and what had led me to this point and they quickly christened me with the nickname “*el niño*” or little boy. It was a little bit strange for me to be called that from these men, as I had only heard my grandmother, mother, aunts, and nannies call me that before. Nevertheless, I embraced it and appreciated their term of endearment.

The brunch was full of laughter, gossip, and witty remarks. Sergio was interested in learning about the best gay clubs to hit during his visit; Lucas had placed second in the morning run and was happily accepting compliments while he compared himself to a gazelle; Jorge kept complaining about how he was way too fat and would not be able to walk for the next few weeks from exerting himself so much, and; Alex expressed excitement about hosting a friendship dinner for all of them before going out to the gay village later that evening. While eating, I noticed that they referred to each other as *loca* (crazy woman) or *ella* (she). I quietly asked why they were using feminine personal pronouns and they burst out laughing stating that that’s what we were: *locas*. Not quite

understanding the context of the word, I smiled and continued to listen to their conversations.

Eventually, their curiosity focussed around me and how they envied the fact that I was going to have the best time of my life on *Grindr*. I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about and when Jorge noticed my confusion, he clarified and said, “you do have a *Grindr* account, right?” Admitting my ignorance, the boys erupted in shock and pulled out their phones to show me and made it clear that *Grindr* was essential for every gay man. I learned that *Grindr* is a smartphone geosocial-networking app that is most commonly used for hook ups or casual sex. I laughed sheepishly and vehemently tried to control my eyes from bulging out of my face – something that usually gives away what I am thinking. Thankfully, the conversation turned to sharing their stories about their varied experiences with the app. Sergio hated it, Alex had overused it, Jorge was taking a break from it while he pursued a relationship, and Lucas had been banned from it. Regardless of their experience, Alex summed up their excitement when he stated, “you’re so lucky, Ricardo, because you’ll have so many guys to choose from cause we’ve fucked them all, so it’s pretty boring for us now.”

Lucas, Jorge, and Sergio left to shower and rest before the scheduled friendship dinner that evening and Alex and I went to his apartment for his interview. He was a little embarrassed by his modest and untidy place, but ensured I felt comfortable. At this point, Alex is thirty-two years old and a Webmaster for a wireless company. He began working in customer service and eventually worked his way up to his current position. Although he was born in Latin America, he has lived in Canada for the last ten years, at first with extended family, and now, with a roommate in a small apartment in the gay village. With

a fan blowing loudly in the background, smokes in hand, and while munching on a bowl of grapes, he relaxes into his favourite chair and shares his life story:

**Loving My All Queer Crazy Life.** When I was growing up in America Latina, the message around homosexuality was pretty clear: it's a bad thing to like guys. I was always told that guys who like guys go to hell or aren't respectable people in society. Basically, a gay guy will have a bad reputation and will have a very difficult time living his life. Because Latino communities are extremely Catholic, there is a lot of stigma that surrounds homosexuality. My mother was always at Church. She had a statue of the Virgin Mary in our backyard, and she taught me to go to mass every Sunday, pray before going to bed, to stay away from sin, and to feel bad about your negative acts. Any time I sinned, I would pray *el Rosario*, the rosary, and ask for redemption so that I could be forgiven. I don't think I stopped doing that until I was about twenty-three years old.

Another thing I remember is the Latin American profile of gay men. To be gay means you're going to be queer, blah blah blah. Basically, you're going to act like a lady and everyone is going to call you *loca*, a crazy woman. If people called a guy *loca*, they were basically calling him gay. It's weird because a guy can be jerked off by another man, he can receive a blowjob, and he can even penetrate a guy and our society will not question his heterosexuality. So, as long as you take the active role, you're not considered gay. But if you are gay, there is no such thing as having a normal, healthy life in Latin America. On the contrary, a gay man is going to dress like a woman and become a prostitute. That's the understanding and exposure people have regarding homosexuality. It's not something anyone envies or wants to be and I didn't want to fall into that

stereotype. Real Latino men must have girlfriends and must be players. The more girls a guy has, the more manly he is.

I always knew that I was attracted to boys, but it's not something that I put a lot of thought into. It was something that I knew and felt, but I just kept it to myself. It was my special secret. Honestly, when you're a child, you just do things. You act and play and live in a type of denial because you don't want to confront reality or society. The boys in my neighbourhood loved to play soccer, while I secretly dressed up in my mother's clothes and danced around my house. I even wore her wedding dress! The other boys loved being rough and tough. While as for me, I preferred to hang out with the girls. I didn't want to play soccer or be with a girl; I just wanted to make *pupusas* (traditional Latin American dish) with mud and talk. I guess I was just different than the other boys. I was less rough and maybe a bit feminine, but not to the point where others would have assumed I was gay. I understood the weight of the social expectations regarding gender roles and I didn't want to have a bad reputation.

Because I was the youngest in my family or *el hijito de la casa*, nobody paid particular attention to my unusual behaviour. People just called me *mimado* or spoiled. They knew my mother was overprotective and that she would give me whatever I wanted. I got all of my affection from my mother and my father took his role as provider seriously. If I needed shoes, he gave me money to buy them. But that was as far as our relationship went at that time. Same thing with my older brother. He was there, but we were really distant. But, I didn't really care because I spent my time being creative and organizing events for my neighbourhood. I enjoyed writing scripts or performing skits for Father's Day or Mother's Day and I liked being known in the community.

However, when I was ten years old, I had my first sexual encounter with another guy and that changed everything. I remember it was one of those nights where *toda la calle* or the entire neighbourhood got together to visit and play games. You know how it is in America Latina; the entire neighbourhood knows each other and gets together to socialize. Well, there was this older teenager who was looking at a pornographic magazine, while most people were playing volleyball. Our game was interrupted by a power outage and I went over to him and ended up fooling around with him. A few months later, he started a rumour around the neighbourhood that I like dick. All of the bad things I experienced began from that rumour and he made sure everybody knew. Because I played with his dick, no one made fun of him. I had a difficult time because I knew that people knew that about me and I couldn't go to the local convenience store anymore without being heckled. "Hey Alex, hey *mamasita*, come and record on the microphone." People yelled things like that on the street and it put me in a very bad position. Thankfully, I was able to keep the rumours quiet at my school, but life in my neighbourhood was hard.

When I was thirteen years old, I had another sexual encounter with a boy my age, except this time, his mother caught us in bed. You know how Latin American mothers are with their sons. She made sure I never spoke to him again. I'm not really sure how the rumours about that incident got around, but it became clear that many parents didn't let their children talk or play with me. I had two big damaging rumours about me and my friends started to make fun of me as a result. "You're a *culero*, you're a queer, *mamasita*, *mama verga*." It was really sad because neighbourhoods play an important role in Latin America, but I was not able to be friends with anyone. I wasn't able to knock on anyone's

door and see whether or not my friends were able to play outside. The recognition I had earned from the scripts I wrote or the skits I performed disappeared. Sometimes I wonder if my distant relationship with my family, at that time, was a result of these rumours. I didn't want my parents to hear that I was a queer, so I tried really hard to fake an image with them.

Fortunately for me, I was able to find refuge from the rumours and gossip from one neighbourhood family, the Tabares. I was around fourteen years old and their oldest son, Francisco, was nine. But, Francisco became my best friend and his parents, Evelyn and Roberto, became my adopted parents. My parents were always working, so I relied on the Tabares for social and emotional support. They invited me over to their house and took me with them on their family weekend trips. I was ashamed that my real parents were probably aware of the rumours surrounding my sexual encounters, so being able to spend most of my time with another family helped me hide behind a type of mask. I felt safe with the Tabares and I knew that, because Evelyn was a psychologist, she was more open and understanding. When I turned fifteen, my father asked me what I wanted for my birthday. All I wanted was an ice cream cake and when he brought it home, I thanked him and took it over to the Tabares. I didn't want to share my cake with my family, but I did want to share it with the Tabares because I understood what a family was thanks to them. I can say that I have a family because of them.

Despite feeling safe with the Tabares, I was unhappy during my adolescence. Yeah, I can definitely say that I was unhappy. I lived with a type of social paranoia because I knew that I was playing with fire. Knowing the kind of *machismo* that existed in my neighbourhood, I knew that I could be in trouble. I was afraid that I might get beat

up or that I might even be killed. At one point, there was this group, La Banda Rosa (the pink gang), which went around killing gays. It was basically a bunch of guys that killed the gays that dressed like ladies for prostitution. It only lasted for about six months, but I knew the weight of my secret and I was afraid of what I was. I didn't want to be like those queers that were on the street. That's too much. If you want to be a girl, get a sex change. Don't be a man *toda marica* – all queer. I guess that's part of the homophobia I still have from my time in Latin America.

In high school, I had a friend who I think was in the closet. He always denied being gay, but he introduced me to my first group of gay friends. Through his connections, I was able to experience gay life in Latin America. I started to go to gay clubs and I began to live a double life. Even though it was stressful, I was used to being stressed, so going to these underground gay clubs made my life exciting. The clubs were very discrete and secretive. They couldn't be promoted on the radio or anything and there were no signs to attract patrons. People just knew the locations. So, that's the thing, I was struggling with Catholic guilt and the stress of hiding who I really was with most people, but I also felt a sense of adventure from being part of something that was forbidden; you're still in the closet, but you also have your little life with authentic moments.

In August of 1998, I went to the annual national fair and met a guy that eventually became my first boyfriend. I was leaving the bathroom and he was coming in and we just exchanged looks. I don't know what it is about gay guys, but I think you have a sixth sense. I don't know if it's a survival feature or what, but you can tell that a straight guy doesn't look at another guy like a gay guy does. So, you know, you recognize that sort of energy and that's what happened with Simon. We started talking and then eventually I

brought him home. We made out a little, but then my parents arrived. We were in my brother's room and I thought to myself, "oh my God, how am I going to get Simon out of here?" It was around eleven o'clock at night, but I took my parents to the backyard insisting I had something to show them, which didn't make any sense, but it allowed Simon enough time to sneak out. While I probably should have felt more stress, I kind of had fun with this hide and seek situation. We would discretely hold hands on the bus. Sometimes, when no one was around, we would steal a kiss or have sex in public places, like the park, because we had nowhere else to go. It was so exciting!

Because I fell in love with Simon, it led me to tell my brother and father that I was gay. My brother was really calm. He just didn't care and he basically told me that I could do whatever I wanted. My brother was really open and because Simon loved soccer, the two of them got along very well. I thought my father would be accepting too, because after puberty, he started to become more than a provider for me. He was really open about talking about sex or how to fuck girls and stuff. I told him that I was in love, blah blah, but he just asked me if I had been penetrated anally. I told him the truth, which was that I hadn't been and he expressed relief because he felt that I could still change. Maybe because I was eighteen and a bit rebellious, I ignored him and continued to keep going out with my gay friends. I started to wear more tight fitting clothes and I began to look a bit like the gay Latino stereotype. My father noticed that I was just hanging out with men and he became furious. He told me that he wanted me to go away. He didn't want me to become a sexual travesty; he asked me if I was going to become a queer or a transvestite. My parents both come from small villages or towns in Latin America, so their thinking around homosexuality is really limited. I think he was trying to protect me,

but I knew his preference was just to get rid of me. I was living the *vida loca* or crazy life and he didn't accept me.

It was at that time that I applied for Canadian residency. I'm glad it went through because it was really good timing for me to go. I'm not sure why, but when I moved to Canada in 2001, I went back to living in denial and repressing myself. I felt gross and ashamed about my sexual encounters with men. It's really weird because even though the social stigma about homosexuality is worse in Latin America, I still had boyfriends and lived the *vida loca*, the crazy life. I couldn't live like that in Canada. My father's disapproval scared me and I thought about what it could mean for my future. Would I lose my inheritance? Would I be treated equally as my straight brother? So, I guess I came to Canada to clean up my past and get a fresh start. I arrived with that voice in my head that I was wrong, that my gay actions were wrong, and that now, I was going to have bad luck in my life.

When you're an immigrant, you have to start from scratch. I was in survival mode and it was really hard. I was trying so much to repress myself and eventually, the pressure of moving and hiding who I was just got to me. Even though being gay in Canada is so different, I just became really shy and withdrawn. Remember that in Latin America, the more girl you are, the more gay you are and I didn't like that. But in Canada, you can be the most masculine guy around and you can still be gay. This city is very open and nobody cares about it. You just get to live your life. I did not want to be a feminine gay guy and Latino gays tend to be more queer and more effeminate than Canadians I think, so I just tried to push all that gay stuff away. I remember going to the gay village and it's so free; you don't have to be ashamed. But I walked around looking down, not making

any eye contact with anyone, but discretely looking for sex. I don't know why, maybe because I felt so bad about myself, but I made a lot of stupid choices like having a lot of unprotected sex. I think it was because I lived like a victim of my own repression.

When I turned twenty-two, I think I was struggling with depression or with personality issues. Trying to repress and clean up my past was not working. I just lost it. I couldn't handle it anymore. I had all of these ideas from Latin America that I had to be straight blah blah blah. I was still dragging that guilt around with me. And now, as an immigrant, I was working in a manufacturing factory and all I could say to myself was, "Oh my God, this is Canada, which is a first world country and I'm working in a factory." Even in Latin America, you know, my life could have been better. I could have a better job and I could have had the opportunity to go to school. Here, I was mostly alone, I had to learn the language, and all I could do was work in shitty places. I was depressed about moving. I wasn't happy. I just kept thinking that if I were straight, my life would be better.

The transition from Latin America to Canada was so painful; I started to look for counselling that would help me not feel alone. I couldn't tell my parents about what I was going through, so I looked for help in other places. They have lots of organizations to help you with the coming out experience or being gay, but I never went for help to those places. I don't know. Maybe because I was used to carrying that secret on my own, I didn't feel the need to talk about being gay. I'm not the type of guy that goes to the hospital for every little thing. I wait for the pain to pass and then that's it. I move on. But, I wasn't sure if I had a personality disorder or if I was depressed because I was tired of

being two Alex's. I was tired of being in limbo between two sides of me. It was like I was half-straight, half-gay.

Eventually, I ended up in group therapy. I went to a group for people really struggling with depression. And I mean they were really struggling. There were about five people there and most of them did not have the energy to wake up in the morning and make a cup of coffee. I thought that I was maybe in the wrong place. But, each person is different and has different needs. The group allowed people to go and talk about how they feel without any judgment. You have to be open and mature enough to be able to share personal things. So, I only went about three times because I was used to having a life that I didn't share with anyone, unless you were my gay friend. That was easier for me. I still appreciated that experience because I realized that maybe I wasn't doing too badly. I wasn't that messed up.

About four years ago, I finally told myself that I was done. I didn't care anymore. I just wanted to be myself and if people didn't accept me, it's their problem. Not mine anymore. The funny thing is that the Catholic Church had something to do with helping me accept myself – something I would have never expected. I was invited by one of my cousins to go to a men's three-day retreat. It wasn't one of those retreats where you have to pray and ask God for forgiveness; it was more about learning about yourself. There were about fifteen Latino guys and we just shared about our lives. On the Saturday night, you had to go to confession. Remember that all I had been doing was thinking about myself and my spiritual side. So, when I began to confess to the priest, I don't know why, but I started to talk about everything that had ever happened to me regarding being gay. I talked about the guy whose dick I played with during the power outage, the rumours, my

boyfriends, the discreet sex, everything. I'm telling you, I didn't ask for forgiveness, I just started talking just like I am now. The priest just looked at me and said, "Alex, you are already forgiven."

I don't know if you've ever experienced something like this but I just felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. I think that's what they called it. I felt my blood running through my veins. I felt like a ton of bricks had been removed off my back. I just felt a release. And then, I realized that all this shit, all of these bad things I had experienced in my mind or in my attempts to repress myself was due to the fact that I didn't have my father's forgiveness. I realized that my father didn't betray me, but I was just set apart or removed by him. At this point, my brother was a successful lawyer in Latin America and he had everything, while I was working in customer service. Everything was different for me. I had to move. I had to do everything myself. I had to survive on my own. Since that confession, I do whatever I want and I don't have that little voice in my head that tells me I'm bad. It's so funny because in a Catholic retreat, I healed my soul.

In 2010, I went to Latin America for Christmas. I actually went with my ex-boyfriend, which was a pretty big deal. For the last nine years, I had really distanced myself from my family because I didn't feel like going back there. I didn't want to see my parents because I was afraid. I had been back once before with a male friend and my father didn't take that very well. I was hoping that he had evolved a bit since I had originally left Latin America, but when I told him that I was bringing a male friend, he told me that there was no way he would allow another man to enter his house. He said that only three men could sleep at his house: himself, my brother, and me.

This time, I said, “papa, I’m coming home with a friend. But, don’t worry. We are staying in a hotel.” It was probably better that way anyway because you know how little the houses are over there. My father was okay with this arrangement and I liked that he respected my decision. I realized that, okay Alex, you’re a man now. You know, you make your own decisions and you don’t care what your father is going to say. We only stayed for five days and it was a pretty decent trip. When we returned, I called my father to let him know we were home and he told me, “it was a pleasure to see you, my son. I love you. I’m happy if you’re happy and I’ll be there for whatever you need.” So for me, I took that as I got his blessing. When I think retrospectively, I was only ever looking for that, my father’s blessing. You know, because before I felt like he had put a stamp on my forehead, which said, “I don’t want a gay son.” For me, that was very difficult because I depended on my father. You know how it is in Latin America. My brother is thirty-four years old, he’s married, and he still lives at home with my mother. I guess you depend on your parents for a really long time compared to Canada where you can be independent from an early age. I’m really glad that my father did that for me. I’m happy because I got what I wanted. I got his approval and his blessing. That’s why I don’t have any resentful feelings towards him anymore. And I got his blessing just in time because he died ten months later.

His blessing helped me. I think the more that he saw me, the more he saw that I was going to be okay. I think he was afraid that I was going to become a queen and maybe that’s why I was so reluctant to feminine gay guys because I did not want to be what my father told me not to be. Even though there was a huge chance of me becoming *toda marica* – all queer – in that last visit, he saw that I was masculine. I had a job. I had

been living on my own for ten years in Canada and I think that helped him to realize that, yes, I'm gay, but I did well in my life. I had left my home country and didn't get into any trouble. I wasn't dependent on anyone, I wasn't an alcoholic, and you know, I have a normal life. I think he understood now that I wasn't going to end up on the street dressed up as a female prostitute.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to come out to my mother. She pressures me to have children, because I think she wonders about whether or not I might be gay. I guess people talk blah blah blah but she confronted me about having grandchildren and wanting to see her genes passed down. I tried to be as direct as I could and started talking about how I couldn't have children and I even referenced Ricky Martin and told her how he had had children via surrogacy. But she was like no no no no no no. She got mad. She's a smart woman, but she chooses to look beyond aspects of life that she's not happy with. Remember that in America Latina, family is the foundation of society and she believes that families require a man and woman with children. She is unable to process her son being with another guy. Beforehand, I used to care that I couldn't talk about that with my family in Latin America. But now, I don't care. I just don't say anything in order to prevent any kind of crisis over there. I wish that I would have the approval of my entire family, as it would have made a huge difference in my life in so many levels. But, I'm satisfied with the approval of my father at the very least.

My life is very different now. I'm happy. I have less regrets and I don't repress myself anymore. Like before, I would think once, twice, or three times over before doing something and now, I just do it. I learned that in life you have choices. Either you let life pass you by or you're part of the show. I decided that I want to be part of the show no

matter what. I don't do bad things, but I refuse to repress myself like I used to before. It's more about doing and learning. That's what life is all about; you just have to have the guts to do whatever you want to do.

I've discovered new aspects of myself. I'm a cyclist. I have my bike, suit, and just everything a cyclist requires. I pursue things I want and I'm free and outgoing. I meet people and I'm very social. Things are just different, even with sex. I have sex now and I feel like it's good. I don't have any bad feelings or voices telling me that I'm gross for getting a blow job or being with a man. I enjoy it. My friends have changed as well. They were more closeted and reserved like me. Now, they're bitchy queens. Don't get me wrong, though, they're not that gay.

I also had a social block against all Latinos. I banned all Latin Americans, except for my family members that live in Canada. I think because I felt betrayed by my own culture, I didn't want to have anything to do with Latinos. I was only looking for White Canadian friends. I have Latino friends now, but my boyfriends and sex partners are exclusively White. Actually, my closest friends are all Latino now. We've experienced a lot of things together and I am so comfortable with them. I'm so happy with them. The things we do are just crazy. Wow! But, you know, it's just for fun and we have a blast every time.

I'm not sure what my life will be like as I get older. When I was child, my dreams were about my future profession. I thought that I could be a teacher or maybe a psychologist like Evelyn. Sadly, my dreams for my future job didn't come true. Right now, I like being gay and young because it's fun. You can party and do whatever you want. But when you get older, you're going to be alone. Unfortunately, in the gay world,

it's difficult to find a serious guy who wants to get involved in a long-term committed relationship. Everything is more about sex and quickies, that's it. So, like I said, right now, that's fun. But it's different if you have a family because then you can have kids and raise them and maybe be a grandfather and so forth. For that reason, I still sometimes wish that I was straight because I don't trust any guy.

