Spring 1999

Queering/querying identities: The roles of integrity and belonging in becoming ourselves

Cari Ann Elizabeth Moorhead

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Queering/querying identities: The roles of integrity and belonging in becoming ourselves

Abstract
This dissertation presents a picture of the complexities and contradictions in the daily lives of people in the Seacoast area of New Hampshire who identify as, or are identified as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people (LGBTQQA). The focus of this study is the "Create Our Destiny" conference, a social change project. Philosophically, I viewed this project through a Postmodern feminist lens, and methodologically I used a grounded theory approach.

This dissertation is divided into three sections. Within section one, I present more detailed descriptions of my philosophical and methodological approaches, a description of the geographical and political context in which the study was set, and definitions of terms. There were three distinct stages to this research project—the planning process, the conference, and the follow-up interviews—and my role varied, from participant, to observer, to interviewer. Recognition of the challenges and ethical dilemmas inherent in conducting qualitative research, especially when one is working with participants who are marginalized, is an important part of this study.

Along with a detailed description of the "Create Our Destiny" conference (chapter 4), section two contains the bulk of the participants' experiences and insights presented in my dissertation. Clear patterns emerged from the participants' stories about coming out (chapter 5), labels (chapter 6), and gender identity issues (chapter 7), particularly the underlying tension between seeking a sense of belonging while maintaining one's personal sense of integrity.

The third and final section is where I present my research findings. Ultimately, this study shows that people in the Seacoast want to be "fully and wholly" themselves, or as I re-present their interests in chapter eight, to strive toward singularity. In this dissertation, I argue that striving towards singularity requires grappling with unexamined codes and principles, such as compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality, through self-awareness and reflexivity. In chapter nine, I present practical suggestions that can be used to operationalize the theoretical suggestions developed and/or supported by my work.

Keywords
Education, Adult and Continuing, Psychology, Developmental, Women's Studies

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QUEERING/ QUERYING IDENTITIES: THE ROLES OF INTEGRITY AND BELONGING IN BECOMING OURSELVES

BY

CARI ANN ELIZABETH MOORHEAD

B.A., University of Ulster, 1983.
M.S., Northeastern University, 1988.

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

May, 1999
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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Dr. Thomas H. Schram
Associate Professor of Education

April 12, 1999
DEDICATION

To Cyn
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ABSTRACT

QUEERING/ QUERYING IDENTITIES: THE ROLES OF INTEGRITY AND BELONGING IN BECOMING OURSELVES

By Cari Ann Elizabeth Moorhead
University of New Hampshire, May 1999

This dissertation presents a picture of the complexities and contradictions in the daily lives of people in the Seacoast area of New Hampshire who identify as, or are identified as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people (LGBTQQA). The focus of this study is the “Create Our Destiny” conference, a social change project. Philosophically, I viewed this project through a postmodern feminist lens, and methodologically I used a grounded theory approach.

This dissertation is divided into three sections. Within section one, I present more detailed descriptions of my philosophical and methodological approaches, a description of the geographical and political context in which the study was set, and definitions of terms. There were three distinct stages to this research project — the planning process, the conference, and the follow-up interviews — and my role varied, from participant, to observer, to interviewer. Recognition of the challenges and ethical dilemmas inherent in conducting qualitative research, especially when one is working with participants who are marginalized, is an important part of this study.
Along with a detailed description of the “Create Our Destiny” conference (chapter 4), section two contains the bulk of the participants’ experiences and insights presented in my dissertation. Clear patterns emerged from the participants’ stories about coming out (chapter 5), labels (chapter 6), and gender identity issues (chapter 7), particularly the underlying tension between seeking a sense of belonging while maintaining one’s personal sense of integrity.

The third and final section is where I present my research findings. Ultimately, this study shows that people in the Seacoast want to be “fully and wholly” themselves, or as I re-present their interests in chapter eight, to strive toward singularity. In this dissertation, I argue that striving towards singularity requires grappling with unexamined codes and principles, such as compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality, through self-awareness and reflexivity. In chapter nine, I present practical suggestions that can be used to operationalize the theoretical suggestions developed and/ or supported by my work.
SECTION ONE

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The need for a recognizable identity, and the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity - these are driving forces in our culture, and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender and sexuality. (Bornstein, 1994, pp. 3-4)