If I think about it long enough, I see myself with a boyfriend and a dog. But, we both have to be mature enough to develop something solid. It does exist. You can see them in the village, these kinds of couples. But, they have specific rules. A lot of people say that the key to making a gay couple survive requires being in an open relationship. I am not open to that. I know they have rules and they talk about what they can do with other people, but I don't feel comfortable sharing my boyfriend. Maybe one day I will find what I'm looking for, but right now, I'm happy being single. I'm happy being comfortable enough with myself to be open at work with the people I feel safe with and to be private when I want to be. I don't have to share the fact that I'm gay with everyone. I mean, why should people know? If they're close to you, that's fine, but just because people notice that I'm gay doesn't mean I have to talk about it. I like to keep my distance and share that part of my life when I'm comfortable.

I can't believe I've shared all of this stuff without being drunk. I'm glad I did share it though. It's so great.

**Epilogue.** After listening to Alex's story, Lucas was supposed to be back for his interview. However, Alex informed me that I would have to get used to Latinos and their faulty sense of time. Consequently, he wondered if I would be willing to join him while he picked up some groceries for the upcoming friendship dinner that evening. I agreed.

While we walked, he asked me stories about my life and the challenges that I have gone through and I was moved by his efforts to encourage me to keep going in the path I was now walking on. In many ways, I felt as if he was treating me like his little brother. He was considerate, attentive, and thoughtful in the advice he shared.

Because he lives in the gay village and it was gay pride week, the streets were overflowing with semi-dressed, mostly naked men. People were celebrating with drinks on patios, shopping for unique paraphernalia from one of the many booths, and dancing to the various songs blasting from local store speakers. Outside of Safeway, there was an information booth about Lucas Entertainment. If you are like me and have no idea what Lucas Entertainment is, it is a hardcore gay pornographic company featuring Michael Lucas. After Alex explained what it was, it made sense why there were three beautiful and impeccably muscular male models in black speedos posing for pictures. He jokingly asked, “wouldn’t you want to fuck or be fucked by one of them? Oh my God, I know I would.” I immediately blushed and sternly replied, “No!” He laughed and told me that, at the very least, it was okay to look at the models. He suggested I take a picture with them but I could not speak or think or do anything. He tactfully observed me, asked for my phone, took a picture of the models for me, and told me I could look at them when I was ready. I do not know if it was fear or shame or embarrassment, but I could not look at the models, even though deep down I completely wanted to do everything he suggested.

Once in Safeway, I felt at ease walking down the aisles and talking with Alex. At one point, he expressed frustration regarding his inability to find pesto. We searched everywhere until he finally asked an employee where it was. The man, also from Latin America, spoke to Alex in Spanish and we followed him to the other side of the store.

They were engaged in a conversation about which part of Latin America they were from and, while I was still thinking about what had happened outside of the store, I was abruptly brought back to reality from my daydreaming when I heard him ask how long Alex and I had been together. In fact, I should not say I was brought back to reality because as I processed that question, I could not help but think to myself whether or not I was dreaming. First, I had just been bombarded with naked men everywhere outside on the streets and now, an older, Latin American, presumably heterosexual man was asking not if we were a couple, but how long we had been together without judgment or persecution, just genuine interest and curiosity. Our lives were not at risk and the only person feeling uncomfortable and that there was something wrong with this conversation was me. Alex explained how we had met and what my research was about and the man asked me a few questions and went on with his shift.

When I think back to what I thought was going to be a casual walk to the grocery store, it is evident to me that it was anything but normal for me because I am comfortable and familiar with being an outsider and with being judged. I thought about how hard I have worked and trained myself to be invisible and to repress my instincts that I did not know how to behave when someone was inviting me to express a natural response to good-looking men. Similarly, I was completely startled by the Safeway employee who simply saw two men who might be in love with each other and did not show any sign of disgust. Even though I feel sadness for where I was at during that walk, immense hope and gratitude has emerged as a result. Becoming aware of my controlled responses has helped me to acknowledge what is happening within me, but then to mindfully allow myself to express what I truly want to do.

More importantly, listening to Alex share his story was pivotal in feeling a sense of belonging. So much of what he shared resonated with my own life. He preferred playing with girls, he struggled with his Catholic background, he felt unhappy during his adolescence, and there were many times in his life where he felt it would be easier to be heterosexual. As he spoke, I felt hope for my own future. If he felt disgust and hatred towards gays at one time in his life, yet he could now be the confident, unapologetic, unashamed man that I witnessed all morning, then perhaps I could be like that one day too.

### **Lucas's Story**

There is no way for Craig to say, I need you to convince Dad and Sam and Kevin that this is fine. I need you to support me as much as Harry's parents support him. I need you to be proud of what I'm doing, because it will matter so much more if you are. I need you to come back. I need to know that neither of us is going to drown from this.

-David Levithan, *Two Boys Kissing*

**Prologue.** "Alex, what does he look like?" "I don't know I've never seen him before?" "Look at all those men in those suits?" "OMG, and I look disgusting!" "Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch! Excuse me? Do you know where Chinatown is?" Alex, shut up! You're going to get all of us shot." As these comments blurted out of a vehicle with four Latin American men, I could not help but think I was headed for trouble and started thinking of ways to get out of these interviews. But, I reminded myself that this could be a positive learning experience if I walked into it with an open mind.

After speaking with Alex from the sidewalk and confirming our identities, I squeezed into the back seat with Lucas and Jorge. Lucas had heard about my study through Alex and he had also wanted to participate. I was a little bit nervous to meet him because Alex and I had communicated a lot more regarding the interviews compared to

Lucas. But, it did not take long for him to gauge who I was and what I was like. “Alright, so tell me, which language are we going to be using?” I let him know that I was comfortable with them using Spanish, French, or English, as I would be able to understand them, but that I would prefer to speak in English. “Oh no, honey, you have to hold on to your roots!” I tried to explain that I barely use Spanish and that because I was a little bit nervous, it would be incredibly challenging for me to speak fluidly. My comments did not seem to appease him, so he spoke all three languages indiscriminately. I panicked slightly, as I did not want to give him the impression that I was not proud from where I come, but he seemed to quickly forgive my language barrier.

As I observed the banter and camaraderie between the four guys, I got the sense that Lucas is sharp-witted, intelligent, and cautious. While the others continued laughing and heckling each other, Lucas took time to ask me questions about what I had been up to in the city, what my profession was, or what Alberta was like. His curiosity, however, did not stop him from paying close attention to the other conversations so that he could throw his sarcastic comments in when appropriate. Having just come from a five-kilometre run, they were all hungry and hyped up. Our table was so loud I kept worrying that someone was going to ask us to leave, but it quickly became clear to me that this was just my own discomfort and fear from being around gay men who were abundantly comfortable in their own skin. I had tried to avoid people like Lucas, Alex, Jorge, and Sergio my entire life, but there was certainly no way anything or anyone was going to silence this crew. When the server came over, she wished us happy pride and the table erupted. Again, I thought to myself, wow, not only is everyone staring at us, but now the whole restaurant knows that we are all gay. Noticing my shame, I took a deep breath and admired the four

men sitting in front of me who simply did not care about their surroundings and were focused on having a good time.

Lucas explained that he would go home and shower while I interviewed Alex and that he would come back to Alex's apartment later that day for his interview. But when Lucas had not returned at the agreed upon time, I decided to wander around Alex's neighbourhood. Alex was embarrassed and insisted that Lucas would eventually arrive, but that it's part of Latin American culture. "Latinos are never on time, no matter what they say." Having just finished Alex's interview, I welcomed the opportunity to rest and walk around alone.

About an hour later, Alex called and told me that Lucas was now ready. Walking back into the apartment, Alex was busy cooking and Lucas sat at the kitchen table with a drink. Lucas and I moved into Alex's room, so that I could begin the informed consent process and answer any questions he might have. Not surprisingly, Lucas was very curious about me and why I had selected this topic for my thesis and I appreciated having the opportunity to share my own experiences and challenges coming to terms with my own sexuality considering my religious and cultural background. At this point, Lucas is thirty years old and working in the finance department of a phone company. At the same time, he is hoping to enroll in post-secondary studies in finance and to reach his goals, he is upgrading courses in the evening. Although he was born in Latin America, after his first year of university, Lucas illegally moved to the United States and lived there for a little less than one year. He has been living on his own primarily in Eastern Canada for the last eleven years. With a drink in his hand, Lucas got comfortable in the only chair in Alex's room, while I sat on the bed and listened to him share his story:

**Want Something in Life? Just do it!** I grew up in a small farm town in the mountains of Latin America. My parents were farmers and I would say that 98% of the people around there are very conservative. Everybody's Catholic and most of the people who live there didn't have the chance to go to school. So, for me, the word gay didn't exist when I was a kid, except for some negative situations. Even though it wasn't commonly used, I knew that I was different. I was never a violent guy and most of my classmates were rude and they liked to play dirty and get dirty and I was just not the same. My brother always wanted to play soccer and I was just more quiet and had no interest in sports. I was different! Back in the day, I didn't realize that what I felt was part of being gay. I just knew that I didn't belong there. Often, I was bullied. Kids would take your money, your lunch, and yeah, it was pretty brutal. They called me *maricón*, faggot, or *niña*, girl, which doesn't sound bad now but it was an insult as a boy growing up.

I always spent more time with girls than boys all throughout primary and secondary school, but I also felt rejected by the girls because, you know, they didn't feel comfortable with me spending so much time around them. Like I said, I grew up in a very conservative place and so, as children, we were told that boys are supposed to hang out with boys and girls stick with girls. So, I felt lonely because it was hard for me to fit in because I wasn't part of either group. However, I would say that I was blessed with great teachers who were excellent, professional people. I would go to them and ask them questions about school and they encouraged my passion for different topics that I like. I am glad I had that support from at least some people at school. Otherwise, I had no friends. I mean, back in the day, I called them friends but they just used me because I was the smart kid. They made fun of me all the time, but every time they had issues with

homework, which was pretty often, they would come to me for help. Those were the kinds of relationships I had with my classmates. At the time, though, I was just happy that they would come talk to me.

Life at home was pretty uneventful. Well, my dad is an alcoholic, so that was tough for my mom, older brother, and two younger sisters. Basically, it was tough for everyone. But other than that, the bullying at school made me closer to my family, especially my older brother, Ronald. Kids insulted him and called him a faggot because of me. So, whenever people saw us, they would say, “look at the two little gay brothers.” He felt a lot of pressure as well in that little community and I think that’s why he was so desperate to find a girl to have kids with when he was older. My sisters didn’t really care about how I behaved or what I was called. They did wonder why I didn’t stand up for myself. They would often stand up for me, even though they were younger, but I guess I was just too beat down emotionally to defend myself. At some point, I just lost the ability to not let the name-calling bother me.

My mom must have known that I was gay or it must have bothered her that I was so feminine because she never let me cook. You know, you have certain tasks that are assigned to girls and boys, so cooking was not an option for me, but she did teach my brother. I don’t want to blame my mom or say anything bad about her because I know that my odd behaviour was hard for her too and I’m sure that she was trying to help or protect me. But it always made me wonder why she made the exception to let Ronald cook and not me. I remember when I hit puberty, I was happy that my voice changed. I spoke like a little girl and because my voice became stronger, my mom was pretty proud.

I would say that, at this point, I was starting to become more aware about who I was and about not wanting to feel different and I just wanted to fit in the society. I began to bury myself. First of all, religion in society pushed everyone into being homophobic. The fact was that you had to go to Church and in Church you heard that you have to get married, that you have to have children, that you have to reproduce and I didn't want to bring shame to my parents or my siblings. I chose to hide. I felt that I was always going to be society's shame and that I was going to go to hell. Well, it's more like living in hell. I mean, you're a kid, a teenager, and you don't even know what gay is and people are already telling you that you're a shame. You can choose this path or this other path, but if you don't go on this path like everyone else, you're going to burn in hell.

It wasn't just about who I was as a gay person, it was also my ideas. I liked science and geography and I was always looking at things differently. My perspective was always different. But, because of this religious thing in Latin America, this idea that if you don't follow the Church you're going to die, I was only allowed to be curious in my mind. Even though the Indigenous people of Latin America had their own spiritual beliefs, the Church came in like this group of mercenaries looking for witches or mediums in order to kill them. They just saw things differently and the Church killed them. Because of this history, I was born into a Catholic society where people believed that they were going to die, that they were going to go to hell, and that bad things were going to happen to them if they didn't follow the Church's teaching. In my personal point of view, people there do not have faith in God, they're just afraid of being tortured. They're afraid of being punished or dying if they don't live their lives in the way God sees is right. So, I understand why my ancestors didn't have a choice but to teach this

belief to my family. As a child, I agreed with my family only because I was born in Latin America, but not by choice. I lived my life without having the option to even consider a different perspective; I couldn't even conceive the thought that there were different views.

On top of that, I grew up with a clear expectation as to how a man is supposed to be. Males are strong and guide their families. They provide everything for their families. I didn't necessarily grow up with that example in my household because my mom was always working, but I still had that idea in my mind. I eventually learned about my mother's cousin who was also gay. It was horrible, you know, because I would go to the hairdresser just wanting to get my hair done nicely, but people would just talk about all these rumours about my uncle and how he had died from AIDS. He was an old man and he never got married, so people referred to him as being sick or disgusting. I never heard my mom or dad talk about him like that, but my aunts and uncles spoke badly about him. Like I said before, my dad was an alcoholic, so he would have support meetings at our house like Alcoholics Anonymous and my gay uncle would join in even though he wasn't an alcoholic. They would say that he only went to these meetings because he was a nasty pig who would take advantage of other guys while they were passed out. It wasn't nice to hear. It was just very clear to me that gay people were sick and not welcome in society.

The other thing is that whenever they would talk about gays, they would only mention the bottom partner. If you were the top partner in a sexual relationship with a man, you're not gay. To be gay, you have to be the bottom guy or the one that's more feminine. So, people would bring up my uncle and talk about how one guy went over to his cornfield and my uncle would beg him for sex. But when this random man showed my uncle his penis, he would say that it was too big for him and that he wouldn't be able

to take it. Why would someone spread that rumour? What's the point of bragging about something like that? And it wasn't just about my uncle. People would talk about how guys would go sleep with bottoms in groups and it was considered okay because they were all penetrating. I was even encouraged to go and have my first sexual experience with a bottom, but I said no. I still can't understand that thinking, but it was actually very common. Even today, my Latin American openly gay friends make it a point to tell people that they're exclusively tops. What difference does it make? You're arousing another guy. That's what homosexuality is about. Anyways, I think they believe that being the top means being the man.

I remember when I was eleven or twelve years old, my body began to change. I didn't realize that I was going through puberty because, on the farm, information was not available to me as it would be here in Canada. So, it was already hard for me to understand that I was different, but then my nipples popped out and I didn't know what was going on. I created some sort of cocoon because I was so scared. I thought that I was transforming into some sort of transgender person or hermaphrodite or I don't know. My brother even asked me what was happening to me because we used to shower together sometimes, but I didn't know what to say to him. I didn't know and I didn't ask my parents. I always tried to cover myself by wearing two t-shirts and in a hot country, that was tough, especially in the summer months. I just kept wondering what was wrong with me? I would question myself and wonder whether or not I had ovaries inside of me and maybe that's why I was different. At that time, I used to wear my sister's high heels and see, I had a lot of fun! I mean, I was a kid and my mother and two sisters didn't know how to walk in high heels. I knew it instantly! So, that was a big question mark for me:

why am I able to walk in high heels when they can't? See, in my hometown, people also think that gays end up as transvestites. You know, that they would just wear women's clothes all the time, but that just never seemed right to me. I never felt like I wanted to do that, even though I had fun in those heels. So, these questions of figuring out what was underneath my skin or why I was different remained constantly in my mind. But, you don't have the resources to go and find this information, so all you can do is get used to feeling desperate and attacked. You have no help. You have no answers.

With the nipples situation and with feeling so different, I just walked with my arms over my chest and a closed body posture. I was not confident at all. I was way deep in the closet because I didn't know what I was. I tried to cover up what I was feeling by trying to have a girlfriend. I know my parents liked me having a girlfriend and I remember my mom making comments about how she would see me walking with this girl around town or by the school. But, I found it a bit ridiculous. Like, why would that be a big deal? You're just with someone. Who cares? It's your life. But, at the time, I cared. That relationship didn't last long, though, because eventually, I found out she was going out with another guy at the same time. It's probably better that it turned out that way.

Internally, I remember just torturing myself at that time. I didn't hurt myself physically because I guess I'm too much of a coward to do something like that. I would always tell myself that I couldn't do certain things because I was going to get sick or that I was going to die soon or that something bad would happen to me. I was always telling myself that I was not worth enough to live. This torture was constant and resulted in endless nights of not being able to sleep or not being able to concentrate at school. I felt that I was not capable of doing anything well because I didn't have the ability to do it.

I realized that I wasn't going to be able to live this way much longer and so, I decided to leave Latin America. Even though I was already in university, I knew I couldn't stay there anymore. I was living in the shadows while I was there. I mean I could not see an enjoyable future for me. I thought that I was going to marry a girl from my school or university and that I would start my career, have children, buy a house, and I wouldn't ever be able to move out of my hometown. I couldn't let that happen. It was a really long journey because I made my way to the United States illegally, but being in the USA was a way to escape for me. It was quite the experience. We walked through the desert in the day, which was pretty hot, but honestly, it was the greatest adventure of my life. I was ready for it and I knew that it was the opportunity that I had been waiting for and I was really hoping that I would never have to go back to my hometown. I went from living in a small town of maybe five thousand in the area to a city with more than a million people. I was able to live with my cousin who had also moved to the States illegally, but had now married an American girl. I rented a little room in their apartment.

I was still in the closet, and actually, at this point, I was homophobic. I hated gays. I didn't want to have any gay people around me because I was afraid about what other people would think of me. I would make fun of gays or effeminate guys and when I first saw two guys holding hands, I was like, what the fuck is this? It was a whole new experience for me. I couldn't believe that it was just the way it is. I guess it was just the fact that I couldn't understand myself. But I forgot about the whole gay thing because I just wanted to get settled. I wanted to make sure that I wouldn't have to go back to Latin America so I went to school to learn the language so that I could live there. I realized that hating gays and escaping from Latin America wasn't helping me feel better. I still didn't

understand why I was different and I just wanted to talk about it with someone to see if it was true that being gay was a shame. I was depressed.

I found a Latin American psychologist and I was hoping that he would feel pity for me. I thought he would be like, “poor you, people were always picking on you.” But he was cold and told me that I had the whole world in front of me – do something! He was so straightforward and he would ask me what I was doing and when I would say not much, he would implore me to pick something. “Start exercising,” he would say. “You want to find out if you’re gay? Well, there are plenty of gay groups in this city.” Then I would argue that I couldn’t speak English very well and he would tell me that there were also a ton of Latino, Spanish-speaking gays in the city. Then I would say I didn’t have enough money to exercise and he would tell me to start jogging. Then he suggested I explore the city by going to museums or places where reduced rates were offered. Even though I didn’t expect this psychologist to be like that, I liked it. I’m kind of cold myself, so him being so straightforward helped me. I don’t know if it would work for everyone because it could come across like he didn’t care or give a shit about me. But, I liked it. It was a relief to be told that nobody cares that I’m gay. The most important thing I learned from him was that this is my life and I get to choose how to live it. He lectured me, “Do you want to come out of the closet? Do you want to get married? Have children? Do it!”

So, I did it. I listened and started jogging. It’s kind of funny when I think about it, but I remember getting lost in the park one day and coming across guys having sex in the woods. There was another guy, Benjamin, also from Latin America who was just standing there. Anyways, we started talking and we just, you know, kind of clicked. We went for coffee and he wanted to meet again. He was a lot older than me. I think I was

nineteen at the time and he was twenty-nine. He was a lot more knowledgeable than me, because he moved from Latin America when he was ten years old. So, his ideas about sexuality were a little bit more open than mine. Benjamin was bisexual and he didn't bring boys home to meet his family or anything, but he was my first boyfriend. For me, it was a big thing to be going out with this guy and to have a boyfriend. I couldn't talk about it with my cousin because he was closely associated with my hometown, so you know, our relationship was hidden. I was having so much fun and I couldn't talk about it with anyone. Again, all of these new feelings were just for me.