This study presents a picture of the complexities and contradictions in the daily lives of people in the Seacoast area who identify as, or are identified as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people (LGBTQQA). In this study, I used a grounded theory approach to focus on the “Create Our Destiny” conference, a social change project for the Seacoast area, designed to support a healthy future for LGBTQQA people. My use of a grounded theory approach, along with my personal familiarity with both the participants and the context based on my ten year residency in the Seacoast area, focused my attention on issues of central importance in the daily lives of these participants as they emerged directly from the material collected, rather than based on any a priori ideas (Miles, 1987; Wiersma, 1995). As my study progressed, clear patterns emerged, i.e., the importance of coming out, labels, and gender identity, and their relationship to the participants’ ability to be “fully and wholly themselves.” A common theme manifested in participants’ discussions was the tension they felt between maintaining their integrity and creating a sense of belonging.
Having introduced my study, I now wish to provide readers with an outline for this chapter. I begin by positioning myself, personally, educationally, methodologically, and theoretically. My positioning includes discussion of my own personal interest in integrity and belonging. Explicitly outlining my positions in this way supports my conviction that to present oneself as detached while carrying out research is to camouflage one's deepest, most privileged interests (Rosaldo, 1989, as cited in Fine, 1994). Then, I outline the significance of this study and close the chapter with an organizational overview of the eight chapters to come.

Personal Positioning

I must understand my work to be part of that engagement with what it means to be fully human....I must locate myself(ves) and assume the responsibility of attending to how this should inform my philosophy of education. (Boyd, 1998, p. 16)

The importance of personal positioning, as indicated in the opening quote by Dwight Boyd, a philosopher of education, has become widely accepted by academicians. The importance of attending to and acknowledging the ways in which various aspects of one's being influence one's work has also been raised in less academic settings. Sarah McLoughlin in her song “Building a Mystery” ponders whether one can “look out the window without your shadow getting in the way,” which implies that one’s world view is impacted by the position from which one views it. Furthermore, I contend that shadows fall on our windows whether we recognize them or not, and, as I discuss throughout my dissertation, it is possible to look past one’s shadow on the window failing to recognize it.

We are all positioned subjects with perspectives formed and informed by the various aspects of our personal experience, the various lenses though which we view the
world, including our ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic perspective, among other factors such as our historical and cultural contexts. From a lesbian feminist perspective, my personal background might be described as anything but queer, maybe even old school, which is one of the many inconsistencies or tensions throughout my work. My credentials are almost impeccable: While I am not a vegetarian, I was a camp counselor, an athlete, a P.E. teacher, and, yes, my partner (of 12 years) and I moved in together on our second date (No U-Haul!). However, it is important to point out that when one posits certain identity categories, one necessarily silences other aspects of one's life (Seidman, 1996). Therefore, sharing some specificities of oneself is always a limited way of describing oneself even if one acknowledges the fluidity of all of those categories. Therefore, if I claim that "myself(ves)" include an educator, lesbian, middle class woman, immigrant, and activist, then I silence differences which relate to religion, regional location, subcultural identification, relation to feminism, age, education and/or any other categories.

I encourage readers to recognize that they too have lenses, developed through their lived experiences, through which they will view this dissertation. Throughout my work, I endeavor to prevent readers from losing sight of my lens, which due to its constant presence might become invisible and more easily forgotten. For example, this detailed personal positioning here in my introduction is one way in which I hope to prevent the reader from losing sight of my presence.
Integrity and Belonging

As I mentioned previously, the concepts of integrity and belonging emerged as central concerns in the lives of LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area. Over time as these themes emerged more clearly in my material, I became more conscious of the extent to which maintaining my personal sense of integrity, while seeking belonging, was also a daily struggle for me. Prompted by this realization, I took time to revisit my past recognizing that while I was conducting a study driven by the participants' experiences, my personal history influenced which aspects of participants' experiences caught my attention.

Personal Interest in Integrity

The impetus for the “Create Our Destiny” conference was the creation of communities where LGBTQQA people could live with integrity, where we could be “fully and wholly” ourselves. Sarah Hoagland (1988) claims that living with integrity is particularly pertinent for what she calls multiplicitous people, people who have two distinct yet connected selves. Through my own lived experiences, I have intimate experience with the sacrifices one can feel compelled to make between being true to oneself when one’s very being is at odds with societal expectations. For example, my identity as an Irish lesbian has been repeatedly negated by members of the American Irish community, particularly in Boston and New York, who have made their level of hostility to LGBT people very public. In an effort to ensure the highest standard of compulsory heterosexuality, organizers of the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in both cities have refused to take public moneys in order to legally ban me and my queer Irish peers from participating in the parade.
Personal Interest in Belonging

According to Elsbeth Probyn, a sociologist with particular interest in gender and culture, “If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside” (1996, p.8). My own discovery that my sexual orientation was not in line with normative standards occurred the summer I left high school, when on the last night of camp a fellow (female) counselor kissed me. This revelation about my sexuality coincided with my leaving my home in the Republic of Ireland to attend college north of the border, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Entering the only non sectarian Physical Education Teacher Education program in Northern Ireland, I discovered very different cultural norms operating than I was used to growing up in the south. My primary and secondary level educational experiences had been segregated by both gender and religion, but my neighbourhood was very mixed; so I entered into this non-segregated environment with a very different perspective than my Northern peers. I quickly became aware that people’s initial goal upon meeting someone new was to determine whether they were Catholic or Protestant. This skill was alien to me, and at the time I was more concerned about figuring out how to determine who the other lesbians were and how I could access their invisible world.