One day, however, Cindy, a transgender girl at work who happened to be from the same province that I come from asked me what I was doing on the weekend. I told her that I had plans with this guy I had met and she automatically told me that she knew I was gay. I didn't make a big deal about it, but that was the first person I ever admitted my sexuality to. Probably because she was transgender and I knew that she went to Queeraokes and stuff, I thought it would be easier to tell her considering she was an acquaintance from work that I would sometimes have drinks with. I was also just tired. I was tired of questioning myself all the time. I was in the USA and I felt blessed to be outside of Latin America in a swarm of people, which basically meant I was free. I felt freedom. I was in one of the greatest cities in the world and I just didn't have time to question myself because I didn't want to question myself anymore.

Being with Benjamin helped me accept myself. I grew up thinking that I was disgusting and that my body was an awful thing to see. But Benjamin would tell me that I was ridiculous. He would tell me that I looked good and that I should show my body off. I think what he was saying was that I wasn't disgusting and that he had a desire to be with

me. But it took me about eight or nine months to finally go for it and have sex with him. I was still really scared and unsure of what would happen. Benjamin was the first guy I ever kissed. He was the first guy who saw me completely naked and I couldn't believe that he wanted to be with me. I could see it in his face that he wanted me. I just couldn't believe it. Was this really happening? But then I would wonder if something bad would happen to me the next day if I had sex with him. I was afraid of AIDS. I didn't understand many things and I was afraid that I might turn into a transgender girl like Cindy from work.

I'm grateful for Benjamin because he was really patient and waited for me until I was ready. I was able to go through my own personal process of letting go of my fears, of coming out, and of accepting myself. But, my future still looked bleak. I noticed that Benjamin was deeply influenced by his family and I think that's why he told me that he was bisexual. I think he couldn't come out as gay, which is what I think he was, because he would only be with guys on the side. I mean, back in the day I convinced myself that I was attracted to women so I could see why Benjamin stuck to being bisexual, but at some point, I accepted that I was gay and I made a choice. I said, I'm gay and I'm not going to be with a girl and then pick up guys here and there. I just want to have one man. Staying in the USA was just going to keep me in the shadows. I couldn't be openly gay because I lived with my cousin and I couldn't marry a girl and get citizenship the way he had, so I started looking at my options. Cindy was the one who told me about how Canada was probably a better place for me to be. And so, I left.

I was still nineteen when I arrived in Canada and luckily I met this guy who belonged to this youth group. The group was for gay teenagers and young adults who

were trying to come out of the closet. I guess you didn't have to be gay to join the group as it was open to everyone, but the purpose of it was to help young gay people. It was in a church and they held meetings or activities once a week to talk about all kinds of stuff, anything really. It was a very helpful program because it helped you realize that you were not alone. I was not alone. I wasn't the only that was going through challenges about my sexuality. I had the chance to meet other Canadians who were, well, who were young and my age. And as the young people spoke, the older members who were over thirty would talk about how they went through similar things and it was great. I remember them talking about repeating words that hurt you. They said that by repeating these hurtful words, you wouldn't feel anything anymore the next time you heard it or someone called you it. That's why I still call my friends *culeros*, faggots or *estupidas*, stupid girls. We all call each other by those names and it's not because we're whores or prostitutes, it's just that those words don't hurt us anymore. If you think about it, when someone called me those names when I was growing up, I would feel so frustrated and angry that I wanted to cry, but you couldn't. It's not like that anymore, thank God. It was helpful for me to hear them so that I could come out of the closet and then accept myself.

I didn't come out to my family in Latin America until I was twenty-four years old. I was dating this guy, Sean, who knew that no one in my family knew about my sexuality. He asked me about my relationship with my brother because he had told his brother who then told his family, and that's how he had come out of the closet. I didn't think it was a good idea for me to do that because my brother was in Latin America and I was in Canada, but Sean encouraged me and suggested that I do it over the phone. He said that my life would be a lot smoother if I just did it. I didn't feel pressure to tell my family

from him, but one day, I called home and Ronald was the only one home. So, I felt it was the perfect time to tell him. My brother has always been a little bit more sensitive than me. Like I said, I consider myself to be more cold and it's more difficult for me to show my feelings. Perhaps it has something to do with the gay thing or with being bullied at school, but I've just always been more independent than my brother. Every time that something hard happened to him, he would come home and cry with my mom. So, when I told him I was gay, he was in tears. But, actually, it was touching. He didn't quite understand it, because you know, we grew up in the same place and so he knew that I wouldn't be able to go back home for a very long time. But, in a way, he was kind of happy that I moved away so that I could live my life.

Obviously, I wasn't there when he told the rest of my family, but my sisters told me that my mom cried too. Actually, my sisters were very supportive and they had no problem accepting me. They went from asking me if I had a girlfriend to whether or not I had a boyfriend. They're not shy about anything. In fact, they even asked me whether I was a top or a bottom in front of my parents once. Regardless, they were the ones that talked about it more with my parents and helped them go through the mental process of accepting this news. They explained to them that it's not that bad, that being gay was just who I am, and that I was still the same person. My parents called me and asked about my boyfriend and my dad just said, "if you feel alone, go for it. Go see your boyfriend." Except for that brief conversation, my dad and I have never talked about me being gay ever. He's just happy to know that I'm fine. My mom came to see me here in Canada and I wanted to show her who I was. I didn't want to hide my life from her - this is who I am, whatever I do, this is who I am. That's what I wanted her to know. I think that's what

made her more satisfied. I wasn't doing drugs. She noticed that I was drinking a bit and smoking here and there, but she also saw that I was going to school, doing exercise, and working. By coming out to my family, I think they all understood why I had to leave Latin America and why I live so far away. They understand I need to live in Canada so that I can actually live my life.

I still can't believe how much things have changed after living in Canada for eleven years. There are so many things that I never thought I was going to be able to do that are now just a part of my regular life. I mean, the fact that I am comfortable to talk about all of this stuff means that I've accepted my life. At one point, I could not stand up for myself. Today, however, if someone called me a name or said something hurtful to me, I would stand up for myself. When I walk down the street, I can see who isn't gay-friendly, but I just project this fuck off, get away from me feeling. I have more confidence anywhere I go. I wouldn't say that I am proud of being gay, in the same way that I'm not proud of being a man. I don't know if that makes sense. I guess I mean that I am who I am. I could be proud of other things that I've accomplished in my life. What I am proud of is that I wouldn't change who I am. Back in the day, when I was a kid or when I first moved to Canada, if someone could make me straight, I would have taken that opportunity. But today, there's no way I would want to be straight. It's just not part of me. It's not me, definitely not. For me, it would be like asking a straight guy if he wanted to be gay? He would say no. So, I say no! I'm comfortable enough to know myself and know that I wouldn't change my sexuality.

In order to feel this comfort, I had to let go of my religious background and being in Canada helped me to do that. I mean, Canada also has a religious and very

conservative background. I would say that some of the views or rituals here are similar to my hometown. But, Canadians have been able to separate their own personal lives from the Church. And that's what I wanted to see. I wanted to see that people could separate their lives from the Church without dying. They didn't die! It was hard to let go of those ideas, but I still believe in God. I still pray. I still use the same Catholic prayers because that's what I was, what I learned, and it's still part of my identity. It's my way of communicating with God. I don't believe in the man-made Church. The state of the Church is what I don't believe in anymore and that's why I don't follow it.

Now, I go to the gym and shower completely naked. I have no shame with my body at all anymore. I'm not showing off or it's not because I want other people to see my body, it's just that I'm comfortable with myself. Just thinking back to what I was like when I was fifteen and comparing it to who I am today, it's just unbelievable. I just don't have the same feelings anymore. I'm not ashamed and I don't think that I'm not good enough. I'm just a normal guy. The feelings I had about never being able to accomplish anything are gone. Being in Canada, I had to learn my third language in order to go to high school and work. But, I realized that it wasn't that hard and that I could do it. Math is math. Physics is physics. I love physics and chemistry. I took finance courses and everything went so well, like so smooth. And being alone in Canada, I couldn't just be a student. I had to work and meet other responsibilities, but I still found it easy. So, back in Latin America, those thoughts, those feelings, I was just torturing myself.

Even now, I feel very vulnerable when I go to Latin America. I'm not as confident as I would like to be when I'm there compared to what I'm like here in Canada. I don't know what it is but I just feel weak. I mean, it's not a big deal because I don't go there

often. Usually, I go just to visit my family, because like I said, I don't have very many friends from my childhood. There are a few that I visit from the one year of university I completed there. Again, I wouldn't say they are good friends, but we still chat on Facebook. In fact, one of them is gay too, although he doesn't think so. It's weird and awkward because he's married to a woman and has two kids, but he is still under that same belief that because he's having sex with other guys just as the top, he's not gay. Perhaps being around those same beliefs weakens my developing confidence. Who knows?

Still, I hope that I will continue on in the same positive way. So far, the place where I work has no issue with my sexual orientation. At work, everyone knows that I'm gay and whenever someone asks me if I have a girlfriend, I just respond by saying, "you mean boyfriend?" I feel a lot more confident and that's helped me to be more bold. I've lived in a few Canadian cities now and everywhere I've been has been open to gay guys. Actually, it's been more challenging being Latin American in Canada than being gay. Some Canadians I've come across give me the sense that I was not meant to learn their language, that I would not be able to work here, and that I wouldn't know anything because I am from a third world country. So, when I start talking about politics or topics I find interesting, they realize that I'm not as Latino as they want me to be. I mean, it's clear that I have gaps in English, but I can still have a conversation about relevant topics. Usually, these types of people only want to use me so that they can practice their Spanish.

I will say that the one thing I wish was different about the gay community was the promiscuity. I don't like it. I guess it's because we're like all male animals. We're always ready to have sex. With these new technologies, it's become so easy to have sex. I know

that everyone is different and I don't necessarily think that this just happens in the gay community. Heterosexuals do it too. Actually, that's the thing: everyone is different! A lot of people talk about how gays are more organized, cultured, better at decorating, hosting major events, or knowledgeable about fashion. But I think anyone can do that. Honestly, for me, I would love to get married. I see marriage being more than being with someone whom I can support and raise a family. I see marriage as a huge challenge. It's a huge thing to raise a kid because it's more than another responsibility. For me, it means that you have thought about what you are going to teach that child. I guess that's why I'm still single because I want to find the person that sees life in a similar way to me, especially about raising children. But so far, the guys I have met are either too into drugs or parties or religion.

Even though it took me years to get to where I am today and it was such a tedious process, I hope it's just going to keep getting better. And, not just for me or not just in big cities or in big corporations, but that we're going to be able to talk about homosexuality freely in places like my hometown where I grew up. You know, it's too bad that I didn't have the resources or people I could rely on when I had big questions about who I was. I wish that there could have been someone else I could have learned from or see that living as a gay man was an option. But, that didn't happen. I can't do anything about that anymore. I do hope that there will be resources for other kids out there today. I just think that kids are kids and they should be kids with their own lives who are able to choose their own paths. I don't want kids to be trapped in shadows like I was pretending to be something they're not. I hope that the culture in Latin America will change. It will evolve. I know it will take time, but I'm very positive that it will change.

**Epilogue.** Exhaustion. I was beyond tired at the end of Lucas's story. As had been the case with Alex, so much of what Lucas said resonated with my own personal experiences. The bullying he endured, his ideas about the Catholic Church, his personal self-torture, and feeling disgusting. Although the specific detail was different, I knew and understood what he had gone through. At this point, however, my being could not handle much more. Since early this morning, I had met new people at brunch, interviewed Alex, had been overwhelmed at Safeway, and now completed a second interview. I could not wait to get back to the hotel, take a nap, and visit with my friend, colleague, and classmate, Emma, about anything but gay people and experiences.

However, when I returned, Emma was ready to go explore the gay village and festival. There were so many things to see, but after such an emotional day, we took some time to sit in the festival gardens, where a concert was taking place. As we sat and listened to the music, a young gay couple caught my attention. They were chasing each other around the park and each time they caught each other, they would kiss and hug each other as if they had not seen each other for weeks. Then, the chasing and kissing process began again. My initial reaction was fear and the phrase that came into my head was "they are going to get shot." Again, another example of the intense paralysis I had faced earlier in the day at Safeway.

This time, however, I started to think about Lucas and his determination to make his life better. His matter of fact manner of expressing his experiences struck me, especially when he spoke about walking across the American border and when moving to Canada. I thought to myself, here is a man who did not know how to speak English, who had no family or anyone waiting for him to help him transition into Canadian culture, and

who did not know how he was going to meet his basic needs. To me, it seemed as if he had one vision; he needed to get to a place where he could be himself and he was willing to do whatever it took to get there, no excuses. In contrast, I grew up in Canada. I am more Canadian than Latin American. I have two undergraduate degrees and I am living in a city and working in a school district that inhibits me from being who I am. Why am I not doing anything about it? Why am I torturing myself by the choices I make? As Lucas would probably say, it is because of fear. I am afraid of leaving the security of a continuous contract. I am afraid of not being able to get a job in a city I want to live in. I am afraid of life, as if I have no say with what happens to it. But, despite all of the challenges in Lucas's life, he is not only surviving, but he is thriving. He is happy and his goals are slowly coming to fruition. Listening to Lucas inspired me to make active choices with what I truly want in life and then going for it without excuses.

Emma, who had caught the attention of another pair of male models similar to the one's outside of the Safeway earlier in the day, kept suggesting I go and have a shot with them. Although I kept saying no and trying to avoid her encouragement, I eventually made my way over and allowed myself to just enjoy the moment. Emma, throughout the trip, had been asking me about the kind of man I find attractive. I kept saying I did not know. Despite being surrounded by gay individuals in one of the most gay-friendly cities in Canada, I could not even look around to see what the men around me looked like. With that continual image of Lucas walking across the desert in search of a free life in my mind, I shyly and briefly disclosed to her what I have known and felt about other men in that regard since I became aware of my same-sex sexual attraction. Vulnerability is not

easy. But, if I ever want to run around in a park chasing my partner and lovingly embracing him, I have to take the first step, even if it is a small one.

### **Daniel's Story**

Alex has kissed a few girls. That girl Carla, in eighth grade. He liked it, though it felt mechanical and fast. Powerful but not passionate. He kissed Lang once, too, but more as a joke. He liked the process, the act – but not really the people he was doing it with. This is different. It's not mechanical. It's not a joke. It feels right. He'd do it forever, if he could. He realizes it is how a kiss is *supposed* to feel.

-Martin Wilson, *What They Always Tell Us*

**Prologue.** Driving to Memorial Park, I felt excited and a little bit nervous to listen to Daniel's story, the final participant. Based on my phone and e-mail interactions with him, it was clear to me that he is a thoughtful and intelligent person. A few times, he had joked about how he would probably say a lot and that I might have to interrupt him so that the interview would not take several hours. I was not worried about that. I reassured him that I was looking forward to listening to his experiences. I was more concerned about the location he had selected to meet me for his interview: initially at Memorial Park, and if it rained, at a local coffee shop. I was not sure if my audio-recording software would pick up our voices in either location, but I agreed to give it a shot.

When I arrived, I was pleasantly surprised by the peaceful ambiance. Memorial Park is not far from the busyness and chaos from the downtown core of a major Canadian city and, as soon as I got out of my vehicle, I felt calm. I did not know exactly where I was going to meet Daniel, so I made my way over to the nearest park bench. The park was empty minus some individuals walking their dogs and I quickly relaxed, as I realized we would have no problem with the audio recording. Because of my nerves, I purposefully paid attention to my breathing and thought about my recent trip to Eastern

Canada and the two previous participants. I felt immense gratitude for those experiences and disbelief with the positive changes emerging in my own life as a result.

My deep breathing was interrupted by a text message saying, “I’m here. Wearing a green hoodie. Let me know when you arrive.” I scanned the park, noticed Daniel, and texted him back letting him know where I was. After brief introductory formalities, he asked me where I would like to sit, on the park bench or on the grass. I selected the grass, he took out a blanket from his bag, and we made ourselves comfortable as possible as I went through the informed consent procedures of the interview. He expressed support and interest in my research and I appreciated his efforts to encourage me regarding grad studies, since he had finished his master’s degree a few years prior.

I noticed feeling relieved that Daniel was so tranquil and poised. He sat on the blanket as if he was going to begin a yoga session and I admired his willingness to share his experiences. From the moment we sat down, it was clear that he felt more than comfortable opening up to a stranger and sharing intimate moments from his life. At this point, Daniel is twenty-eight years old and is self-employed in the health industry. Having undergraduate and graduate degrees in molecular biology, genetics and pharmacophysiology, he is an accomplished scientist working with pharmaceutical companies that sell cosmetics and natural health products. He helps companies reach compliance with Health Canada by identifying how these products function in the body and how they benefit individuals. With gentle enthusiasm, he clutches his legs tightly and begins to share his story:

**A Man Without a Land.** I had an amazing childhood in Latin America. Our family of six, mom and dad, plus four boys – Mateo, me, Thiago, and Isaac - was very

close, mainly because my mom always made sure that we were part of one another's lives. So, if one of us was doing something, we were all involved in that something that that person was doing, whether it be sports, music, graduation, whatever. My mom made sure that we were all involved and that we were all actually cared about. When we were little, we would have music hour or story hour or whatever before bedtime and we'd just all sit down and talk or tell a story or sing a song and it was just time for all of us to be together as a family. That was always something that was very dear to me. I look back at my family and say we have always been very close because my mom made the effort to bring us close together. She always made sure that we apologized to each other when we were fighting, to always make sure that we talked to one another using kind language, never harsh language, never cursing, never yelling. We were allowed to fight, but just not allowed to scream at each other or what not. From an early age, she made sure that my brothers and I had very well defined conflict resolution skills.

Growing up in a house with all boys, we never had access to dolls or anything of the sort. But I remember having friends who were girls or even my female cousins and they would bring their Barbies over to family gatherings and they would always be playing with their Barbies. And, you know, my male cousins, they would be playing soccer, but I would be interested in playing with the girls. So, I would. But then, my mom would just come and say, "no, no, no. Go and play soccer. Go and play with your male cousins. Go and climb trees and go and build clubhouses, but I don't want you playing with Barbies." I remember just feeling like there was something wrong with me because I wanted to play Barbies. I didn't feel wrong wanting to play Barbies but I thought there must be something wrong with it even though I don't feel wrong. So I suppressed it. But I

always, still, wanted to play Barbies. If no one was looking, if no one was paying attention, I'd immediately go and play with the Barbies and I didn't care if someone found me. When someone did find me, I just went back and played with the boys and then eventually go back to playing Barbies. In my mind, there was nothing wrong with it, but I didn't want anyone to think that there was something wrong with me.

I remember not really being engaged when playing with the boys. Because it's not something that I wanted to do, I remember half-assing the experience and not really looking to interact. I remember my male cousins who were older than me interacting with one another and I didn't feel like I could interact with them in the same way. I can't even tell you how they related to one another because I didn't and couldn't and it wasn't part of my experience, so I don't know how they did it. I just remember feeling like I couldn't just sit there with them and have a conversation, which is what I was interested in most.

I have very early, early memories shortly before going into grade one where I wanted to share my candy with boys. It's such a weird thing because it's not like we were talking about dating or anything. It's just that I would see my older brother sharing his candy with girls because he liked them or whatever, but I wanted to do the same thing with boys. It never really felt weird and it never really felt different, it just was. As I got older and went into upper elementary, I had a whole bunch of girlfriends, I guess as much as you can at that age. I remember always being very aware that there's something there that I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was, but that there was something that made me just want to kind of deal with boys differently. In the back of my mind, I always knew that I had this difference, especially because my brothers always wanted to go and play soccer and I was always more interested in interacting or talking and doing things like

dancing or putting on plays. That's always what I was attracted to. It's just what I naturally wanted to do, but eventually, over time, I just realized that it's not what I should've been doing and I started behaving in a more normal way, I guess.

I don't remember anyone ever saying that homosexuality was wrong until later in life. No one ever said that to me. But, I started putting two and two together that guys hanging out with guys or having that kind of relationship was negative. The term people used was *marica*, which is the equivalent of *faggot*, and it was used in a very negative way, but it wasn't the worst thing that you could say to someone. Nowadays, it's something that everyone says to everyone and it's not a problem. But, at the time, I remember feeling like it was used as a derogatory term, so right then and there I knew that that word is used to put someone down and if you are a *marica* or whatever that is, then that can really hurt you. I knew I didn't want to be associated with that word. I guess the word *marica* was the first time that I realized there was a term for what I was feeling and automatically, that first connection was negative.

When I got into puberty, when it became more apparent that what I was feeling was an attraction that was also sexual, having been to Church my entire life and living in Latin America, I understood that that kind of interaction was not something that was celebrated or even discussed in any way, shape, or form. So, I never discussed it with anyone and I lived my life as I thought I should live it. Eventually though, my older brother and I got to the age where my mom and dad sat us down with a whole bunch of books on sex ed and they were very open about sex. They were never afraid of touching the subject and saying this is how it is, what girls are, what boys are, or what happens when boys and girls love each other. They were never afraid of talking about condoms.

They were never afraid of talking about intercourse or anything of the sort, as long as it was heterosexual. Of course, why would they think anything different?

But, I do remember they made the sex ed books available to us and there was a section on homosexuality, which I was very interested in because it answered a lot of the questions that I had. I think they gave us maybe four or five books but there were only about three or four pages on homosexuality. In that section, it included information about male prostitution and how it was very common for guys who are homosexual to be prostitutes. I remember thinking that that sucked because it meant that that's what I was going to end up doing in a way. Of course, it ended up being not true, but I still remember thinking that was really going to suck. So, there wasn't a lot of information and, at the time, there wasn't a lot of information anywhere else. We didn't have the Internet. Computers were not accessible. Libraries didn't have books on sexuality that you could take out. There was no information out there for me to go and seek anything. I was twelve or thirteen years old and what I knew was that being gay was something negative and now it was something that was also taboo.

Still, I didn't feel out of place in my family. Since my dad is a musician, singing was always part of our lives – that in itself made me feel it was okay to be musical. My older brother, who I identified with a lot, is also a musician. The fact that he sang, the fact that he played the guitar led me not to feel different within my family. We were the touch-feely, artsy brothers who read books blah blah blah, while our two younger brothers were jocks who were not musically inclined at all. Even though they knew that I was bad at sports, they never made fun of me or never made me feel like I was less than them because of it. I guess I was lucky enough to grow up in a family, at least on my

dad's side, that was very well educated and well-to-do in terms of money. The social status of my family was a little bit higher than most people and because of that, whatever we did was automatically accepted as being part of the status quo. So, when I went to school and I didn't want to play sports, it didn't really matter because most of the boys who were playing sports were part of a lower social class. No one ever pointed it out or made fun of me because I was one of the few boys who wanted to go and play guitar and sing and act. It made me feel like I was less traditional because I didn't want to play football or soccer. I didn't want to play basketball. I didn't want to play volleyball. I knew that I was kind of different in that regard, but that social class separation made it easier for me to not feel as different.

In terms of gender stereotypes or roles, they were less defined in my household. With so many boys in the house, we always took care of everything. My mom never really said this is what boys are supposed to do and this is what girls are supposed to do because we didn't have a female sibling. So, my mom taught all of us that we had to clean, do laundry, cook, get our clothes ready for school, and that whenever we could help, we had to. Even though my mom did a lot for us, she wasn't going to do everything for us, and so I guess she made us do a lot of the things that would now be associated with a girl doing it for a guy. Obviously, we saw a bit of that with my mom and dad and their relationship, but for my brothers and I, those gender roles and boundaries were fuzzier.

When the civil conflict in my country got really bad and boys our age were starting to disappear, my mom decided that we were going to move. You know, we weren't in direct danger. We weren't living in the jungle. We weren't living in a rural

area or whatever, but my mom said that she didn't want us to live anywhere where we couldn't go to our music classes because we might not come back. The hope was just to live in the USA for a couple years, wait for things to cool down, and then go back. But, after getting the American paper work to go and we did move, things changed significantly.

First, my older brother had already moved to begin his studies in the seminary, so he was already away from our family because he was involved in his Church. My mom and dad, at this point, had both started working and my mom had always been a homemaker, but now needed to make sure we always had money to provide for the family. That meant my two younger brothers and I were left on our own. We all went into this sort of depressive state where we were all asking ourselves, what are we doing here? Why do we have to be here? Why can't we go back to Latin America where we know how things work, where we don't have to worry about immigration, where we speak the language, and we can just be ourselves? We didn't like being in the USA at the time and so, that took us all on very different kinds of ways of dealing with that.

For me, I went into a state of isolation. I didn't really have any friends at school and I didn't feel like I wanted to have friends, even though I did want friends. So, I forced myself into isolation including isolation from my family. My older brother who was always my best friend was no longer around to guide me and hang out with me and talk to me about stuff. He was away. I didn't feel like I could connect with my younger brothers because I was a teenager. I was fourteen years old and they were eleven and nine and I just didn't feel like I could connect with them. I didn't want to connect with my parents at all, probably because of normal teenage stuff. I was always by myself not

really wanting anything because I missed my friends in Latin America. I missed my family in Latin America. I missed how my family interacted in Latin America and we no longer had that.

Overtime, I guess we all kind of got used to living in the United States and we started having our together time again through Church. My older brother came back into the picture and we slowly got back to having the same type of very intimate, very close, very kind, very loving interaction between the six of us and that was a very good anchor. When our immigration status was denied in the USA and we received our deportation letter, we anchored ourselves to one another because we didn't have anything yet again. We were forced to just pack up everything we had in thirty days, wrap up our lives that we had lived for the last four years, and just leave.

When we got to Canada, we depended on each other for intimacy, for attachment, and that anchor to one another was our base. We were secure in ourselves because we had each other, and so, in a way, the good that came from moving was that it made us closer and closer and closer. By this point, I was nineteen, and my brothers were fifteen, seventeen, and twenty-one, so we were getting out of our teenage years and moving into adulthood. We were actually able to relate to one another more and we were more like friends than we were before. And then, two or three years later, our immigration status in Canada was denied and we were going to be forced to leave Canada and leave our lives behind again. However, by some miracle, another application that we had sent to immigration years before went through and we were granted permanent resident status. It was incredible! The whole time that I had been living outside of Latin America, I had lived in this constant state of anxiety over immigration and whatnot. And so, having that

application come through was so liberating. It was liberating to all of us because now we didn't have to live in that constant state of anxiety. We were always afraid of checking the mail or checking the status of our applications online because it was scary. We didn't know where we were going to go next. Finding out that we were going to stay in Canada gave us the freedom to no longer be attached to that anxiety we had lived in just waiting. We were actually going to be able to start planning our lives for ourselves the way we wanted them knowing that we could stay here and make a life for ourselves in Canada. This happened in 2007, and as soon as that happened for me, the gay theme entered my mind. It was like not having to worry about immigration all the time now allowed me to connect and deal with this other thing that I had ignored for the last four or five years. Since I left Latin America, I really just wanted that part of myself to come out, but I just couldn't.

I definitely didn't have an "ah ha" moment. It was never anything like that. It was a progression of knowing that there was something there as a kid to going through my adolescence and realizing that these feelings were more than just an attraction. It was basically a process of fifteen or sixteen years. I never hated myself for being gay, but I remember when anything related to gays was discussed, I was very vocal about it in a negative way. Even though I never brought that topic up, if someone else discussed it, I made sure to say something along the lines of "yeah, that person's a fag." I felt hypocritical because here you are saying shit about this person because they're gay and you know that you're gay. I never felt vicious because it was very mild and it was more about me living in the atmosphere I was living in. I guess that was internalized homophobia in a way, but I never actually directed it towards myself.

I guess because I knew that the gay thing was in my mind only and I didn't really have a problem with anyone finding out because I wasn't doing anything that was gay, I knew that I was safe. By this point and all through puberty, I always had girlfriends. It didn't feel weird to me. It felt normal. I didn't have to fake it. I didn't have to do anything special or different. I actually enjoyed being with girls and being in the company of girls cause it was never hard for me to go and ask a girl out on a date or to flirt with girls. You know, it was never hard for me to interact with girls, never at all. By the time I got to the age where I became sexually active, my first time was with a girl and it wasn't a problem at all. I didn't feel funny. It didn't make me feel different. It was just a part of who I was at the time.

Friends or peers didn't question my sexuality because I've gone through different phases of friends. So, I've had the friends that belong to my Latin America years, then the friends that belong to my high school years in the USA, then those that were a part of my American college years, then the different Canadian cities, and none of these friends have actually spilled into any other periods of my life until very recently. So, I had very defined friendships that had a beginning and I knew were going to have an end. People talk about having best friends, but I never really had a best friend because I always knew, in a way, that eventually I had to move somewhere or I would be removed from somewhere. I never really built those kinds of close friendships. I do remember, one time, that one of my female friends in the US brought it to my attention that I hung out with a lot of girls. I remember her telling me to be careful because some people could think I was gay. I told her that I hung out with a lot of people and it just happened that the people I hung out with in the college program were all Latin American and happened to be

female. She was a jealous person and so, I just took it as her being jealous, and not her actually thinking that I was gay. But, it did raise a bit of a little warning in me. I thought to myself, you need to adjust how you deal with people a little bit, but it wasn't a big deal enough for me to do something drastic.

Again, I don't know if knowing is the right term for what I was feeling. I didn't just know that I was gay, but I had acknowledged that there was something there. If I saw a girl that I thought was pretty, I automatically forced myself to look at her ass because I told myself that's what I should be looking at. If I saw a cute boy, automatically, without even thinking about it, I'd look at him but then be like, no, no no, just look at girls. At this point, too, the Internet was accessible to me, so I had already gathered lots of information. I had browsed through porn multiple times and I found myself, even though I forced myself to go to straight porn, I always found myself going through gay porn. So, I knew that something was there, but I never actually acknowledged it and gave it a name and said gay. I thought, maybe it's just normal to have this kind of attraction. I became really good at deleting the history from the computer because I became paranoid that people would find the history. But, because I was always very computer literate, more than anyone in my family, after I had gone through the whole process of deleting everything, I knew that it was done. My stress of anyone finding out was gone. I dealt with it in that moment and so it couldn't generate chronic stress for me. I knew that my secret was safe. I never spoke about it with anyone, not even with the priest in confession. So, I knew no one knew about me, only me, and I wasn't going to tell anyone. I never felt unsafe.

I envisioned my life like any other heterosexual boy would envision his life. I always thought that I was going to get married to a girl and that I was going to have a family. I thought I would go through college and sleep around with a whole bunch of girls and eventually move on to having a steady girlfriend, then asking her to marry me, going through a wedding, going through the first years of marriage, having kids, raising those kids, and essentially, like a movie, living the perfect progression of any heterosexual couple's life. I remember feeling excited about having to propose to a girl and going through pregnancy with a girl. I was excited about the whole birthing process and raising a child with a woman. I never doubted for a second that I wasn't going to lead a heterosexual life, even though I knew something was there. And because I never had a problem connecting with girls or having intimacy with girls, I was really excited about this future life. I thought, yeah, there's this gay thing going on here, but I know that I can have all the things I want - with the exception of the sexual part with a man - with a girl. I never felt fearful about this, just excited for my life.

Around a year before my immigration problems were solved, I began dating this girl that I met at university. She was one of the first people I met when I moved to Canada and, because I was unsure of my immigration status at this point, I wasn't really looking to make connections with a lot of people. It was easier for me to actually have a girlfriend than it was to have friends because having girlfriends helped me anchor myself. Having a girlfriend makes me feel secure about myself. However, early on in our relationship, she told me that she kind of cheated on me. She wasn't the type of girl to do something like that, so I asked her to tell me what was going on. She explained that she didn't really cheat on me, but that there was another girl that had kissed her and she was

confused about it and needed to figure it out. I was very supportive of her because I loved her and our relationship was serious, well, at least for a second-year university, twenty-one-year-old student. I found myself telling her that she needed to deal with that and that I was going to be there for her to support her because I loved her and wanted her to be happy. At the same time, I thought, shit, how can I not say that to myself? She might be gay, you know that you have this within yourself too, but why can't you be as supportive to yourself as you are to her? We ended up breaking up, tried dating again, but things got very messy and I went into a deep state of depression.

I wasn't being hard on myself for being gay, but I was being very hard on myself for not giving myself the space to figure it out. That, in combination with immigration, court, appeals, hearings, just made things really stressful. I started just smoking a whole bunch of pot. I started drinking a lot. Again, it wasn't because I was gay. It was because I didn't know how to deal with wanting to come out and not knowing how to do it. I started seeing a counsellor at school and he sent me to a psychiatrist who gave me sleeping medication and eventually depression medication. I was mixing that up with pot and I was mixing that with alcohol. I was doing things that I knew were not good for me and I was pretty sure that I was going to fail school. I didn't know anything. I didn't know how to deal with anything in my life at that time. The only thing I knew how to do was smoke, drink, and just watch movies. So, that's what I did for months and months at the time.

Mateo, my older brother, actually was the one that kind of saw how lost I was, but he didn't really know what was going through my mind. He just thought I was heartbroken, so he introduced me to a girl, Carmela, and she was a very awesome girl.

She was older than me and because I knew that relationships were always good for me, I held onto her and began to feel okay again. She had graduated from university already and was living on her own in another city and I saw her as someone who had her life figured out. It was a very weird situation. Carmela had a couple of gay friends, Miguel and Esteban, who were a couple, and we would all go out together. At the beginning, I remember being really weirded out by the fact that these two guys were not only gay, but they were a couple. In my mind, I was like, whoa! I knew of people who were gay, but I had never really known a gay person at this point. But here were these two guys who are really nice and are normal people who are in a relationship with each other. They were so normal.

I started hanging out with Miguel and Esteban more and asking them questions about how they met, how they came out, normal things like that. But, in my mind, I thought, look at these two guys: They're older, they have things figured out, and they're fine with who they are and whatnot. I saw them being just a couple of regular people who were engaged in a relationship, who were fighting about the stupidest little things like every couple does, and who had really beautiful, loving, intimate moments that were outside of just two men having sex. It was actually two people, two human beings connecting on that level; they love each other. And I saw them loving each other and I just thought to myself: wow, that can happen, that exists, it's there! That's definitely what turned it around for me. It wasn't something that I saw from far away. It wasn't something that anyone was telling me. You know, at this point, gay people were more accepted and were out having relationships, and I remember songs that included gay relationships. I remember a Christina Aguilera song and there were two guys kissing in

the video, but I just thought that it was all about sex. The gay thing was a sexual thing. Now, I saw two men connect in the same loving connection that I thought I could only have with a girl. But, it was there in those two guys.

My mind was going through so many things. I like Carmela, immigration is a mess, and now I've come across this couple. I was so confused about everything that was going and I asked myself, how do I deal with this? Fortunately, I had the opportunity to go back to Latin America as part of a three-week research program through my university. I was confused about this whole gay thing and I'm confused about how I feel about Carmela, so I decided I would take time to focus on school. It was the first time I was going to go back to a Spanish-speaking country in eight years and it was the change of scenery I needed. Our research was on the ecology of this island on a natural reserve. Basically, there was no civilization for days and days and we were on this boat where our prof really encouraged us to find time on our own. He told us that we needed to get off the boat, swim to the island, and be by ourselves to prevent cabin fever. It actually happens. I wanted to kill so many of those people, but it forced me go be by myself. I found myself thinking about everything that had been happening to me for a long time and I found myself being closer to who I was as a person. I thought about Carmela and about Miguel and Esteban. I wanted my life to be just wholesome. I want my life to be full and I don't want to have any regrets. I thought that I was going to marry a girl and I thought that I was going to have kids and all these other things with a woman, but I really want to live my life without regrets. I want to live my life as I want to live it, not as I'm told that I want to live it. I don't want to hurt anyone and, through Miguel and Esteban, I had heard stories of men who had come out later when they had been married to women

for a couple of years and had kids and families and how devastating that was, so I knew I didn't want that. I thought that if I'm going to go out and do and just pretend to live a life that I know that I can live but that I'm going to be questioning this, I need to be sure. I don't want regrets.

It's kind of silly the way things happened, but I decided that I was going to go back and propose to Carmela. It made no sense after having gone through the whole I want to live life without regrets, but I've always been a stupid romantic. I wanted to give her a try and because I thought I loved her, the next logical thing was to propose to her. I guess things happen the way they're supposed to because when I went to have that conversation with her, her ex-boyfriend opened the door and she told me that they were going to get back together again. I was really confused, but I thought, in that case, I'm going to come out and I'm going to try being with men and dating men and see what it's like. Maybe then I can make a decision for my life without having regrets. Because I didn't fully know what I was and because I was very confused, I never really labeled myself. I never said I'm gay. I never said I'm bi. I just said, I like guys.

I had seen a few guys, but I thought that my family deserved to know right away. I didn't want them to find out through anyone else or any other way, especially because of everything we had gone through together. I felt they deserved to know before anyone else. Naturally, I started with my brothers because they've always been my best friends. I told brother number three, Thiago, and he was very supportive. He didn't have a problem. It brought us closer together actually and then I told brother number four, Isaac. He was cool with it. I told my older brother, Mateo, who is a Catholic priest, and he, too, didn't have any problems with it. I mean, eventually we had conversations about how the whole

gay thing affects us and our connection because, you know, he's a Catholic priest and I'm a gay man, but he was very supportive of me regardless. In fact, the relationship with my brothers has grown and we are the best of friends. Even though I've lived away from them for a long time, we've always kept in close contact and my two younger brothers have been amazing people to me. I don't speak that often to my older brother anymore, but that has nothing to do with the gay thing. It's got more to do with the fact that he, I feel, has been absorbed by his life as a religious person. He's kind of left the family behind. Regardless, the gay thing wasn't a big deal to my brothers because we love each other, no matter what. We always will support one another regardless of what's happening. If my brothers do something wrong, I am always going to love them, support them, and forgive them for whatever they do. My mom instilled that loving connection in us since such an early age that it just stuck and I think that's why they were so ready to accept it.

I had been out to my brothers for a month or two and then, as I got ready to tell my parents, my brothers were, again, very supportive. They told me they were there for me and would be there for me with whatever happened. But, they encouraged me to talk to my parents, so that I wouldn't have to worry about this anymore, so that I could stop pretending. My mom did not take it very well. She was very devastated and used the word disappointed a lot, which was really sad for me to hear. My dad, on the other hand, was actually okay with it from the get-go. I thought it was going to be the other way around. I think it took them about six months to a year to fully come to terms with the fact that I was gay, but eventually, they accepted it. And then, my mom and dad both became advocates for me as a person, as a gay man. I know they have helped other

people within the Latin American community who have had their sons come out. They have been there to explain what they went through and have helped people accept that being gay is okay. Like I said, it did take my mom a while to get to that point, but once it got to that point, I felt she really accepted me. I always knew that she loved me and I always knew that she would support me no matter what or through anything, but when she started advocating for me and helping other families, it made me feel like she finally accepted my life. I knew she wasn't afraid to be a part of my life. Previously, I thought that if I came out and started dating a man to the point where I would get married and have kids, I was afraid that she wouldn't want to be a part of that. When she started advocating and when she wasn't afraid to talk about my ex-partner and I being in a relationship and living together, I realized that she accepted me for who I am.

After I told my family, some of my friends were in complete shock. They couldn't believe that out of all the people they knew, I would be the one to come out. None of my friends ever made me feel bad about being gay. No one ever made me feel bad about lying, in a way, when I was straight. All of my friends were very supportive. I guess because I was just starting to make close connections in Canada, I didn't have a ton of people I needed to go to and let them know I was gay. I just had a really small group of friends and they were very supportive, very loving, very kind. They made me feel like I belonged here even more. That was good for me.

Actually coming out was very easy and painless for me. It was the process of getting there that was challenging. Probably everyone feels this but before coming out, the thought of coming out was super scary because I didn't know what was going to happen. You're afraid of the future at that point, so that creates a lot of anxiety about

telling people and about being afraid of their reaction. I had to go through a lot of very difficult and dark moments within my mind and within my own psyche spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. I had to go through very difficult times where I isolated myself again because I didn't know what was going on in my mind. But, because the first person I told reacted so positively, and then the second person, the third person, my parents somewhat, because everyone was so supportive, that fear and anxiety got less and less and less. Because of that positive beginning, the rest happened very quickly.

Before coming out, I was very much Catholic. I went to church every Sunday and participated in the community. I sang in the choir, I was an altar boy, and anything you could do in the Church, I did it. That was just a part of how I grew up with my family. When we moved to Canada, I lost track of that because I was really fed up of asking God to help me through the immigration thing. I wanted to stay in the USA because I had a lot of educational dreams for myself and I just really wanted Him to help me. I wanted a miracle where I could stay in the US and get my citizenship. So, when we got deported, I gave up on God. I was like why? What am I praying to? Is there actually something or someone that's actually listening to my prayers? Who's going to help me? So far, I haven't seen anything. For a very long time, I ignored the God thing.

I didn't want to worry about that at all. I wanted to worry about the physical aspects of my life, as opposed to worrying about whether anything was above me or reigning over me or whatever. After I came out, I started thinking about what the Bible says and how we're not really supposed to be gay, but I asked myself, how do you actually feel about this? I came to the understanding that I did not choose to have the experience that I had in terms of feeling different for such a long time and from such an

early age, which I now know was because I was gay. It's not something I made up for myself. It was never a choice for me. If I think about the fact that God made me and God made everything that I am and everything that I'm not, then God also made me gay. He made me gay and He makes no mistakes because He is God. Then, I'm just supposed to be the way that I am. God is okay with me being gay, so I'm okay with being gay, too.

I started being more spiritual after that. I realized I could go back to praying, even though I couldn't be Catholic anymore. I can't be Catholic if I'm gay, but I can still be a Christian and I can still be religious and I can still experience God through other means outside of going to mass and taking communion. I've become a Buddhist Christian where I engage in a lot of meditation, a lot of yoga, a lot of just study of Buddhism, as a way of living my life. I bring God into Buddhism and I know people say that I can't do that, but it works for me and because it works for me, I don't really care what people think.