The experience of being seventeen and seeing the world from a new vantage point in terms of my sexuality and religion prompted me to think about belonging, about who I was, and what various aspects of my being meant to me. Particularly fascinating for me, as I looked back on the sectarian aspect of my college experience, was that rather than feeling ostracized or separated from one side or other of the religious divide, for the most part I felt welcomed. In hindsight, I attribute my acceptance at least in part to my ability
to “pass” as both Catholic and Protestant. North American readers might find passing an odd expression in connection with one’s religion. However, in Northern Ireland one learned quickly to determine people’s religion using a number of methods, i.e., through their name, school, even their sporting interests. My surname is not Gaelic and is easily mistaken for a Protestant name; my high school was not named for a saint as was the case with most Catholic schools in the North of Ireland. In addition to those aspects, my choice of sport also marked me as a Protestant. Field Hockey and Rugby are considered British games and are taught in Protestant schools.” In hindsight, these personal experiences helped me inherently understand the socially constructed nature of categories.

**Insights from Undertaking to Personally Position Myself**

Claiming my personal position helps me as a researcher to differentiate my views from those of my participants. Elsbeth Probyn acknowledges the difficulty of differentiating between the researcher and one’s research claiming that “the body that writes is integral to the type of figuring I wish to do. It is a body that is fully part of the outside it experiments with” (1996, p. 6). Had I not emigrated from one culture to another, been welcomed into both Protestant and Catholic circles, “passed” as a straight person while also experiencing a mostly invisible lesbian culture, the ultimate focus of this work may have been on something other than the tension between integrity and belonging and the search for grounded theoretical and practical suggestions to the day-to-day challenges of LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area. Throughout this process, I experienced a tension between my duty to clearly and accurately articulate the sentiments of those whose stories I share and my responsibility for drawing theoretical or practical
conclusions from those stories. My world is very much the world of all of the people whose stories are shared herein as I too live, work, and love in these communities. Therefore, I make no apologies for the potential unrepresentativeness of perspectives taken here because as Probyn points out, “They are nonetheless part of the world as I see it becoming” (1996, p. 6).

**Educational Positioning**

My own educational journey has been interdisciplinary, or perhaps transdisciplinary, through Physical Education, Recreation Management, Student Personnel, Education and Curriculum Theory. Given the grounded theory approach I used to conduct this study, I believe my broad perspective was an advantage. As a result, I think I was less inclined to filter out material on the basis that it was not relevant to a particular theoretical perspective than might have been the case had I interacted with participants using a more precisely honed disciplinary lens. Had I gone into this project with a narrower and more focused lens, my task might have appeared more straightforward, but the richness and complexity of the situation as it emerged would have been lost.

Earlier I described myself as an educator, and this completed work will be reviewed to determine its merit as a component of my doctoral program in Education; therefore, my position on what constitutes education is of importance here. As is the case with research, I believe there is also no neutral education (Freire, 1973). Much of my personal educational experience has been in areas traditionally seen as supplemental or additional to the academic mission of schools, colleges and universities, e.g., as a P.E. teacher, coordinator of student activities and presenter of non-institutionally affiliated...
educational workshops on gender identity and sexuality. My belief in the integral importance of such educational activities leads me to define the education system much more broadly than traditional schooling. In addition, I believe it is vital that the work of educational theorists in the academy become more widely utilized by activists.

Therefore, I support the position, which educational anthropologists and some queer educational activists have taken, which argues that education and institutionalized schooling are not synonymous (Leck, 1994). Insights drawn from this experience may be of value both inside the academy and in the community, helping (re)discover what we as educators ought to know already: the academy and the community are not dichotomous. Therefore, educational research needs to be responsive to the experiences of those who work on social change outside and separate from the traditional approaches to schooling.

Methodological and Theoretical Underpinnings

Having positioned myself personally and educationally, I now wish to introduce myself methodologically (grounded theory) and philosophically (postmodern feminist). I believe that research is not neutral (Hall, 1975; Reason & Rowen, 1981; Westkott, 1979; Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and that all research projects are (and should be) political (Wilkinson, 1986; Tiefer 1990; Payton, 1984, as cited in Fine, 1994). Furthermore, I believe that by acknowledging my biases upfront I reduce the risk of conveying implicit political messages to the reader.