It's only been five years since I came out and everything has been so positive and easy that I haven't really associated being gay with anything that was bad. But there are a few things that have been challenging when I think about it. I remember when my ex-partner and I moved to a new city and he started engaging in its lifestyle, I wasn't okay with what was going on. Maybe because it was all too much happening too quickly and I was someone who had never seen anything like that before. It was just a whole bunch of gay guys doing a whole bunch of drugs and partying every single night and I was just not okay with that. My ex-partner is older than me and he had lived through some of that before, so he had already gone through the shock and fear of seeing that for the first time. He couldn't understand why I was so freaked out by it and so, I associated that with the gay lifestyle. Eventually, I met more gay people and I started to realize that that's more of

a personal choice then it is a choice of living a gay lifestyle or whatnot. Yeah, drugs exist in the gay community, but gays are not the only ones who are doing drugs. Gays are not the only ones who are promiscuous. Gays are not the only ones who party excessively and drink excessively or who have multiple sex partners at the same time. It's not a gay thing. I accepted that and acknowledged that my experience as a gay man is not any of that. So, I said, I'm okay. I'm good.

I remember being discriminated for being gay at a Cowboy club in Eastern Canada. I was already dating my ex-partner at that time and we went out to this club to celebrate a friend's birthday. Because of the atmosphere, we were not being touchy-feely or anything. We were just, you know, next to each other, but I guess people could tell that we were a couple and so, on our way out, some guys started harassing us and calling us faggots. They said they were going to beat us up and whatnot, but nothing happened. That was the first time that anyone had ever treated me in that way for any reason whatsoever, but I remember my ex being more scared and anxious than me. He took it to heart, where as for me, I knew why they were treating us that way and it didn't generate the same kind of anxiety and fear. I was more surprised and shocked that somebody was actually talking to me in that way, but I didn't feel unsafe. I just thought, well, if you touch me, I am going to make sure you end up in jail.

Another time, my ex and I were walking down the street holding hands and we were in a group of people and a drunk Native person started yelling profanities across the street. People were just in awe that this guy was being like that, especially because we were living in a very open Western Canadian city. Holding hands was never a problem, but this guy was just yelling the worst profanities and I just looked at him and just

shrugged. My ex, he was more freaked out again. But, we were walking with a friend of ours who was straight and also a bodybuilder. That guy's huge, so he just yelled back at the guy from the other side of the street and we were left alone. But honestly, apart from those few incidents, I've never really felt discriminated because of my sexual orientation.

Even earlier this year when I returned to Latin America, I thought that I couldn't be as open as I am here in Canada. You know, I thought that it might not be safe for me. So at the beginning of my trip, I was more careful. If people asked me if I had a girlfriend, I would just say no. However, if someone asked me that question in Canada, I would answer with no, but I have a partner or no, but I also don't have a boyfriend. In time, I was surprised that Latin America has become more open. Of course, not everyone, but I never felt unsafe with the people I was with. I didn't find myself in dangerous situations. I found myself with people that it was okay for me to talk about it with. That could be because I was backpacking with a lot of travellers from North America, Europe, and Australia and they are already okay with gays. So, I don't usually edit my story. If I do, it's not because I feel unsafe but more that I just don't want to get into it with people that may not be okay with it. I mean, I went to my cousin's wedding and my family fully knows that I'm gay. All of my extended family has me on Facebook and I don't hide anything on there. When I was with my ex, we had pictures up, we lived together for four years, and everyone knew it. But no one brought it up, so if they didn't bring it up, I didn't really feel like I needed to. In that way, I edited by omission I guess, but not in a way that I had to change my story or anything.

For me, I guess the only thing that I have a hard time with, and that might just be because of where I'm at right now with dealing with a break-up after a four year

relationship, is how difficult I find relationships to advance. Aside from hooking up or using anything like *Grindr*, I see a lot of relationships start and I see how people try to go out there and have relationships. I mean real relationships where people connect, but I find that gays are less willing to accept imperfections. If you're not muscular, if you don't have blonde hair, if you are not good-looking, if you're not White – I do find, actually, that there is a lot of racial discrimination in the gay community – then, people are just less willing to create that kind of real relationship and connection with you. Whereas for me, I'm more willing to look at someone for what they bring my life, as opposed to what they look like or what they don't look like. I might just be a hopeless romantic.

A lot of times, I see my friends who are out there dating and I hear about the people that they've gone on dates with and why they break-up and it makes me feel jaded. All of those guys talk about wanting to have a boyfriend and wanting to have a relationship and wanting to have a connection with someone, but then they go out and find one thing wrong with their date and it's automatically over. I don't know what it is. People want connections but they're less willing to work for those connections. It's almost as if the majority of gay men, who are White, have an avoidant attachment style. They all want that relationship, but the moment that they feel their independence is being threatened or that their freedom is going to be somehow interrupted, they shy away from that intimacy. As a Latin man, I have more of an anxious attachment style and I seek intimacy, so that I can go out and do other things in my life.

In that same regard, I think there's something to be said about interracial relationships. Obviously, having been in an interracial relationship, I think it's worthwhile having some sort of discussion as to what it means to date someone who is

Latin and what it means to date someone who is not Latin or fill in the blank with whatever culture you want. Different cultures are going to have differences, but for me, it would've been helpful to have someone to help me help my ex-partner understand how I relate to people. I've been to counselling several times in my life and it's helpful to talk to someone who is unbiased. Counsellors helped me when I was depressed and then again when I couldn't figure out how to handle the heavy party gay lifestyle that freaked me out previously. But when I found myself going to couples counselling this year, I remember being in the counsellor's office and she just kept validating everything that my ex-partner was saying. She completely pushed everything that I was saying away because she didn't understand where I was coming from culturally. Intellectually, she knew exactly where I was coming from, but intimacy wise, she had no idea how my intimacy needs were attached to who I am as a Latin person and she had no clue how to deal with me.

I'm not just a minority; I'm an immigrant. I wasn't born here at all. I have no home. I'm a man without a land. Being Latin and in Canada is like being homeless in a way. A lot of people don't understand that concept of what it feels like not to have a home. People don't know what it's like not to have a place that you go back to. It's not that I have less or anything, it just feels like I'm missing out. I'm an immigrant and you may not understand that I feel different, but when I look around, I know that I'm not from here and I know that I'm different and I'm okay with it now. I was raised in a completely different place, in a different context altogether. Even though I've gone through stages in my life that have brought me to where I am today, they are all very much defined by the fact that I am Latin. I found this counsellor not just to be judgmental, but that she didn't really understand where I was coming from. It made me feel very misunderstood and that

no one understood what was going on with me. A lot of the issues that I had with my ex were issues about how I relate with my family and how I want intimacy and closeness versus how he wanted those things. We didn't really understand each other and it was a cultural thing. When it came down to it, that counsellor validated my ex so much that he felt that he was in the right one-hundred percent and that I was in the wrong one-hundred percent. It made me feel very little.

When I went to Latin America, I spoke to my cousin who is a psychologist and she validated me fully. When we spoke about things, she put my situation in a purely Latin American context, which made so much sense to me. I know that if we had been in a couples counselling session in Latin America, that counsellor would have validated me and not him. So you know, it's the exact same problem. I'm not saying that every counsellor has to go live in Latin America and have that experience, but people who are not multicultural can achieve that through studying or through training. There can be awareness that these issues exist. I've never gone through a counselling program or anything, but the assumption can be made that a lot of the theory in terms of how couples relate to one another is probably based on people who are from North America, with people who relate to one another with a set of values that are purely North American - that leaves out the rest of the world! It would have been really beneficial to have someone who understood both of us and I mean, the result would have probably been the same, a break-up. But, I think it would have helped me to not feel as though what I was doing was so wrong. The fact that I'm a minority within the relationship was a big part of the way things ended up in the end because I feel that he treated me the way that he treated me at the end because he's White.

Despite everything, my quality of life has improved exponentially since I came out. I am more outgoing. I am friendlier. I am more secure. I am just more of so many of the good things that I always knew I wanted for myself. I am more social and, because I am open about all of these things and accepting of myself, it allows me to explore other areas of my life that continue to give me joy and that continue to help me grow as a person. It's not that those hobbies have anything to do with me being gay, but they are things that I would never have engaged in if I hadn't gotten to the point where I accepted myself. Indirectly, the fact that I'm gay led me to the things that I'm doing now.

I still want to find a partner that I'm going to have a loving connection with. I want to find someone that is going to be a part of my family and that my family is going to accept. I want someone that will be part of my circle of friends, who is going to be my best friend, who is going to support me through my growth as a human being. I want someone who will have children with me and then go out and help people to accept themselves. And it's not just about accepting gay things, I want to help people who have had similar challenges that I've had like moving away, immigration, being Latino, being a social minority, or whatever differences they've had. I want people to understand that these differences can be celebrated and how you can embrace those differences.

I've seen the power that accepting myself as I am has had in my life and how it's made me more confident, more open-minded, and more well rounded. I actually love being gay. It's not just about being able to be with another man; it's just about everything that being gay has been for me. It's about how loving and accepting people have been of the person that I fully am. Being gay has a very positive connotation for me. Being gay hasn't been a hindrance to me in relationships, at work, or with my hobbies. Eventually, I

even became sporty because I didn't identify masculinity with playing sports. It became more about what do you want to do? What do you feel like doing? I live my life without having any kind of prejudice about what I can and can't do. Being gay is not something that I should hide. It's just a part of me. The fact that I am gay helps me to relate to other people. Because I'm more willing to accept others, individuals are more willing to come and just be my friend because they know that I'm going to accept them regardless of what's going on in their lives or what's happened or who they are.

I would encourage others to be compassionate with themselves. I would encourage them to cultivate and foster self-compassion and self-love because it's more important than feeling secure. Being secure has this connotation that you can be secure if you have things that are better than what other people have. But, I don't know, people are imperfect. Whether you think being gay is an imperfection or not has less to do with how you can relate with yourself. If I saw someone who was struggling with being gay and not wanting to be gay, I would say, be compassionate with yourself. Be kind to yourself. Just love yourself regardless of who you are and foster that. There are things that you can do to foster that self-compassion and that self-love. That's what I would do.

**Epilogue.** After Daniel finished sharing his story, he asked me several questions about how I was going to use this research and, more importantly, what I had learned from the other participants. Were there similarities? What were the differences? While I did not go into explicit or specific detail, I briefly shared about the unique voice each participant had shared. He also asked me about my own life and the experiences I had gone through in the various places where I have lived. Being somewhat surprised about

what Southern Alberta was like, he offered support and suggested positive places where sexual minorities were welcome and celebrated.

As I drove away, I, like with Alex and Lucas, thought about how many experiences he shared resonated with my own life. He felt more comfortable with girls; he wanted to play with Barbies, and the challenges he faced as part of his migration experience all reminded me of times gone by. However, I was more struck with the differences, both subtle and vast. First, it was incredibly challenging for me to contain myself when he spoke about how his older brother, the Catholic priest, had accepted him without question. I understand that the familial bonds in his family are so strong that there would be no reason for him not to accept his brother, but I was really amazed that, despite obvious challenges, religious beliefs did not interfere with their relationship. That is what I want to hear from every gay man.

In many ways, I was dumbstruck by all of the positive experiences that he shared. Of course, there was immense hardship and turmoil in his life, but I loved listening to how his family and friends accepted him. In particular, I paid careful attention to his comments about his fears regarding his mother and how he felt after both of his parents became advocates for families coming to terms with their gay children. Naturally, probably because of the hardship I have faced with my own parents and the deafening silence regarding my sexual orientation with my extended family, I felt validated hearing Daniel speak. Currently, even though I know my parents love me and even though they have made healing gestures, they are still in the closet about their gay son. I wish it did not bother me, but I agree with Daniel, as I do not yet feel they accept me fully. It still seems as if my sexual orientation is something of which to be ashamed. I know my

parents disagree, but I firmly hold on to the idea that people only hide things of which they are not proud.

Daniel's experiences with female lovers also caught my attention. For me, having sex with a woman would be an almost impossible task, which would probably require pharmaceutical assistance. Regardless, Daniel comes across as being very masculine and straight acting. I did not get into a conversation about whether or not he is the penetrative partner in his sexual relations with men, but I was curious about whether or not his masculine way of being could be an additional reason others have accepted him so readily and why he has been treated positively. Unlike Alex, Lucas, or me, Daniel is not effeminate. I acknowledge that I am cautious to use terms such as masculine and effeminate because I do not want to affirm stereotypes or limit my thinking and understanding of sexuality into strict binaries, but if I had met Daniel outside of this study, I would have never thought he is gay. His commentary regarding how his secret was only in his mind is accurate and a sharp contrast from how my effeminate behaviour led others to conclude I was gay before I even knew what that meant.

Last, I felt deeply encouraged by his personal hopes for the future. It was refreshing to hear another gay man move beyond sexual conquests to long lasting human connections. More than the fact that he wants a committed partner for reasons other than what he looks like or that he wants to have children, I was most heartened by his confidence in attaining those experiences. To him, it seems that it is not a question if whether or not it is going to happen, it is just a matter of time before he finds it. I loved his perspective and it, once more, reminded me about the shifts that need to take place in my own thinking. As he shared about how much he loves being gay, it motivated me to

get to a place where I can genuinely and consistently feel fully satisfied with my sexual orientation. I want to live inside a Ricardo that no longer places limits on life based on being gay. As Daniel spoke about his desire to help others build self-compassion and self-love, I realized that I want to do the same.

In Chapter Five, I identify the themes within the interviews with the three participants. Themes are discussed in relation to the research question involving sexual identity, ethnicity, and positive identity.

## Chapter Five: Results and Discussion

### Analysis and Themes

After storying the stories, I returned to the interview transcripts to begin the process of coding for themes. In order to code transcripts, it is essential that the researcher become familiar with and close to, the data, and through this close study process, themes begin to emerge (Morse & Richards, 2002). Having gone through the storying process, I was quite familiar with each participant's interview and transcript. Therefore, I chose to begin coding interview data using the following descriptions to facilitate the retrieval of information fundamental to the research question: Themes regarding sexual identity, themes regarding ethnic identity, and themes regarding positive identity (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Within the interview data, several phenomenological themes emerged within all of the participants' stories. As such, I went through a lengthy process of changing, re-sorting, renaming, and abandoning possible categories from which to make meaning of the data collected (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Because I was uncovering the lived experiences of Latin American gay men, phenomenological themes are essential, as they are "structures of experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 79). In other words, when analyzing the lives of Latin American gay men, I attempted to select themes that clearly described elements that accurately accounted their experiences.

Please note that the quotations provided within the discussion of themes reflect the speaking skills of English language learners. Each participant speaks, at least, three languages. Consequently, quotations taken from their transcripts to support themes will, in many cases, demonstrate grammatical errors and misconjugated verbs.

### Themes Regarding Sexual Identity

In this section, I identify themes that emerged from the interviews with the three Latin American gay men that are similar to those themes found in the literature regarding the challenges in developing a sexual minority identity. These themes include:

(a) Atypical Gender Behaviour, (b) Verbal Harassment, (c) Feeling Isolated, (d) Safety in Secrecy (e) Risky Behaviour, and (f) Internalized Homophobia.

**Atypical Gender Behaviour.** All three men indicated that, as boys, their interests, behaviour, and preferences to play with girls set them apart from other boys in their families, schools, and communities.

Alex enjoyed spending time with girls pretending to cook local dishes:

I was more, let's say, a straight guy or a straight kid, he would play soccer. He would be more rough. Me, I was in the ladies side. I would go, I preferred to go with my girlfriends to go play, to make *pupusas* with mud, and, you know, my other guy friends were playing soccer or trying to be with a girl.

Lucas indicated that he was more calm and gentle compared to his male classmates and his brother. While he wanted to spend more time with girls, his gender rule-breaking actions were not welcome by anyone:

I was never a violent guy and most of my, uh, classmates were, uh, rude and they liked to play dirty and get dirty and I was just not – different – I was just not the same. I used to hang around more with girls, but I also felt a rejection cause the girls felt that, you know, they didn't feel comfortable with me around them. I just felt that I didn't fit in, in that picture, like I felt that I didn't belong there. I felt really different from my brother who is older and I didn't feel the same. Well,

he always wanted to go play soccer and do other stuff and I was more of a quiet guy.

While Daniel felt a strong bond with his three brothers, he still recognized that he would much rather play Barbies and have conversations. The other boys, however, were not interested in playing Barbies and were not interested in just talking with him. He admitted that he could not fully describe how boys related to each other because it was not part of his experience:

I was less traditional in that I didn't want to play football or soccer. I didn't want to play basketball. I didn't want to play volleyball. I just wanted to go and play guitar and sing and act and I was one of the few boys who did it, so I knew that I was kind of different in that regard.

Participants also discussed how their parents corrected their atypical gender behaviour by redirecting them in their activity choices or by restricting interaction with girls.

**Verbal Harassment.** The three men indicated that verbal harassment was another prevalent factor in determining their feelings of difference.

Alex indicated that life in his neighbourhood was more challenging than his home or school life:

Even I remember if I go to the corner store, they say, hey *mamasita, culero, mama verga*, come and record on the microphone. Things like that they yell out on the street. So, me, I was in a very bad position.

Lucas encountered verbal harassment mainly at school. One of his struggles emerged from not being able to stand up for himself. His siblings, in particular his brother

also got bullied via association. His younger sisters stood up for themselves and their brothers. In retrospect, Lucas spoke about how those insults were especially painful because of his age:

Uh, *maricón, estupidas, locas, culeros*. Uh, that doesn't sound so bad, but it is an insult if you're a male growing up. Someone would call me like that, I would just, like, feel frustrated, anger, to the point that I wanted to cry but you couldn't.

Daniel was not necessarily bullied or harassed verbally. However, for him, verbal harassment helped him recognize that there were negative connotations to being an effeminate boy:

The term that was used was *marica*, which was the equivalent of faggot. I remember just feeling like it was used as derogatory term. I knew, okay, there's context to that word being used to kind of put someone down and if you are *marica* then that can really hurt you. So, you don't want to be associated with that word.

Each individual found different ways to cope with verbal insults. They were influencing experiences that informed their choices to withdraw from active participation in their communities.

**Feeling Isolated.** While participants did not have the adequate language or vocabulary to express their feelings of difference, confusing messages about their expected behaviour as boys compared to what they felt internally led to intense feelings of isolation.

Alex was once a very popular person in his community. However, when he attempted to express his sexual identity, rumours spread through his neighbourhood, which left him without a peer group:

I had a lot of friends and I guess their parents said don't talk to Alex. So, it was very sad because you have a neighbourhood and you cannot be friends with them.

Lucas, because of consistent bullying from his classmates, chose to withdraw in order to secure a sense of safety and as a mode of survival:

I actually created some sort of a cocoon. Uh, I was like the nerd guy at school. I was not really sociable. Yeah, but it was when I was eleven, uh it was really hard. I was the guy that was bullied at school.

Daniel, struggling to find the space to think about his sexual identity in the midst of moving to different countries during his adolescence also preferred to withdraw:

I kind of went into an isolated, like a state of isolation, where I didn't really have any friends at school, including isolation from my family. Um, I didn't feel like I wanted to have friends even though I wanted to have friends. So, I was at school just always by myself not really wanting anything.

Participants did not appreciate being isolated from their respective communities, but at that time, it was the best option.

**Safety in Secrecy.** With limited resources and supportive adults in their lives, participants learned to keep their most inner feelings to themselves. While they did not necessarily appreciate hiding important aspects of their lives, staying quiet about certain events helped them to explore their sexual identity without the danger of rejection.

Alex noted that he secretly integrated himself quite successfully into the gay community in both Latin America and Canada whilst considering whether or not he would admit his homosexuality. For him, hiding his sexual identity became second nature: “I was used to having a life that I didn’t share with anyone, unless you’re my gay friend.” Finding a peer group was invaluable in having an outlet to express his confusion and fear.

When Lucas had his first same-sex relationship, he struggled immensely in private, but it was the best option in staying out of trouble and avoiding persecution from his cousin with whom he was living at the time:

I was, uh, torturing myself quite often mentally. You know, like don’t do this cause otherwise you’re going to get sick, you’re going to die very soon, something wrong is going to happen to you. Uh, I always was actually telling myself that I was not worth enough to live, that I was not someone who deserved to be where I was just because I was different. I was still in the closet; like I was going out with this guy and having so much fun and I couldn’t talk about it with anyone. And again, all those feelings were just for myself.

Daniel did not participate in the gay community until he had *come out* to his family. For him, keeping his sexual identity a secret helped him thoughtfully consider how to best live his life without regrets:

Because I knew that the gay thing was in my mind only, I didn’t really have a problem with anyone finding out because I wasn’t doing anything that was gay, only in my head. I knew that I was safe, that my secret was safe. I never told anyone; I wasn’t going to tell anyone.

While participants no longer live their lives in secrecy, hiding their sexual identity allowed them to feel more confident and secure when taking the challenging and potentially dangerous step to reveal their sexual identity to family and friends.

**Risky Behaviour.** At different stages in their lives, these men took risks that put their safety, physical, psychological, and sexual health in danger.

Alex expressed that being an openly gay man in his Latin American country was not a viable option. Once he found a group of gay men with whom he could express his sexual identity, taking risks made his life more exciting and adventurous:

It was cool because it was forbidden. It was intense because, you know, we were on the bus and we would hold hands very discretely. And then, you know, in a dark place, you can steal a kiss. So, it's kind of like playing with fire. We had sex in public places, in the park. Now, in general, I like to have unprotected, rough sex, you know, to bring me up to life.

Lucas did not find a peer group in Latin America. Through cruising, he was able to find other gay men during his short time in the United States. While he recognized that it was not the best way to find a peer group, his unconventional methods were common and helpful in accepting his sexual identity:

I saw guys having sex in the woods. There was this guy standing there and he wasn't doing anything, so I just stopped. He was from Latin America, too.

Anyways, this guy, we went for coffee and then he was like I want to meet again. He was, uh, a lot older than me. He was a lot more experienced than me.

While Daniel struggled to understand his sexual identity, he turned to substance abuse and procrastination to help him get through his challenges. He indicated that he was in danger of failing school but did not seem to care:

They sent me to, like a psychiatrist, so that they could give me some sleeping medication. Eventually, they gave me, uh, depression medication, and, you know, I was mixing that up with pot and I was mixing that with alcohol. I was doing things that I knew were not good for me. I didn't know how to deal with anything in my life at that time, so I was like, the only thing that I do know how to do is smoke, drink, and just watch movies. So that's what I did for months and months.

Participants recognize that their choices, although not necessarily prudent, were helpful in coping with the difficulties of having a homosexual sexual identity, especially because they had limited resources at their disposal.

**Internalized Homophobia.** One of the most challenging aspects of accepting a sexual minority identity comes from being immersed in a culture and society that promotes heterosexuality exclusively and ridicules non-conforming individuals.

Alex adopted many Latin American messages regarding homosexuality. He struggled to accept and be around gay men who flamboyantly expressed their sexual identity:

You know, when I see like a queer, I cannot stand that. It's too much, you know. Like, if you want to be a girl then simply change sex, you know, and change completely. Don't be a man all queer – *toda marica*.

Lucas, even though he left Latin America so that he could potentially be himself, also struggled to accept public displays of affection between same-sex couples:

When I left Latin America I totally hated gays. Just to say it, like I hated them. I didn't want to have anyone around me, any gay guy next to me because, you know, I'd be concerned about what other people think about me. Um, I would, uh, make fun of effeminate guys. Uh, and it was just the fact that I couldn't understand myself.

Daniel's experience of internalized homophobia was not as harsh. Although he experienced many challenges in accepting his sexual identity, having girlfriends consistently helped him avoid negative conversations regarding homosexuality:

I never hated myself for being gay. We didn't talk about gays. But, when gay topics were brought up, I always made sure to speak up against gays because that was part of me not blending in. I felt hypocritical because I knew that, you know, here you are saying shit about this person because they're gay and you know you're gay.

Despite the varying degrees of internalized homophobia in each participant, each indicated that changing negative thought patterns or rigid views takes time. The process of understanding their sexual identity and not seeing it as a negative aspect of life facilitated change in each of their lives.

### **Themes Regarding Ethnicity**

In this section, I identify themes that emerged from the interviews with the three Latin American gay men that reflect unique challenges about being both a sexual minority and an ethnic minority. These themes include: (a) Religion, (b) Limited Education and Lack of Information, (c) Machismo, (d) Sexual Role, (e) Mental Health Challenges from Immigration, (f) Racism, and (g) Counselling.

**Religion.** With Christian ideologies strongly influencing Latin American cultures, it is no surprise that each participant was raised in Catholic households and communities. While having a religious background offered supportive elements, it also presented participants with struggling with fear and shame.

Alex indicated that the Catholic Church took an important role in his childhood, as it was a normal part of daily life:

Like going to Church every Sunday, praying before going to bed and not to sin and feel bad about your acts. So, let's say I had something with a guy, my mother has a Virgin Mary in the backyard, so I had to go there and pray and ask for redemption to be forgiven. I would pray el Rosario, the rosary, everything to be forgiven. And that happened until I was maybe twenty-three years old when I stopped doing that.

Lucas was not an active participant in his community's Catholic faith. He learned all of the rituals and traditions associated with the Catholic Church, but he always had a critical view on this dominant institution:

Everybody's Catholic. I would say that 98% of the people around me were extremely conservative. Being gay is a sin. Um, you know, that you would go to hell, that you would burn in hell, that you would, uh, that you're simply not welcome in the society. They are like, that you're a shame to society. It was this community who pushed you to being homophobic.

Daniel, in addition to living in a Catholic home and community, took an active role in his Church. He participated in various ministries, including singing in the choir

and altar serving. The Church's messages regarding homosexuality were not explicitly spoken about, but through observations, he knew same-sex relationships were immoral:

Having gone to Church my entire life and having gone through living in Latin America, I kind of understood that that kind of interaction was not something that was to be celebrated or even talked about.

Religious organizations are not exclusive to Latin America. However, I felt it was a unique element to this population, as Christianity, and in particular Catholicism in this study, is rarely separated from the public social and cultural conscience. In other words, it is fair to assume that, for the large majority of society, to be Latin American is to be Christian. The religious environments participants experienced largely inhibited their ability to recognize their sexual identity as being natural and positive.

**Limited Education and Lack of Information.** One of the most challenging aspects of understanding a sexual minority identity for these men came from not having any resources, information, or people that they could ask questions or find answers, while noticing that they were different from other boys in their communities.

Alex indicated that he felt attracted to boys at around ten years old, but he did not have anyone to which he could speak. Because his father was willing to speak about matters of heterosexual sexuality, he considered the possibility of asking him questions:

My father was really open. Like at thirteen, we started to speak about sex and how to fuck girls and stuff. So, I thought maybe my father will be open to questions about gays. But, he wasn't.

Lucas also reported that he felt attracted to boys around eleven years of age. He noticed differences in his body, but he did not know what was happening to him or what having a sexual minority identity would mean for him in his life:

Um, my parents are farmers. So, the word gay didn't even exist when I was a kid. Information to me was not available as it would be here. There was a constant, uh, thing in my mind. What's underneath? Why am I different? You don't have the resources to go and find this information to, so you get to question yourself a lot and you, just, it's just that the feeling, the uh, you feel desperate. You feel, uh, attacked. You have no answers. You have no help. You want to know more. Why is this happening to me? Why? I was afraid of AIDS. I was afraid of, uh you know, what's going to happen after I have sex with a guy?

Daniel noted that he felt attracted to boys as early as six years of age. While his parents were both open to speaking about sex or answering any questions on the subject, he was not able to find helpful information that presented homosexuality as a healthy sexual identity:

I remember my parents gave us these books and there was a section on homosexuality and on lesbianism and I remember just being very interested in that section. There were maybe four or five books and in the whole four or five books, there was only like three or four pages on homosexuality and lesbianism. It said it was very common for guys who are homosexual to be prostitutes and I remember just thinking, well that sucks cause then that means that that's what I'm going to end up doing.

While limited education and lack of information is a common experience to sexual minorities regardless of ethnicity, I placed this theme in this ethnic distinction section because researchers have previously indicated that sexual silence exists within Latin American families. Alex and Daniel's experiences suggest that it is not true for all families and that sexual silence could be dissipating to some degree, at least regarding heterosexual sexual activity.

**Machismo.** The literature indicates that machismo is a dominant script for Latin American men. In other words, society perpetuates the notion that men must be aggressive, sexually dominant, and in constant pursuit of women. For gay men, this creates an increased sense of difference and stress.

Alex noted that growing up in Latin American gave him the impression that gay men needed to act like women, which heightened his awareness regarding how to behave in social situations:

I kind of live in a type of paranoia, social paranoia sometimes because I knew that I was playing with fire, you know. And given the fact that in Latin America, guys are very *machos* and *machistas*, so I knew that I could be in trouble, you know. Maybe this is different because in Canada, being gay doesn't mean to be a queer or to be effeminate, but you can be straighter than a straight and be gay and people are fine with that. But in Latin America, we have the tendency to make a profile of a gay. Gays are going to be queer. Queer means, its like a lady, like a man who is going to act like a lady or you know be all *loca*.

Lucas expressed that strict rules surrounding machismo illustrated a specific profile of non-conforming sexual identities, to which he could not relate:

The feeling that we have in my hometown too, that either that you become a transvestite, not a transgender, but you would, uh, just wear women's clothes all the time. But, I just never felt like I wanted to do that.

Daniel stated that his experience regarding machismo differed because he grew up in a household of only boys. He was aware of the machista stereotypes through school and society, but at home, his mother devalued those gender expectations:

In terms of gender stereotypes, I guess, or gender roles, I guess my mom, because we didn't have any other girl in the house, like my mom, from a very young age taught us that we had to clean, do the laundry, that we had to cook or get our clothes ready for school. Even though we saw machismo with my mom and dad, when it came down to my brothers and I, the definition of gender was less. It was less defined. The boundaries were fuzzier.

It is worthwhile to note that Alex and Lucas experienced more defined gender role expectations and a more derogatory and narrow profile of gay men. Both men struggled with negative self-talk in their adolescence and early adulthood. In contrast, Daniel, who experienced less strict gender norms at home, indicated that he was more kind to himself and never hated himself for having a minority sexual identity.

**Sexual Role.** Being the active (penetrative) partner versus the passive (receptive) partner has significant social connotations in Latin America. The messages individuals internalize reflect the idea that only passive partners have a homosexual sexual identity. While penetrative partners can participate in homosexual sexual activity, they do not endure the negative social consequences that passive partners encounter. Consequently, Latin American societies believe that gay men must be effeminate and female acting.

When Alex expressed his homosexual sexual identity to his father, the only matter in question was what role he was taking in sexual activity:

He just asked me, so have you ever been penetrate anally? And I was like no.

And it was true. And he said, okay, you still can change. I don't want you to be a tranny. I don't want you to be a sexual travesty.

Lucas noted that it was common knowledge in his community that several men would have sex with one particular gay man. Because only one man was the passive partner, he was ostracized and ridiculed. Lucas was also encouraged to have sex with this man, but only as the penetrative partner:

Whenever they would talk about gays, they would talk about being the bottom.

But there, if you, if you are the top guy in the relationship, you're not gay. Um, you have to be the bottom guy, you have to be the one that, you know, that's more feminine. It's a taboo to talk about it, even today.

Daniel stated having sex with females was never a problem for him. His first sexual experiences were with women and, because he consistently had a girlfriend, no one ever suspected that he might have a sexual minority identity:

I always had girlfriends, always. Um, it didn't feel weird to me. It felt normal. I was actually, by this point, people used to think that I was a heartbreaker because I would go from girl to girl cause it was never hard for me to kind of go and flirt with girls.

Alex and Lucas indicated that, despite attempts to repress their effeminate behaviour, it was not something they could control completely. It also made keeping their sexual identity a secret more challenging. Their bullying stemmed from this behaviour.

Daniel did not experience major bullying, which could be a result of his decreased non-conforming gender behaviour.

**Mental Health Challenges from Immigration.** Sexual minorities experience mental health challenges regardless of ethnicity. However, in this study, the three participants all experienced migration to several different countries. In addition to the challenges experienced because of their sexual minority identity, the immigration process also threatened and damaged their mental health.

Alex indicated that he knew he had to leave his home country, but he did not anticipate the challenges that he would endure from moving. While in Latin America, moving offered hope; however, while in Canada, he felt as if he was in a worse situation than before:

When I was twenty-two, I think I had a depression. I had personality issues, I think. It's a huge change. You're in Latin America and all of a sudden in Canada and then you have to create your own life. I had to start from zero and I don't have my parents that are to pay for my school or whatever. When I arrived, I think I arrived in a survival mode. I need to work. I need to do this so my mind was set to work, work, work, work. I said, oh my God, this is Canada, which is a first world country and I'm working in a factory. Even in Latin America, you know, like I would have been better there.

Lucas immigrated illegally to the United States and then legally to Canada throughout his early adulthood. He indicated his stress emerged from thinking that he might have to live his entire life in hiding. He hid his sexual identity in Latin America and now he would have to hide as much as possible, so that he would not risk getting

caught and deported because of immigration policies. His sexual identity challenges were replaced by immigration concerns:

I was really, really depressed when I got to the United States. Uh, I actually felt that I was escaping from Latin America. It was a way for me to escape, uh, Latin America. I couldn't stay there anymore. But, I had to learn the language, find a job, do, like, uh, sustain myself economically. So, uh, I didn't have the time to question myself.

Daniel experienced immigration along with his family as a young adolescent. He did not have to worry about how to survive financially, but he struggled leaving his extended family behind, learning new social norms, and the uncertainty of knowing whether or not he would be allowed to stay in Canada after being deported from the United States:

They gave us our Canadian permanent resident status, which was incredible because, for the whole time that I had been living outside of Latin America, I lived in this constant state of anxiety. We were always afraid of checking the mail or checking the status of our applications online cause it was scary. We didn't know where we were going to go next. It was like not having to worry about immigration all the time allowed me to kind of connect and deal with this other thing.

The immigration process delayed each participant's ability to consider and work through his sexual identity.

**Racism.** Participants expressed various forms of racism once living in Canada. Alex developed internalized racism, after feeling rejected and betrayed by his ethnic

community in Latin America. Further, Lucas and Daniel experienced racism within the Canadian dominantly White gay community.

When Alex moved to Canada, he distanced himself from the Latin American community. Initially, he did not interact with anyone from Latin America, whether they were heterosexual or non-heterosexual. While Alex has made progress regarding his internalized homophobia to allow Latin Americans within his social group as friends, he still refuses to date or enter into relationships with Latin American men.

I banned Latin Americans except my family. But I didn't have any friends that were Latin Americans, nothing. All my boyfriends and sex partners were all White, never Latin American, never. Because I felt betrayed, I don't know. I had that social block.

Lucas expressed consistent moments of other people treating him differently because of his ethnicity, especially within the gay community. Dating or having relationships with Latin American men has never been a problem for him. However, if he felt attracted to a White gay man, he often encountered rejection:

But the thing is people look at me different. The guys that I met, they thought that because I was Latin American I was not meant to learn the language, that I was not able to work, and that I was, uh, that I was from a third world country and that I didn't know nothing about geography, uh, and other things.

Daniel also indicated that, while most of society has not treated him poorly, non-Latin Americans usually note his ethnic difference:

It's never really been like people discriminating saying you're less because of this. It is more like, oh you're Latin, like you're not from here. It's more of a point it

out than putting me down for it. I worked very, very hard at like getting rid of my accent because I wanted to fit into the North American society.

Racism, whether internal or external, adds another layer of difficulty to Latin American gay men. After learning how to deal and move past rejection based on their sexual identities, they also needed to learn how to cope and manage rejection based on their ethnicity.

**Counselling.** Each participant experienced different forms of counselling in North America for various presenting concerns.

Alex noted that he knew he needed help regarding his mental health, but he did not have the means to access support because of language and financial barriers. Group counselling proved to be helpful, as it helped him increase his language skills, as well as give him a sense of community:

Each person is different and has different needs. So, maybe a group where you can go and talk about how you feel without any judgment. But, you have to be open and mature enough to be able to share those things. When I went there, I think I just felt the need not to feel alone in that moment.

Lucas indicated that his first experience with a psychologist in the United States was surprising. He did not anticipate how direct and confrontational his sessions would be:

It was my first experience with a psychologist. I was hoping someone would be, you know, more like, oh poor you. Poor you. People always picking on you. Poor you. I was actually looking for that, but it was a wake up. I'm kind of cold myself personally, so

that was a big help for me. But for other people it wouldn't work. Perhaps someone else would have felt, I don't know, like, he didn't care. He didn't give a shit. But I liked it.

Daniel expressed that he has accessed counselling services several times in his life through university and through private practice. While most of his experiences have been helpful, he noted that Canadian counsellors must be more mindful about culture when working with non-dominant populations:

I think there's something to be said about interracial relationships. We were going to couples counselling and I remember the counsellor kept validating everything my ex-partner was saying and completely just pushing away everything that I was saying because she didn't understand where I was coming from in terms like culturally. Intellectually she knew exactly where I was coming from, uh, but intimacy wise, she had no idea how my intimacy needs were attached to who I am as a Latin American person.

These experiences suggest that Latin American men might struggle accessing counselling services, that the working alliance is crucial in developing positive relationships between counsellors and clients, and that multicultural competencies need to be reviewed more thoroughly to practice ethically.

### **Themes Regarding Positive Identity**

In this section, I identify themes that emerged from the interviews with the three Latin American gay men that are similar to those themes found in the literature regarding developing a positive identity. These themes include: (a) Post-Traumatic Growth, (b) Family, (c) Disrupting Stereotypes, (d) Evolving Religious Views and, (e) Gay Community Drawbacks.

**Post-Traumatic Growth.** All participants, despite their unique experiences, went through challenging moments of fear, stress, rejection, isolation, and confusion, as a result of their sexual identity or because of immigration. Today, however, others' opinions are not as relevant and they have more control as to the direction their lives take.

Alex stated that he is a lot more carefree and easygoing than he used to be. He is not as concerned with what other people are doing or what they think of him. He simply just makes choices on what he deems right:

You know, like before, I think, one, two, or three times before doing something and now I just do it. Either you let the life pass by or you be part of the show and I decided to be part of the show no matter what. I won't do bad things, but you see, I won't repress myself about something like I used to do.

Lucas, eventually, got to a point where he felt exhausted thinking about what he was going to do regarding his sexuality in his life. He did not want to waste more time:

I was just tired of questioning myself, like why this, why that, why is this happening to me? I just didn't have time to question myself and I did not want to question myself anymore. It's simply, for me, it would be the same if you asked a straight guy, do you want to be a gay male? No. Today, I'm comfortable enough with myself to know myself and no I wouldn't change that. It's not me.

Daniel noted that accepting himself and being unapologetic about his sexual identity, not only helped him feel better, but it also helped those around him feel more comfortable:

I've seen the power that accepting myself as I am has had in my life and how it's made me more confident and, uh, willing to accept other people too. It's made

me more open-minded, um, it's made me a better, like a well-rounded person. I actually love being gay. Because I'm more willing to accept other people, other people are more willing to come and just be my friends because they know that I'm going to accept them regardless of what's going on in their lives or what's happened or who they are. My quality of life has increased, like improved exponentially. I am more outgoing. I am friendlier. I am more secure.

Participants indicated that their lives have improved because they feel a sense of freedom. Life is not as challenging, as they are no longer plagued by fear and they have each found sources of support through their families or friends.

**Family.** The literature indicates that positive parental reactions to finding out a child's sexual minority identity increase that child's ability to develop a positive sense of self in the present and helps him envision a hopeful future. While participants' families did not have the most positive reactions initially, when they were able to offer support and acceptance, their lives improved.

Alex is in a position where he does not feel safe to disclose his sexual identity with all members of his family. His father and older brother are the only people in his family that are aware of the main reason he moved to Canada:

[My father said], I'm happy if you're happy and I will, uh, be there for you for whatever you need or whatever. So, for me, I translated that as, okay, I got his blessing. I'm happy because I got what I wanted: his approval and blessing. The approval of my father would make a huge change in my life.

Lucas was no longer living in Latin American when he decided to disclose his sexual identity to his immediate family. With the help and support of his boyfriend at the

time, he was able to open up to his older brother, who shared the news with the rest of his family. Once his family knew his sexual identity, they were sad because they knew living in another country far away from them and their culture would be a permanent circumstance:

They actually completely understand the fact that I live far from them because I can be myself. I'm very grateful for my two sisters. They were the ones that actually, you know, talked about it with my parents. They told them it's okay. It's not as bad. It's who he is. He's not going to change. My dad is happy to know that I'm fine.

As noted previously, Daniel moved to Canada with his immediate family. He disclosed his sexual identity to his brothers first, and with their support, he opened up to his parents. While he anticipated that his father would struggle with the news, it was his mother who struggled to come to terms with his sexual identity:

Uh, it took a while before my mom got to that point but I always knew that she loved me, and I always knew that she would support me through anything. When she did start advocating and she wasn't afraid of talking about my ex-partner and I being in a relationship and living together and all those things, um, that's when I realized that yeah, okay, my mom does accept me for who I am.

Family plays an integral role in helping sexual minority individuals develop a positive identity. While it is not necessarily a required step to develop a strong sense of self, for these men, getting the approval of their family, even partially, alleviated pressure and insecurity.