Grounded Theory

Judith Butler, a feminist theorist whose work focuses heavily on the politics of gender and sexuality, has helped me to articulate my current understanding of the theoretical approaches supporting my work. She asks:
Is there a pregiven distinction between theory, politics, culture, media? How do those divisions operate to quell a certain intertextual writing that might well generate wholly different epistemic maps? But I am writing now: is it too late? Can this writing, can any writing, refuse the terms by which it is appropriated even as, to some extent, that very colonizing discourse enables or produces this stumbling block, this resistance? How do I relate the paradoxical situation of this dependency and refusal? (1993, p. 308)

My attraction to theory building grew out of dissonances I experienced due to the gap between the material I was reading as a doctoral student and my experience as a social change agent within my local communities. On a given day, I might spend several hours trying to grasp the nuances of an Eve Sedgwick or Adrienne Rich argument and later sit and listen to gay youth describe their fear and alienation as they navigate local school systems and hear their joy upon discovering they are not alone, crazy or abandoned (in most cases) by friends and family. Therefore, my response to Butler's thought provoking questions matches the position taken by Charlotte Bunch, also a feminist theorist, who claimed, “all aspects of theory development, theory, and activism continually inform and alter each other” (1998, p.17).

Theory is also a mechanism that allows one to pass on the knowledge and experience gained through one’s lived experiences. An underlying assumption guiding my research effort is my understanding that theory is not something set apart from our lives. Our assumptions about reality and change influence our actions constantly. The question is not whether we have a theory, but how aware we are of the assumptions behind our actions, and how conscious we are of the choices we make daily among different theories. (Bunch, 1998, p. 16)

The creators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss, argued that it would contribute toward “closing the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research” (1967, p. vii), supporting the concept that theory generation and social research can be

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interconnected (Glaser, 1978, as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Rather than begin this project with a particular theory which I was trying to prove or disprove (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I developed theory which was grounded in data “systematically gathered and analyzed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to uncover a general theoretical framework that would help explain the data (Wiersma, 1995). This approach allowed me to join those bridging the gap between community based social change work, particularly with marginalized people and groups, and theoretical work being conducted within the academy. I thereby developed theory grounded in the everyday experiences of LGBTQQA people that is “useful” to those engaged in social change efforts whether they are primarily engaged in academic pursuits or actively involved in community based work. The term useful theory here refers to Jean Anyon’s (1994) call that theory be judged by more than epistemological criteria, that it ought to have the ability to provide recommendations to those of us engaged in social change work.

Postmodern Feminist Perspective

The theoretical perspective I bring to this work can best be described as postmodern feminist. While I identified as a feminist prior to starting this project, the experience of conducting this study has provided me with more clarity about what I mean when I describe myself as a feminist, particularly a feminist scholar. My approach to my work recognizes and acknowledges the relationship between lived experience, values, and theory (Tribilcot, 1991); I recognize that philosophy is not a luxury (Ginsberg, 1991), and I present actual dialogue rather than hypothetical dialogue (Jagger, 1991). Like many other feminist theorists, I reject many of the dualities that have supported gender bias, e.g., subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known, and the political and
personal (Stacey, 1991), and I have a deep desire to support agency in the face of oppression (Card, 1991; Hoagland, 1988; Shogan, 1992), particularly oppression borne out of gender duality.

My direct observation of LGBTQQA people in the process of creating a healthy future for themselves influenced me to see that my perspective closely aligned with those claiming a postmodern perspective. My work exemplified the three analytical heuristics common among postmodern theorists, the local is important, deconstruction is valid, and discourse is central (Anyon, 1994). Over the course of my study, I recognized parallels between participant descriptions and postmodern theorists, e.g., the relevance of history and political climate to one’s lived experiences. Engaging in work that recognizes and affirms social differences that exist within and between LGBTQQA people, along with the multiple identities and subjectivities to which these differences give rise (Quinlivan & Town, 1997), also aligns me with other postmodern theorists.

Usher & Edwards (1994) refer to the connection between postmodernism and feminism as “an uneasy alliance” (1994, p. 19). I accept their claim, which was based on two points. First, that there are a plurality of feminist positions (making feminisms a more accurate term than feminism (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 20)), some of which do not accept postmodern tenets such as the need to challenge modernism. And second, that the roots of feminism itself are influenced by the Enlightenment tradition, implying that some feminists have continued to be attracted to seek emancipation of women, and declaration of our status as equals in our capacities to reason and seek objective truth. However, as Usher and Edwards point out, it is the failure of this tradition to produce such emancipation that has led some to seek connections with postmodernism.
While the alliance may be uneasy, and neither feminism nor postmodernism presents unified discourse, making any claim to postmodern feminism very problematic, there are commonalities which make this combination an accurate description of my perspective. Feminist theory, the emerging literature on queer theory, and postmodern/poststructuralist writings have at their core a focus on pluralities and diversities rather than on the unities and universals which appear in the traditional Western view (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Challenging claims of objectivity in scholarship has become a common theme in both feminist and postmodern work (Flax, 1990; Hekman 1990, (as cited in Usher & Edwards, 1994) and Nicholson 1990). Following the tradition set by other feminists who have adopted a postmodern perspective, I emphasize the particularity of women’s, men’s, and transgender people’s experiences in specific cultural and historical contexts (Ferguson and Wicke 1992; Nicholson 1990). While my focus is not only on women’s lives, as some might expect from work claiming a feminist perspective, attention to issues of gender identity play a large role in this work.

In their attempt to confront the implications for educators of adopting a postmodern lens, Robin Usher and Richard Edwards sum up my rationale for claiming a postmodern feminist perspective:

The recognition that foundations and universals are themselves discursive constructions within certain human practices does not entail that “anything goes.” Our discourses and our practices are neither monolithic nor univocal. There is always more that can be said and more that can be done. To subvert foundations is not to court irrationality and paralysis but to foreground dialogue, practical engagement and a certain kind of self-referentiality. In the postmodern, the claim is not that there are no norms but that they are not to be found in foundations. They have to be struggled over, and in this struggle, everyone must assume personal responsibility. (1994, p. 27)
Taking a grounded theory approach from a postmodern feminist position also accommodates my belief that knowledge is closely linked to the time and place of the phenomenon under review and recognizes that theories are interpretations made by researchers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, my ability to understand the current sociopolitical context in which the study was set became an important aspect of the process of developing both theoretical and practical insights.

**Sociopolitical Context.** Compulsory heterosexuality and presumption of gender duality exemplify the current normative standards for sexuality and gender identity in our culture, implying that there are two sexes (male and female) and all individuals ought to identify happily with one or the other category. The normative standard dictates that sexual activity is only permitted across categories, preferably limited to committed monogamous partnerships. These normative systems are so embedded that they tend to be invisible to many people, particularly those who benefit from them the most. This normative system prescribes principles and codes on numerous levels, impinging on every detail of our lives, dictating for example how we dress, what sports we play, acceptable responses to situations, and our choice of partner.

Societies and groups continually negotiate and contest normative standards as standards upon which one's individual actions will be evaluated and classified hierarchically (Blasius, 1994). According to Mark Blasius, a political scientist who studied connections between gay and lesbian politics and ethics, individual behavior becomes the site of the contestation, the "object on the basis of which norms emerge and the instruments through which they are enforced" (1994, p. 149). Envisioning changes in the current sociopolitical context becomes easier if one shifts one's understanding of how
normative standards are constructed. Understanding norms as common standards for comparison and communication through which we make ourselves intelligible to each other, rather than through externally imposed static rules, makes it easier to envision that the threshold between the normal and the abnormal as unstable (Blasius, 1994, p. 21).

The lesbian and gay movement has tried to alter the social conditions that positions heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal (Blasius, 1994, p. 21).

Obviously, certain ways of being are privileged over others in this sociopolitical context, with people who identify as, or are identified as, LGBTQQA being seen as deviant. As this study will reveal, people who choose to self-identify as LGBTQQA face unique challenges. According to Barbara Smith (1993), a Black feminist writer and activist, "homophobia, the fear of non heterosexuals, is usually the last oppression to be mentioned, (after race, sex, and class), the last one to be taken seriously, the last to go, "But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal" (1993, p. 99). The difficulty of discovering one's sexual or gender identity in a setting that is generally hostile to any identity not consistent with conventional normative standards increases the tension created as we try to create a sense of belonging that supports our integrity.

Significance of the Study

We do not currently have adequately nuanced understandings of the complexities and contradictions in the daily lives of people who identify as LGBTQQA. According to Vera Whisman (1996), a sociologist who writes about sexuality and choice, if one took a common sense approach to thinking about identity, it would be seen as the sum total of a number of discrete categories, e.g., homosexual + female = lesbian. However, she was correct to point out that identifying with, and politically organizing around, identity
categories in this manner has been problematic because it privileges the hegemonic referent by asking people to organize around aspects of themselves in ways that do not mirror their reality, e.g., on St. Patrick’s Day in Boston, I can be Irish, or I can be gay, but I can’t be both. The creation of oppositional categories (black, white) can create false dichotomies and can be experienced as restrictive of people’s ability to interact as full and whole selves. Therefore, one of the major critiques of identity politics\textsuperscript{11}, a theoretical approach developed by some feminists, was its failure to account for multiple identities, particularly in terms of the need to mobilize for political change.

Using a grounded theory approach, I have been able to use different approaches and different angles to “construct a much more nuanced picture” of the lived experiences of LGBTQQA people (Raissiguier, 1997, p. 35). One of the strengths of my work is that the participants’ primary motivation for involvement in this project was to create their own destiny, not to participate in research. Most sexuality and gender identity research limits participation on the basis of self-identification with any particular identity category. Therefore, Catherine Raissiguier, who has written about the challenge of LGB identity formation for college students, argues that our analyses are “always tainted by the fact that we are talking to, observing, qualifying a self-selected group in one way or another” (1997, p. 35, emphasis in original) because many LGBTQQA people are not out to others, and in some cases even to ourselves. Participation in this study was limited by people’s interest in creating a healthy future for LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area, not on their own self-identification. In addition, my use of a grounded theory approach helped me provide an accurate portrayal of the multiple, interconnecting identities people experience in everyday life (Etter-Lewis, 1991) and the “messy inconsistencies that occur
whenever race, sex, class, and sexual identity actually mix" (Smith, 1993, 100).