**Disputing Stereotypes.** Participants made it clear that they lacked positive role models with sexual minority identities. Their experiences with the Catholic Church and with their homophobic societies made it very difficult to consider positive possible futures for themselves.

Alex noted that, in his childhood, having a sexual minority identity meant dressing up and acting like a woman. He did not want to be that and his father was concerned that is where Alex would end up:

I mean, he was afraid of seeing me as a queen and maybe that's why I was so, you know, reluctant to those people because I didn't want to be what my father told me not to be. He saw me that I was masculine, that I had a job, ten years on my own in Canada. So, think he got that, okay, he's gay, but he did well in life by going out of the country and no trouble and not dependent on alcohol, and you know, I have a normal life.

Lucas was also taught that sexual minority men would end up on the streets as Transvestites. He had no interest in living his life in that fashion, and after establishing a life he enjoyed in Canada, he invited his mother to see what he had built:

I wanted to show her who I was. And I didn't want to hide. This is who I am, whatever I do, this is who I am. And she was, uh, more than satisfied. She knew I wasn't doing any drugs at all, so that was cool. She noticed that I was drinking. She noticed that I would smoke here and there, but not all the time. She saw that I was doing exercise, that I was going to school, and that I was working. So, she was pretty satisfied.

Daniel, through the books his parents provided, learned that homosexual men became prostitutes. At one time, he thought that he was going to become one. But after *coming out* and experiencing life as a fully open gay man, he knew that his life would not be anything special:

I was in a relationship with a guy for four years that I actually wanted to be in like fully. Um, school had leveled back into like my normal levels of how I achieve, uh, at school. Um, my friends were very supportive. I just, like, everything was fine. Everything was like normal.

**Evolving Religious Views.** Each participant noted growing up in Catholic households and communities. While each had different levels of active participation within Church activities, each heard negative messages regarding homosexuality. More specifically, from very young ages, they all knew homosexual acts were considered sinful.

Alex noted that reconciling his Catholic childhood with his sexual identity was a pivotal moment in feeling stress-free. He often felt guilt and shame regarding anything to with his sexual identity:

I went to confess and I started to talk about what I told you. And the priest just looked at me and said, Alex, but you are already forgiven. I felt blood running in my veins. I just felt like I had been removed like tons of pounds off my back. I just felt a release. And since that day, I do whatever I do and I don't have the little voice that says, oh no, that's bad. It's very funny because in a Catholic retreat, I was healed.

Lucas learned, through his experiences in Canada, that it was acceptable to acknowledge his Catholic childhood as an important part of his life that no longer took

precedence in his adulthood. In fact, he could make an active choice in what elements to practice and which ones were not as relevant to living a healthy life:

When I got here I realized that Canadians were very conservative in their history, but at some point they got rid of it. They're still religious in their way. They have the same kind of, I would say the same views, beliefs, rituals, habits of what I come from. And they were able to separate their own personal lives from the Church. And that's what I wanted to see that some people were able to do it and they didn't die. I still believe in God. I still pray. I still, uh, but it's the actual, um, state of the Church, like the man-made thing, that's what I don't believe in anymore.

Daniel went through a crisis of faith throughout his immigration struggles. He prayed endlessly that God would grant him the miracle to stay in the United States. After being deported, he lost his faith, as he felt that he was wasting his time praying to a God that ignored him. He, acknowledging his interests in spirituality, could not integrate himself into the Catholic Church again, but found solace in understanding that he was perfectly made by God:

I knew that I was gay for such a long time, from such an early age; I never felt that it was something that I made up for myself. It was never a choice for me. I took it to be that, you know, if I follow the concept of God made me, and God made everything that I am, and everything that I'm not, then He also made me gay. Because He made me gay and God makes no mistakes, I'm just supposed to be the way that I am.

Coming to the understanding that God did not despise or abhor their sexual identity through retreats and spiritual quests helped each participant realize that they are free to be themselves without fear or shame.

**Gay Community Drawbacks.** While some may question why I included drawbacks, as an aspect of positive identity, positive psychologists indicate that “negativity is also a necessary ingredient in the recipe for a flourishing life” (Fredrickson, 2009, p. 136). Further, after hearing story after story of each participant trying to repress their feelings in order to appease their families, friends, and communities, I believe their ability to acknowledge elements of the gay community that they do not like is part of having a positive identity.

Alex noted that there are many aspects he enjoys about being part of the gay community. However, for him, he would like to have a long-term committed partner with whom he can start a family. He refuses to settle for anything less than what he desires:

Sadly, in the gay world, it’s difficult to find a serious guy who wants to get involved in a long-term serious relationship. Everything is more for sex and quickies and that’s it. Some couples have specific rules. A lot of people say that’s the key to making a gay couple survive, being in an open relationship. I am not open to that. I don’t feel comfortable sharing my boyfriend.

Lucas stated that he has found a strong group of friends with whom he can share his life meaningfully. He can be silly and serious with his family of choice. While he acknowledged that there are benefits to the sexual permissiveness within the gay community, it is not something he values:

One thing I don't like is the promiscuity. We're males. We're always ready to have sex. And likely with the new technologies, it's become so easy to do it.

And it's just, uh, it's one of the things that I don't agree with.

Daniel insisted that, while gay males are stereotyped for having many sex partners, he thinks this behaviour is just as prevalent with heterosexuals. Since he was in a committed relationship for four years, he knows that it is possible to find a kindred spirit, but admitted challenges:

I guess for me the only thing that I really have a hard time with is how difficult I find relationships to advance. I find that people are less willing to accept your imperfections. I do find a lot of discrimination within the gay community. If you're not muscular, if you're not White, if you don't have blonde hair, if you are not good looking, if you're not a lot of the things that people find perfect, they are less willing to create a relationship, that kind of connection with you.

Each participant indicated that, despite drawbacks, they are happy to be part of the gay community. Unlike the hurtful messages they heard in their childhoods, being part of the gay community is better than they ever thought it would be and something of which to be proud.

## **Conclusion**

Identifying themes regarding sexual identity, ethnicity, and positive identity can give professionals working with this population specific elements to explore. Themes regarding sexual identity are all supported by the literature, as they provide further lived experiences of gender expectations, bullying, isolation, risky behaviour, and internalized homophobia. Regarding ethnicity, some themes were supported by the literature, such as

religion, machismo, sexual role, and racism. More importantly, mental health risks regarding the migration experience and the breaking of sexual silence in these participants' families suggests future research is required. Last, themes regarding positive identity highlight the need for society and professionals to share helpful stories regarding sexual and ethnic minorities. There is hope. Individuals can grow from their damaging experiences and live happy, healthy lives.

In Chapter Six, I identify implications for teaching, counselling, and make suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter Six: Implications for Teaching, Counselling, and Future Research**

In this final chapter, I discuss implications for teaching through policy and practice, implications for counselling psychology regarding policy and practice, research contributions and considerations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Implications for Teaching**

This study's purpose was in part to offer teachers some insight and suggestions when working with Latin American gay men, as they develop a positive identity. This section discusses the implications for both policy and practice in education.

**Policy.** Designing, implementing, and enforcing anti-bullying programs and policies, including Gay-Straight Alliances, is socially responsible and ethical work (Walton, 2004). The literature clearly suggests that some sexual minority youth are at risk of being victimized by peers, of being rejected by school faculty, of dropping out of school, of experiencing isolation, and of having higher rates of suicide ideation and attempts compared to their heterosexual peers (Thompson & Johnson, 2003). The participants in this study experienced victimization, rejection, and isolation, as they struggled to understand their sexual identity without visible sexual minority role models, heterosexual allies, information availability, or support and advocacy (Meyer & Stader, 2009).

Participants did not have families or communities where positive stories regarding minority sexual identities could be accessed. While these men continuously and discretely searched for answers to their questions around their sexual identity, the only available resources were negative and stereotypical. In particular, because participants were raised in Catholic households, they attended Catholic schools that further

entrenched their belief that having a sexual minority identity was immoral. Catholic school boards in Alberta, at least, have policies that promote inclusive attitudes towards all students. However, this inclusivity remains within the frameworks of Catholic teaching and takes the approach of pastoral care and correcting homosexual tendencies that promote celibacy and chastity (Callaghan, 2012; Maher & Sever, 2007). Sexual activity before marriage is not permitted and sexual minorities are not allowed to get married. Consequently, sexual minority concerns are ignored. Ensuring safe spaces for sexual minority youth exist in schools is not about forcing alternative lifestyles down non-supportive peoples' throats. It is about providing research-based information that can reduce homophobic attitudes and create safe and inclusive communities for all sexual identities.

Sexual education courses almost exclusively focus only on heterosexual relationships and sexuality. Mutchler, Ayala, and Neith (2005) indicate that young gay boys need to have the space for “gay-boy” talk. This includes being able to consider and ask questions regarding dating and relationships, including what is a relationship? What kind of sex makes sense with my current partner? What is safer sex in a relationship? What roles do trust and protection play? How does sex work between two men? How can two men approach issues of consent? Without comprehensive sex education for students that include sexual minorities, how can these individuals gain valid and credible information regarding their sexual health? Education policies must find ways to provide evidence-based information to all students.

**Practice.** Each participant in this study indicated that one of the major hurdles in developing a positive identity was limited education and access to information. While

families engaged in conversations regarding heterosexual identities, non-heterosexual identities were not part of this dialogue, which left participants questioning themselves and making destructive conclusions about their sexual identities based on cultural norms and stereotypes. Previous research suggests that pre-service teacher education programs do not include sexual minority issues as part of their curriculum (Bellini, 2012; Meyer & Stader, 2009). Further, some teachers believe that sexual minority matters are private and should be dealt within family systems. However, in this study, leaving these matters to the family proved to be unhelpful, and in some cases, harmful.

Others indicate that specialized educators, such as health teachers or community nurses should cover these topics in specialized classes, as core subjects are not appropriate places to discuss such matters. While most pre-service and experienced teachers can recognize heterosexism and homophobia within the school community, many feel uncomfortable addressing these issues because they do not want to be seen as individuals promoting homosexuality. Fear of parents or administrators keeps individuals silent. While changing societal attitudes is not the sole responsibility of the education system and its educators, researchers suggest that putting theory into practice must begin in faculties of education, not elementary or secondary schools, where training pre-service teachers involves “questioning their beliefs as well as assumptions about all forms of discrimination and oppression” (Bellini, 2012, p. 387).

Teachers in classrooms do not have to be experts in sexual minority identity topics. Helping teachers increase their self-awareness and biases for or against the normalization of heterosexuality in schools, while acknowledging the inferiority of sexual otherness can be a small yet impactful impetus for change. In schools, conversations

about teenage opposite-sex dating, mass media messages, textbook representations or fictional characters featuring heterosexual relationships, and straight sexual mechanics and pregnancy in sex education classes all promote inescapable discourse on traditional gender socialization and heterosexuality (Walton, 2004). Increasing teacher awareness on this subject can help to include non-dominant sexual identities. Learning how to be comfortable with uncomfortable topics can lead to open and constructive dialogue on polarizing issues.

### **Implications for Counselling**

This study's purpose also included offering professional counsellors and psychologists insights and suggestions when working with Latin American gay men, as they develop a positive identity. This section discusses the implications for both policy and practice in counselling psychology.

**Policy.** According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (2011), there are twelve determinants that assess Canadians' well-being, including:

- Income and Social Status
- Social Support Networks
- Education and Literacy
- Employment/Working Conditions
- Social Environments
- Physical Environments
- Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills
- Healthy Child Development
- Biology and Genetic Endowment

- Health Services
- Gender
- Culture.

I appreciate the various health determinants, as I think their broad nature implicates many issues and populations within Canadian society. While sexual minority identities are not explicitly considered in these determinants, non-heterosexual identities should be placed under the umbrella of human sexuality, which is also overlooked as a key determinant, but which could be inclusive to all individuals regardless of their sexual orientation. The World Health Organization's sexual rights (2013) explores concepts that include ensuring individuals receive information about sexuality, that they have a choice of a partner, and that they can pursue a satisfying and pleasurable sexual life. Perhaps this comes from my practicum experience with post-secondary students, but many of my conversations regarded questions around how to be a good lover, which was, in many cases, causing anxiety and stress. Similarly, a broad exploration of sexuality as a determinant of health would include exploration around consent, assault, sexual arousal, being ready for sex, safer sex, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, and/or sexual concerns for the elderly or individuals with disabilities. While some of these topics are explored in sexual education classes, they rarely, if ever, include sexual minority experiences.

In addition, this study outlined the experiences of Latin American gay men in Canada, not only a sexual minority group, but also an ethnic minority. It would also be beneficial to include the migration experience as part of a broader health conversation, as many new Canadians have difficult experiences adjusting to new customs, languages, and

worldviews. While elements experienced by sexual and ethnic minority individuals are not entirely excluded from the current health determinants, these unique populations, which are part of our national identity, need further consideration. Counselling psychologists, especially when dealing with elements of health psychology with immigrant populations must be aware of the possible challenges this unique population faces.

**Practice.** Counselling psychologists must consider the unique experience of every individual, keeping in mind that common experiences found within a certain population, might not be true for everyone. While participants shared many experiences supported by the literature, such as religious influence, lack of information, and machismo, their interpretations and internalization of these elements differed. The depth and intensity of their challenges varied depending on their age, their specific Latin American country, and the amount of support available to them, which, in turn, affected their coping mechanisms and strategies.

Similarly, each participant had distinct experiences working with counsellors or psychologists. Alex felt validated and supported through group counselling, Lucas found his counsellor's abrupt and direct nature helpful, while Daniel appreciated suggestions his counsellor made regarding his academic life. As such, being mindful of applying empathy and developing a collaborative working alliance with each unique individual rings true. Making assumptions based on a general understanding of a group of people could inhibit counsellors' ability to uncover core presenting concerns. In addition, based on Bedi (2006) and Lilliengren and Werbart (2005) who insinuate that perceptions between counsellors and clients differ significantly on what constitutes a positive

working alliance, self-reflection, awareness, and continuous consultation are key factors in developing an accurate assessment to indicate whether clients' needs are being met. In other words, what might be useful with one client may be completely inappropriate with another even if they appear similar in sexual identity and ethnicity.

In this study, each participant experienced a migration experience, at least once. As a result of these transitions, individuals experienced mental health challenges not associated with sexual identity. The transition process includes mourning the loss of cultural awareness and familiarity, the loss of proficient language use, lack of employment, financial insecurity, integrating new cultural norms and practices, and re-defining a cultural identity. Latin American gay men who migrated to Canada may require assistance with mourning their culture and coming to terms with a new cultural identity (Bhugra & Becker, 2005).

The concept of unearned and unexamined White privilege emerged from the experience of interracial couples counselling from my conversations with one participant. First, this supports the notion that multicultural competencies and counselling graduate programs addressing human sexuality and relationships must be explored more comprehensively. In this case, it is not simply about addressing the breakdown of a relationship, but also about working with both partners about how cultural influences could be contributing to their obstacles within their relationship. Building cultural awareness among partners can shed light into finding a solution.

Finally, participants recognized one major drawback from being part of the gay community: promiscuity. Heterosexual men, in many ways, are expected to occupy a place of sexual privilege. They rarely, if ever, bear the label *slut* and they are admired for

their sexual prowess (Barrios & Lundquist, 2012). Further, if heterosexual men engage in non-relationship or casual sex throughout university, it is considered normal as part of the male experience before settling down. Heterosexual men are expected to have more sex than relationships, to experience more sexual gratification than their partners, and to pursue relationships on their own terms.

For homosexual men, this constructed notion of male sexuality is interpreted as the ability to have lifelong prestige sex. In other words, prestige sex emphasizes the quest for anonymous sex with a complete lack of romantic intentions. Some gay men, in not meeting masculine gender expectations, reaffirm their masculinity by engaging in frequent sex with multiple, attractive partners and taking part in more risky sexual behaviours. However, the assumption of the male sex drive, even though it is culturally constructed, can be so ingrained in Western culture that it has become a cliché frequently used to perpetuate the myth of gay male promiscuity, to which some gay men fall victim. Counselling psychologists can provide opportunities for gay men to deconstruct notions of expected homosexual dating relationships and facilitating “gay-boy” talk (Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012; Mutchler, et al., 2005). Promiscuity does not have to be a defining element of the gay community or healthy positive identity.

## **Research Contributions and Considerations**

### **Strengths**

**Contribution to Current Literature.** Qualitative research regarding the experiences of sexual and ethnic minorities is limited. While most studies used White participants to draw conclusions and understandings, non-White ethnic backgrounds are largely unexplored. This study supports previous research regarding the experiences of

sexual minorities, as well as elements specific to Latin American communities. In particular, the migration experience added a new layer to consider with this population, which can promote further research in this area.

**Personal and Unique Experiences.** This study also focused on providing in-depth voices to the extensive quantitative research already available regarding White sexual minorities. The narrative inquiry and analysis approach used in this study presented examples of lived experiences of individuals' lives that teachers and counsellors can consider regarding the various and complex struggles Latin American gay men might face as they develop positive identities.

### **Limitations**

**Sampling.** Because I wanted to explore the lives of Latin American gay men in-depth and present their lives as stories, only three men participated in this study. While I feel that the number is adequate for the methodology selected, this small sample makes generalizability unreliable. Further, the participants represent three different Latin American countries and, upon reflection, because Latin America is so vast and diverse, it would have been beneficial to restrict participants to one country. Specific themes regarding that particular nation could have resulted in more astute findings reflecting common cultural norms, language use, and history.

**Language Proficiency.** Each participant, including this researcher, is an English language learner and proficiency and command of the English language varied depending on the length of time each individual has lived in an English-speaking country. Each participant completed the interview process mainly in English, but there were words and phrases that were expressed in Spanish or in French. While it was not difficult to

recognize what participants were expressing, at times, limited vocabulary inhibited clear understanding of circumstances. When these situations took place, I gave participants the option to re-state their experiences in Spanish, but each preferred to re-explain their situation in English. In spite of these limitations, the benefits and strengths make this a worthwhile study in the areas of teaching and counseling and contributing to qualitative research around questions of identity and healthy development.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While studies regarding sexual minorities have explored various elements to developing a positive identity, many still lack the ethnicity variable. A similar study regarding positive identity with other sexual identities including lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals would continue to contribute lived experiences to the literature. In particular, it could begin to answer what influences or inhibits the development of positive identity in other non-gay and non-heterosexual identities?

In addition, participants in this study were foreign-born and experienced immigration at different ages in their lives. It would be interesting to discover the experiences of Latin American gay men born in Canada to note any similarities and differences between men born in Latin America versus men exposed to a more socially liberal and inclusive society. This is not to say that homophobia and heterosexism are not prevalent in Canada, but Canadian laws promote anti-bullying and protection of human rights more so than many Latin American countries.

Participants in this study were all between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty at the time of their interviews, but discovering the experience of other age groups, including adolescents and seniors would expand teachers' and counsellors' awareness of challenges

for Latin American gay men across the life span. In other words, current adolescents born in Canada could potentially have significantly opposing experiences of understanding homosexuality versus seniors who immigrated to Canada, especially due to positive role models visible through media.

Last, I did not anticipate that all three participants would have experienced the migration process or that immigrating to Canada would be directly linked to pursuing safety and the freedom to figure out their sexual identity away from family and social and cultural norms. Consequently, further research exploring the lives of sexual minority individuals seeking refugee and protection of their human rights in Canada would be beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to answer this question: What are the lived experiences, narratives, and perceptions of Latin American gay men as they develop a positive identity? The data collection took place in various Canadian cities and included three foreign-born Latin American gay men, who self-identified as having a positive identity. Through conducting semi-structured interviews, this study attempted to understand their lived experiences through various stages, including feeling different, *coming out*, and having a positive identity.

Participants shared stories about their families, their childhood neighbourhoods, and their school and Church communities. The overwhelming message internalized from these various sources indicated that homosexuality or any other non-heterosexual identity is negative, unwanted, or sinful. Through transcribing and storying their experiences,

themes emerged under three major categories: Themes regarding sexual identity, themes regarding ethnicity, and themes regarding positive identity.

In the first cluster of themes, participants indicated demonstrating atypical gender behaviour, verbal harassment, feeling isolated, safety in secrecy, risky behaviour, and internalized homophobia. While each participant did not have the adequate language, vocabulary, or knowledge to identify their sexual minority identity, having different interests from other boys in their social circles created an awareness of difference. This psychology of difference was further cemented through verbal harassment of effeminate behaviour and having no other choice but to withdraw from active participation in their families, neighbourhoods, or schools. While feeling isolated were not welcome experiences by participants, they realized that they were most safe with keeping their inner thoughts and questions a secret. The result of this isolation and secrecy, however, led to making risky choices regarding their own well-being while they attempted to find answers to their most meaningful questions without any resources or support. Not fitting in and being bombarded by consistent negative messages about homosexuality, each participant internalized homophobia to various extents.