Illuminating a more realistic view of people's day to day experience with multiple, interconnecting identities provides educators and social change agents with access to a more specialized foundation for action and social change (Mobley, 1997).

Theoretical interest in the foundation of identity categories is not new. However, while debates have raged at various times during this century about the basis for sexual orientation such as nature versus nurture, neither social constructionist nor essentialist approaches to sexuality and gender duality were grounded in empirical accounts of identity (Esterberg, 1996). The same critique can be made against much of the discussion taking place between postmodern feminists, who have wrestled with whether there is a need to deconstruct the category of woman altogether. One argument for deconstruction of a singular term “women” is that the term implies a shared experience, creates a false sense of collectivity, and masks the hidden hegemonic referent:

Different identities [that] have operated, and continue to operate, as interventions in facile assumptions of “sisterhood”, assumptions that have tended to mask the operation of white, middle-class, heterosexual “womenhood” as the hidden but hegemonic referent. (Martin, 1993, p. 275)

The lack of grounded theory about identity categories is problematic. Educators and social change agents need to keep sight of the importance our identities play in our politics (Phelan, 1989). Yet, these theoretical debates about deconstructing the categories tend not to take into account the use of categories by an increasing number of LGBTQQA activists loudly proclaiming their identities in the streets (Steven Epstein, 1987, and Kristin Esterberg (1997). Therefore, the increased understanding of the role of gender identity and sexual orientation categories in participants’ daily lived experience provided by this project is very timely.
In particular, people in this study were focused on creating an environment where people can be “freely and wholly” themselves, thereby asking us to think about people’s identities in more integrated ways than is possible by simply focusing on people’s sexuality or gender identity. Integrity and belonging emerged as two concepts central to people’s ability to be “freely and wholly” themselves. People who identify as LGBTQQA are uniquely positioned to discuss tensions between integrity and belonging. The ability of LGBTQQA people to be complacent is minimized because our deviation from the normative standard serves as a constant reminder that promotes increased self awareness and reflexivity. LGBTQQA people constantly encounter discrepancies between aspects of ourselves and normative standards, such as those which contend one cannot be simultaneously Irish and lesbian; therefore we are forced to pay attention to decisions concerning our sexuality and gender identity. However, it may be more difficult for non-LGBTQQA people to be true to themselves because their decisions concerning their sexuality or gender identity are often unconscious. By illuminating the decisions about sexuality and gender identity in the lives of LGBTQQA people in this study, I hope to increase the levels of self-awareness in non-LGBTQQA people.

The project being described is emergent; it is not a simple, clear-cut study. By emergent studies, Adrianna Kezar (1995) means studies that test out new areas (or even long researched areas in new ways) which might not lead to any specific conclusions or clear understandings. My use of a grounded theory approach proved to be complex, and, as I articulate more fully in chapter three, rife with potential ethical difficulties. Yet the benefits in my mind far outweigh the drawbacks. Michele Fine sums up the significance of this kind of research as follows:
Scholarship on school reform, racism, community life, violence against women, reproductive freedom...sits at the messy nexus of theory, research and organizing. The *raison d'être* for such research is to unsettle questions, texts, and collective struggles; to challenge what is, incite what could be, and help imagine a world that is not yet imagined. (1994, p. 30)

Despite great progress in recent years, there is still stigma attached to conducting research on bisexual, gay and lesbian topics; so some researchers may simply ignore sexual orientation research questions (Matheney, 1997). Therefore, I believe that my opportunity to conduct this study, using a grounded theory approach, ought to be recognized as one of its significances. Inspired by Suzanne Pharr (1988), I want to recognize some of the levels of privilege that have supported my ability to conduct research in an area still considered “controversial.” My immigrant status (permanent resident alien) might have given me reason to reconsider this direction, but as a white-skinned woman, I have faced different levels of scrutiny than do immigrants of color and did not feel any threat to my residency. As a Student Affairs staff member at an institution of higher education, my engagement with this work did not jeopardize my employment. My employer indicated a high level of support for my work, even granted me release from all other duties for a six month period so that I could concentrate on this project. Both my families of origin and of choice supported me in this venture, and there are no children in my life whose custody could be jeopardized by my engagement with this work and/or my visibility as a lesbian (it is illegal in the state of New Hampshire to foster or adopt children if one publicly acknowledges being gay or lesbian.) Therefore, this research posed a minimum of risk to me personally and professionally, while offering an opportunity to conduct research that enhanced my own search for belonging with integrity. I hope my efforts prompt others to pursue their own passion.
Story Telling

Postmodern theorists have made the use of personal stories a credible way through which to communicate. Personal histories provide legitimate avenues and starting points for acquiring insight into social and cultural phenomena. We are beginning to understand that to know the “other,” we must listen to their stories (Asher, N., et al., 1997). Jonathan Silin (1997), who writes about being out as an openly gay faculty member to his Teacher Education students as a matter of integrity, reminds us that when we use stories to communicate, it is important to recognize that stories are never abstract fictions separate from the context in which their authors live; they change over time and are transformed by the times. There is a confessional cul-de-sac we enter when our stories become the end rather than the beginning of our political work. The stories told here began as part of a weekend long discussion at the “Create Our Destiny” conference designed to lead us out of the cul-de-sac with the creation of collective action plans.

Silin’s (1997) work reminds us that the increasing specificity of our location within identity politics brings with it very pressing, even paralyzing questions, such as how are we to speak about rather than for others? Throughout the process of planning and implementing the “Create Our Destiny” conference, the planning team and I struggled with questions such as how to make space available for “others” to feel both welcomed enough to participate and supported enough to speak for themselves. My goal is to continue that same level of empowerment. Nevertheless, I recognize that opportunities presented to LGBTQQA people to speak are rare. Therefore, I accept full responsibility for this final presentation of aspects of the “Create Our Destiny” conference and of participants’ experiences in general.
Like Victoria Muñoz, whose work focused on identity formation in Latina and Latino youth, I too sought to listen to both the "... individuals’ voices and to the larger social, historical, and economic context" within which those stories are told (1995, p. 27). Participants’ stories are shared here in great detail to allow the participants to speak for themselves as much as possible. My rationale echoes William Hawkeswood’s in his ethnographic work focusing on gay black men in Harlem: “Extracting words or sentences detracts from the quality of the fuller expression being conveyed by the speaker” (1996, p. 18-19).

Understandably, concerns have been raised, particularly by feminists, about work carried out by social researchers who, using similar approaches to the one I engaged in, carve out pieces of narrative evidence in support of their argument. As Michele Fine (1994), a social psychologist who has studied the construction of “community” within and beyond schools, points out, the difficulty comes not with the carving but with the lack of discussion revealing how the carving occurred, or that it took place at all. Using an analogy borrowed from the world of sport, I must remind readers to be mindful that they are seeing the highlight tape, not the entire game. Obviously this work goes beyond my own personal experience, but I am still engaging in what Franzosa calls telling my “side of the story” (1992, p. 396), connecting my understanding of personal identity and cultural context while carrying out a research project. At the forefront of my mind as I progressed was advice from one conference participant, who advised me to ensure my work was “attached to a person and a voice and [had] meaning in somebody’s life or else we are going to lose people” (Zachary). My work is a weaving of participants’ lived
experiences and my response to their thoughts, connected together with existing and emergent theories.

As I tried to create a text which could communicate the complexities of LGBTQQA people’s lived experience, I gained a deeper understanding of what it feels like to lose intimacy from participant stories by virtue of the writing process (Roy, 1993). As one participant described it, the “Create Our Destiny” conference was “...such an incredible experience, and so monumental and so far reaching ...then I had to try and translate [the experience] into words” [to explain it to people who were not there] (Michael). I now share Michael’s challenge. If my approach is successful, the reader will experience some sense of that which Sully referred to as “the passion and the importance of the event for people.” It has been quite a challenge to present the fluidity and contingency of aspects of identity, integrity and belonging, in a static text. Along with remembering my shadow on the window, I hope readers will remember that this finished dissertation has gone through many oscillations and reincarnations and has been heavily crafted in order to present a coherent story in this final form. Therefore, this dissertation in its final form does not necessarily reflect the confusion inherent in everyday life.

The study’s significance from the participant’s perspective varied:

I think it is really important work that you are doing, and I am glad you are thinking about writing it up and beside the committee of five that it will go out into the world at large .... and it will be heard by people. (Susan)

Susan offered those words of encouragement after we discussed what was likely to be the outcome of the work. Like other participants, Susan wanted her experience to have an impact on her local communities and beyond. The following discussion with Laura took place after I asked her what I needed to be particularly conscious of as I wrote about the
complexities and complications in identifying as LGBTQQA in the Seacoast area. She said “Oh, that we are all dying to read it” (laughs). She went on:

L- Oh, I don’t want to tell you what my first thought is, cause
C- What
L- (Lowered voice) Make it really good.
C- Make it really good. I’m gonna try.
L- Yeah you will. Ah. Oh god, I am in total awe of you.

I struggled with whether to leave Laura’s last comment in the final version of my dissertation. The worry I had came not from wondering whether Laura meant what she said, nor from a lack of appreciation for the sentiment behind her remark. My concern was that out of context this remark might appear self serving and unnecessary. In the end, this genuinely gracious blessing, from a friend, with whom I experience mutual respect, is still included because it represents the type of support I received from friends and participants alike as I undertook this project. The support and enthusiasm of participants for this effort sustained me through this process. Participants were eager to tell their stories and to learn from each other so they too could construct a more nuanced picture of LGBTQQA people’s lived experiences. This level of support exemplifies the significance of my study.