In the second cluster, themes regarding ethnicity were explored, including religion, limited education and lack of information, machismo, sexual role, mental health challenges regarding immigration, racism, and counselling. Participants noted the powerful influence of the Catholic Church in Latin America and within their homes. Presenting a narrow and moral-authority perspective of human sexuality, the Church's message resulted in feelings of guilt and shame. While the men made efforts to find answers to their questions, limited education and lack of information exacerbated their

feelings of confusion and negativity. Being acutely aware of the social expectations for men in Latin America, known as machismo, participants experienced limited understandings of the definitions of homosexuality and more closely associated this sexual identity with acting like a woman or living life as a female prostitute. To pursue safety, either for their sexual identity or from civil unrest, each man suffered mental health challenges from immigration experiences that, for some, included the stress of illegal documentation or deportation. Regardless of how they arrived in Canada, participants shared immigration struggles regarding learning a new language, financial insecurity, loss of cultural know-how, and racism. Counselling opportunities helped each participant to varying degrees, but more importantly, highlighted the importance of the working alliance and building multicultural competencies in counselling psychologists.

In the final cluster, themes regarding positive identity were identified that included post-traumatic growth, family, disputing stereotypes, evolving religious views, and gay community drawbacks. After spending the majority of their adolescence repressing their sexual identity, participants eventually felt exhausted of questioning themselves. This resulted in participants no longer caring about what their families, friends, culture, or religion said or did not say about homosexuality. Individuals experienced renewed hope and a desire to live life fully. With familial acceptance and through forming their lives based on their personalities and interests instead of learned stereotypes of Latin American gay men, participants learned that their lives are just normal and ordinary. While religious views plagued their inner dialogue throughout their lives, individuals learned how to reconcile their previous belief systems and form spiritualities that were helpful and life affirming. Last, even though participants often

cared about fitting into society as best as they could, once developing a strong sense of self, fitting in was not as important, including elements each man disliked about the gay community. Each participant indicated that, if they had the opportunity, they would want struggling sexual minority youth to know that being queer is awesome!

### **One Final Story**

Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen. (Brown, 2010, p. 49)

I never could have imagined the personal impact undertaking this research would have on my life. Before beginning my master's program, I was lonely, confused, unhappy, and emotionally exhausted. Slowly, by reading so many studies on sexual and ethnic identity development, I understood what I had gone through my entire life. I learned the specific language and vocabulary to name my experiences. More importantly, the research literature validated my challenges and allowed me to see that I am resilient. I am a survivor. I am strong. As I started to *come out* and feel more confident in myself, I also did not anticipate the impact my emerging positive identity would have on my family and my close friends. This leads to one final story:

It is the summer of 2014. I am sitting on a sidewalk in the middle of a Sunday afternoon in downtown Vancouver. It is Pride week! The streets are overcrowded, music is blaring, the colours of the rainbow are shining, and perfectly-sculpted half-naked men are dancing on floats. I am no longer scared to be sitting at a Pride parade and, instead of feeling shame and guilt, I feel so happy to be part of such a diverse and fun-loving group of people. As I take a moment to look around and express gratitude for how much my life

has improved the last few years, I notice my sister and mother, who are sitting beside me, laughing and taking picture after picture of all of the good-looking men in front of our eyes. My close Catholic friend sits to my right and she, too, is laughing, clapping, and having fun. As I sit there, I cannot help but imagine and think back to all of the hours I spent crying and begging God to fix me and make me normal. I cannot help but look at my mother and think of her fear and confusion when realizing she had a gay son. I cannot help but think back to the fear I felt before I sat down to tell my close Catholic friend that I am gay. As my mom notices my emotion, she pulls me close and says, “it is okay. I know God gave me you and that God brought me here.” Positive identity is possible; change can happen.

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### Appendix A: E-mail to University Diversity Clubs

Dear [pride centre]:

My name is Ricardo Avelar and I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge currently working towards a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology. I am also working on my thesis under the supervision of Dr. Leah C. Fowler, titled "Better Queer than Dead!"

The study I am conducting is about the experiences of Latin American gay men between the ages of 18 and 35, as they journey towards building a positive identity. The purpose of this study and research is to provide knowledge of experiences to inform the development of emerging teaching and counselling interventions regarding ethnic and sexual minority populations; to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of Latin American gay men and; to qualitatively contribute voices of individuals, which will complement statistical data available to date.

If you know any men who may meet the following criteria, please mention this study to them, and inform them that all information is confidential.

Participants must currently:

- a) have a positive gay identity, which can be defined
  - 1. as being fully out to his family and friends, unless it is dangerous to do so;
  - 2. be able to deal and cope with homophobia well;
  - 3. see himself in a positive manner more often than not;
- b) be between 18 and 35 years old;
- c) be of Latin American decent, by either being foreign-born or by having parents who immigrated to Canada and infused Latin American values as part of his upbringing;
- d) be willing to speak about their experience.

You may provide them with my phone number and email address and instruct them to contact me to inquire about participation in this study. I may be contacted at (403) XXX-XXXX or [first.last@uleth.ca](mailto:first.last@uleth.ca)

In addition, I would appreciate it if you would print and post the attached poster in your pride centre as another method to invite individuals to enquire about participation in this study.

Your assistance is a tremendous help in order for me to complete my thesis requirement for the Master of Education (Counselling Psychology) degree at the University of Lethbridge. If you have any further questions please contact me, my supervisor, Dr. Leah Fowler at (403) XXX-XXXX or the Chair of the Human Subject Research Committee at (403) XXX-XXXX.

**Appendix B: Advertisement****A CALL FOR RESEARCH  
PARTICIPANTS**

Do you know a man between the ages of 18 and 35 who:

- a) has a positive gay identity, which can be defined:
  - 1. as being fully out to his family and friends, unless it is dangerous to do so;
  - 2. is able to deal and cope with homophobia well;
  - 3. sees himself in a positive manner more often than not;
- b) is of Latin American decent, by either being foreign-born or by having parents who immigrated to Canada and infused Latin American values as part of his upbringing;
- c) is willing to speak about his experience.

***All participation is completely voluntary and confidential***

Please contact (403) XXX-XXXX or first.last@uleth.ca for further details

The purpose of this study and research is to provide knowledge of experiences to inform the development of emerging teaching and counselling interventions regarding ethnic and sexual minority populations; to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of Latin American gay men, and; to qualitatively contribute voices of individuals, which will complement statistical data available to date.

Your participation in this study will assist me greatly in completing my thesis requirement for the Master of Education (Counselling Psychology) degree at the University of Lethbridge.

## Appendix C: Screening Script & Interview

*Hello, thank you for contacting me about the possibility of participating in my research study. As the poster stated, my name is Ricardo Avelar and I am a graduate student in the counselling psychology program at the University of Lethbridge. I am conducting research on positive gay identity in young adult Latino males.*

*Before setting up a time to meet with you, it is important for me to ask you a few questions to ensure you meet the requirements to participate in this study. Are you able to answer a few questions right now?*

If the answer is “yes,” the interviewer will proceed with the following questions.

1. *Do you self-identify as a homosexual man?*
2. *What is your ethnic background?*
3. *Are you between the ages of 18 and 35?*
4. *Are you out to your family?*
5. *Are you out to your friends?*
6. *How do you deal with homophobia?*
7. *How would you describe what it is like to be gay?*

If the answer is "no," the interviewer will be asked if there is a better time to contact him, at which point arrangements will be made to contact the possible participant at his earliest convenience.

If the possible participant meets the requirements, he will be invited to schedule a time and location to meet in person for an interview.

*If you have any further questions before meeting me, you may contact me at (403) XXX-XXXX, my supervisor, Dr. Leah Fowler at (403) XXX-XXXX or the Chair of the Human Subject Research Committee at (403) XXX-XXXX.*

***Thank you for your participation.***

## **Appendix D: Interview Overview Guideline**

1. Thank you so much for meeting me today to take part in this research study. I want you to know that I take this project very seriously, so anything that you say I will also treat in a professional, confidential manner.

2. I am going to give you some time to allow you to read through the informed consent form. This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned in the form, or information not included in it, please ask. Take the time to read this form carefully and to understand any accompanying information. You will receive a copy of this form.

***If the participant chooses to participate in the study after reading the informed consent form, asking questions, and signing the form, continue with the following. Otherwise, thank the possible participant for his time and consideration.***

*Even though the consent form addressed the following, there are a few things I would like to reiterate.*

3. The interview will probably take about 1 hour to 3 hours to complete, so I encourage you to get as comfortable as possible. There are several questions to get through, but we are basically going to have a conversation. So as you start to share your story, I may add some questions to clarify your experience, as it is very important to me that I accurately understand you. If you need to stop for a break, please feel free to interrupt me.

4. I also encourage you to be as honest as possible with your answers. This is your story, so there are no right or wrong answers. It is completely up to you how candid, specific, and detailed you are. Also, please remember that you are free to skip questions or to refuse to answer questions with which you are not comfortable discussing.

5. Also, I realize that the story you are sharing is deeply personal, and I thank you for your willingness to share it with me. If at any point, though, you change your mind or you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and you are free to go. I cannot stress enough that participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from participating at any moment.

6. Personal disclosure: I also want to let you know that I, too, am a gay male. I think you can tell I am also Latin American. My experience in developing a positive identity has been a difficult journey. But through important self-discovery, I am at a place where I can discuss my experience more freely. I share this information with you only to let you know that you are not alone. I may have gone through similar experiences. Therefore, please know that I am not here to judge you or your experience.

7. Do you have any questions and/or concerns?

## **Appendix E: Informed Consent Form**

### **BETTER QUEER THAN DEAD! POSITIVE IDENTITY IN LATIN AMERICAN GAY MEN IN CANADA**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “**Better Queer than Dead! Positive Identity in Latin American Gay Men in Canada**” that is being conducted by Ricardo Avelar. Ricardo Avelar is a Graduate Student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact him if you have further questions by phone at 403-XXX-XXXX.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Education (Counselling Psychology). It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Leah C. Fowler. You may contact my supervisor at 403-XXX-XXXX.

#### **Background Information**

The overall purpose of this research project is to investigate the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of Latin American gay men as they journey towards a positive identity.

The collection and analysis of these experiences will:

1. inform the development of emerging teaching and counselling interventions regarding ethnic and sexual minority populations;
2. investigate the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of Latin American gay men, and;
3. qualitatively contribute voices of individuals, which will complement statistical data available to date.

Research of this type is important because it is clear that some homosexuals experience difficulty in various aspects of their lives from lack of acceptance in their families to their schools to difficulty with self-esteem and internalized homophobia. Most of the research I encountered was quantitative in nature and used large samples of Caucasian men. As such, this study will contribute to the literature by implementing a qualitative approach regarding the experiences of Latin American gay men. In addition, because the research suggests that a comprehensive, full-scope of LGBT research is lacking, as a result of shame and secrecy, the goal is to include ethnic and sexual minority experiences to determine and examine similarities and differences that exist between heterosexual and homosexual positive identity development.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a self-identified homosexual man between the ages of 18 and 35, who has a positive gay identity, which can be defined as being fully out to his family and friends, unless it is dangerous to do so; you are able to deal and cope with homophobia well; you see yourself in a positive

manner more often than not; you are of Latin American decent, either by being foreign-born or by having parents who immigrated to Canada and infused Latin American values as part of your upbringing, and; you are willing to speak about your experience.

### **Procedure**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, I will ask you to:

- ✓ Meet with me to be interviewed about your life, identity, and experiences. The interview will last approximately 1 to 3 hours and will be recorded with a digital recorder.
- ✓ Provide a pseudonym for your story, if you choose to use a pseudonym.
- ✓ Provide additions, clarifications and/or deletions by e-mail after the interview has been completed, as necessary in order to review and approve the transcript of your interview.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study has the following risks: You will be asked to recount some life experiences and there is the possibility that you will confront painful or sensitive memories. It is important to note, however, that **you may refuse to answer any question** with which you are not comfortable and you may request that audio recording be discontinued at any point during the interview. Should you require further emotional support, I can provide you with a list of local counsellors.

The primary benefit of participating in this study is that you will help inform future counselling interventions for this particular population. In addition, you will contribute to the inclusion of a qualitative study to statistical data.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including having to read and verify the accuracy of the transcribed interview that will take place a few weeks after the semi-structured interview. However, you are in full control of how much time and effort you put into the verification process.

### **Confidentiality & Anonymity**

You have two options regarding the audio recording of your story.

1. You may choose to allow the researcher to select a pseudonym for your story.
2. You may choose the pseudonym yourself.

For both cases, identifying information will be obscured in the transcription of your interview. (For example, an interviewee who lives in Edmonton would be identified as a person who lives in Northern Alberta.) Furthermore, you will be asked to review and approve all materials that will allow you to ensure identifying information has been changed.

The interview will be conducted and transcribed by the student researcher. The transcript will be marked with an id number. Your responses will be treated with utmost confidentiality. The use of pseudonyms will help ensure that no personally identifying information about you will be given in the results of this research. Quotations or examples will be used from the transcribed interview data in the written report; however, any potentially identifying information will be changed. **In addition, you must know that because I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge, I have a thesis supervisor and two committee members who may request to see my notes, read an interview transcription, or to listen to the audio-recording as they help me prepare and guide my work. Every effort to respect your confidentiality and anonymity will be taken by all members of this committee.**

### **How will the results be used?**

Upon completion of the study, research findings will be available through the University of Lethbridge Library. The results may also be used in future presentations at conferences or in university classes and/or publications such as academic journals or a book. Hardcopies will be available to participants upon request.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Personal information that you deem unsuitable for sharing will remain confidential and under control of the researcher. At no time will information about your life be shared with other participants.

I hope you will participate in this study, but if for any reason at any time you decide to withdraw, you are free to do so **without** prejudice (negative consequences) or any explanation and your data will be destroyed. If withdrawal from the study takes place, your interview data will not be used in the analysis of this research. Similarly, in accordance with the University of Lethbridge ethical guidelines, audio recordings, computer USB sticks, and transcripts will be stored in the researcher's home and will be destroyed by shredding or erasing five years after publication of the research.

As a minor way to show appreciation for your participation, you will be given a 10 dollar gift certificate to a local coffee shop. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

### **Statement of Consent & Release**

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-XXX-XXXX).

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

[ ] I consent to participate using a **pseudonym**. This option means that my name and all identifying information will be obscured in the transcription of my interview.

*If would prefer to choose my pseudonym:* Identify me as the narrator in said materials with the following pseudonym:

---

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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<i>Name of Investigator</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## **Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview**

**Before we begin, please tell me a little bit about yourself.**

### **Feeling Different**

1. Describe your first memories of being attracted to boys? How old were you and what specifically do you remember? You need not have interpreted the attractions as sexual in nature at that time. How far back can you recall such an experience?
2. Before you realized you were homosexual, what messages did you hear from your family, friends, or society in general about homosexuality?
3. Were there any situations or individuals that made you feel different from other boys?
4. Describe your family life and relationships before disclosure?
5. Describe your relationships with peers before disclosure?
6. When did you first realize that you were not heterosexual? What memories do you have of how you came to the conclusion that you were not heterosexual? What did you think and how did you feel about being gay?
7. Internalized homophobia can be defined as an anti-homosexual bias in a homosexual man. How did you experience internalized homophobia? What factors do you think influenced this internalized homophobia?
8. What self-harming behaviour did you experience during this time? Negative self-talk? Drugs? Alcohol? Self-injury? Unprotected sex?
9. After realizing you were gay, but while you were still in the closet, how did you experience stress regarding your identity at home, school, and/or church? Other places?
10. After realizing you were gay, but while you were in the closet, how did you envision your future?
11. In what way does being Latino influence accepting your homosexuality? What messages did you hear about masculinity and homosexuality from the Latino culture? What slurs, if any, stick out in your mind?

### **Coming Out**

12. When did you first disclose your homosexuality? To whom? What made you self-disclose with that individual or group of people?
13. How did your friends react?
14. How did your family members react?
15. How would you describe your coming out experience? What was the most challenging aspect? What was the most rewarding aspect?
16. Were romantic relationships a part of this process?
17. What were your support systems during this time?
18. What difficulty did you experience during this time?
19. What positive experiences did you have during this time?
20. Was counselling a part of your coming out process?  
If so, what and how was it helpful? What did you appreciate about your counsellor? What qualities did s/he have? Was his/her sexual orientation important to you? What interventions or strategies did you find helpful? What was the most challenging aspect of your counselling experience? Would you recommend others seek counselling? What advice would you give others who are seeking counsellors?  
If not, what would have led you to access a counsellor? What stopped you from seeing one? Why was counselling not considered? Any external influences?

### **Positive Gay Identity**

21. How would you define a positive gay identity?
22. What helped and/or inhibited you from having a positive gay identity?
23. In retrospect, what made it difficult for you to develop a positive gay identity?

24. In retrospect, what do you wish you would have had or known to assist you in developing a positive gay identity?
25. If you could choose one key moment that changed your self-concept from negative to positive, what would it be? Why?
26. How has your quality of life changed throughout this process? What are your hopes for the future? What are your relationships with your parents and friends like now? How would you describe your spirituality today? How would you describe a meaningful, romantic relationship? What do you like about being gay?
27. Even though you have developed a positive gay identity, are there times where you feel you should still edit your story? If homosexuals stopped hiding their thoughts and emotions completely and lived their lives completely out in the open, what do you think would be the most shocking thing for heterosexuals to understand about gay people? What changes do you think the world needs to make to allow homosexuals to live freely? Where did you feel the most safe to be yourself?
28. What is the most challenging aspect of being a double minority? What type of discrimination do you experience? How do you cope with these situations?
29. What advice would you give to a Latino adolescent struggling with his homosexuality today?
30. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your story?

## **Appendix G: Observational Notes Guide**

**Consider body language, voice volume & pace, appearance, emotions**

**During the Interview**

**Consider body language, voice volume & pace, appearance, emotions**

**After the Interview**

**Consider body language, voice volume & pace, appearance, emotions**

### Appendix H: Coding Sample

Codes	Transcription
bullying	<b>L:</b> Would that happen around your family as well or was it when you were by yourself?
isolation	<p><b>S:</b> Just by myself.</p> <p><b>L:</b> Ok. Was it the same at school?</p> <p><b>S:</b> No. At the school, I kept that private.</p> <p><b>L:</b> So just mainly in the neighbourhood?</p> <p><b>S:</b> Yeah, exactly.</p>
rumours	<b>L:</b> So, you were talking about different situations that you've had, one with the 18 year old and one with the boy who was just a little bit older, would you say that both, like, uh, like with the 18 year old or were they both positive experiences, like, before the rumours, was that something that you wanted to happen?
sadness	<p><b>S:</b> Yeah, I think so, yeah. When I look at it in retrospect, I think it was kind of fun. And, um, yeah, I don't remember, well I have to say that I was a kid. When you're a kid, you don't have the same reason, you don't reason, you don't think the same thing. So, uh, no, I was ok with that. And even with this guy that was 13 years old, his mother caught us in bed, you know, so I had two big rumours in Latin America because of that.</p>
lacking friends	<p><b>L:</b> From the mom, the mom's the one that would say this to people?</p> <p><b>S:</b> Uh, maybe, maybe because that came out and people knew about that. Well, you know how mothers are, oh you know, my son etc. So, this mother forbid me to talk to this person, so that's why I'm telling you that at a certain point I had a lot of friends and I guess there were parents who said don't talk to Alex because blah blah blah. So, it was very sad because you have a neighbourhood and you cannot be friends with them.</p>
religion	<p><b>L:</b> What about, you were saying something about how the Latino culture is very religious and Catholic, um, what does that mean? Can you explain that to me?</p> <p><b>S:</b> Like going to Church every Sunday, praying before going to bed and not to sin and feel bad about your acts. So, let's say I had something with a guy, my mother has a Virgin Mary in the back yard, so I had to go there and pray and ask for redemption to be forgiven</p>

### Appendix I: Follow-Up E-mail to Participants

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Thank you for your participation in the research project entitled “Better Queer than Dead! Positive Identity in Latin American Gay Men in Canada.” In order to increase the validity of my methods and to give you an opportunity to further include your voice in the research, I have attached the transcription of your interview, which was held on date.

Since this study is intended to describe your lived experience, perception, and narrative of your journey in developing a positive gay identity, I am most interested in ensuring that I have accurately recorded the responses you gave me on the date of our meeting. Therefore, it would be most beneficial if you alerted me to any inaccuracies in what was recorded on date.

Please make any changes on the document and e-mail it back to me at [first.last@uleth.ca](mailto:first.last@uleth.ca). These changes may include adding more detail to your experience, clarifying information that was misinterpreted, and/or deleting information you do not want to be used in the research. At this time, I want to remind you that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw participation at any point, including after you have read and verified the transcription.

If I have not received an update e-mail from you by date, I will contact you again in order to determine the accuracy of the data collected.

Thank you again for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Ricardo Avelar