Given the non-conventional way in which this dissertation is organized, I now offer readers some organizational notes to help you orient yourself to the rest of my work.

Organizational Notes

This dissertation is divided into three sections. Section one, containing chapter one, an interlude, and chapters two and three, provides an overview of the study and concentrates generally on describing the who, what, when, where, why, and how of my work. Chapter one contains my personal and theoretical positions and the significance of
the study. The interlude that follows lists important key terms and my stipulative definitions. This glossary may be helpful for the reader who is not familiar with some of the terminology associated with sexuality and gender identity. Chapter two contains a description of the geographical and political context in which the “Create Our Destiny” conference was set. In addition, I provide the reader with a brief history of activities which led up to and provided support for the “Create Our Destiny” conference. My methodological approach is articulated in chapter three.

Within section two, which consists of chapters four through seven, my focus is on presenting participants’ experiences and insights. The bulk of the participants’ stories presented in my dissertation appear in this section. In chapter four, I provide a more detailed description of the “Create Our Destiny” conference which is the common thread among all of the participants. My interest in keeping a distinct chapter on the “Create Our Destiny” conference has been to make my work more accessible and useful for local readers because the event was the one connecting factor for all of the participants. Chapters five through seven in turn present insights on three areas of LGBTQQA people’s experiences that emerged throughout the study: coming out, labels, and gender identity issues.

My goal in section two was not to reduce the material I have collected down to one single explanation for everything I saw happening in the Seacoast area. Rather, I have tried to provide readers with access to a variety of viewpoints, sharing the similarities and the differences which emerged. Throughout this second section, I present numerous opportunities for readers to gain a deeper understanding of the role identity categories
play in the ongoing balancing act between developing a sense of integrity and gaining a sense of belonging.

The third and final section is where I present my research findings. In chapter eight, the first of the two chapters in section three, I call for a reconceptualization of several theoretical concepts based on in-depth analysis of the participants’ perspectives presented in previous chapters. In chapter nine, I present some practical suggestions that are either currently in use or could be used to operationalize the theoretical suggestions developed and/or supported my work.

As readers, you are about to be exposed to LGBTQQA people’s daily lives. You will see us in a variety of situations, some happy, some sad, some frustrating, hopefully all thought provoking. Your invitation to join me requests that you come not as an observer, but as a participant in an effort to enhance your own understanding and to uncover some of your own assumptions. A doctoral dissertation is by definition a site of much critique, but I urge the reader to follow a suggestion given to the participants at the start of the “Create Our Destiny” conference: “Listen with the intent to understand not critique.” By recognizing the extent to which my work challenges their assumptions, I hope readers will interact with the my work and discover the participants’ lived experiences, not as you expect them to be, but more as they are, thereby learning to see things more queerly!

'The Seacoast is a particular geographical location on the coast line of the state of New Hampshire.

* For the purposes of this study, LGBTQQA refers to lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), queer (Q), questioning (Q) and allied (A) people. LGBTQQA is also intended to include people questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and/or those who reject labels. The term “Queer” in this context can encompass those who identify with any sexual orientation or identity, and the term “allied” generally refers to those who work to build an affirming community for LGBTQ people.
"From grant application sent to the National Lesbian & Gay Community Funding Partnership asking for the funds needed to plan and implement the “Create Our Destiny” Conference (Appendix A).

"This reference mimics the joke, “What does a lesbian bring on the second date? A U-Haul!” The implication is that lesbians are apt to quickly make commitments leading to long term relationships.

"My use of the term lesbian is done with the understanding, as Butler (1993, p. 311-2) outlines, that the current use of the term lesbian has certain value in an effort to counter silence and invisibility. While there is a political need for the sign now there is no way to predict or control the political uses to which that sign may be used in the future. In part the section of this study which focuses on gender identity and sexuality categories will seek to uncover how the participants answer Butler’s question “how to use the sign and avow its temporal contingency at once.”

"The notion that people ought to strive to be freely and wholly themselves, or be true to themselves has my full support on the proviso that the people we strive to be honor the dignity and worth of others, no matter how different we think they are from us. For example, I am not supporting the supremacist who holds a position which claims inherent supremacy based upon race or any other aspect of their being. Given the history of persecution endured by LGBTQ people, I would be remiss in not making that point explicit.

"Victoria Davion (1991) cited Hoagland’s work. Davion also highlights the work of María Lugones, a Nuevomejicana lesbian, who has written about the struggles she experiences in the context of Anglo domination of la cultura Nuevomejicana which in turn sees lesbians as abominations (Lugones, M. (1990). Hispaneando y lesbiando: On Sarah Hoagland’s lesbian ethics).

"This phrase was coined by Adrienne Rich (1986) in her essay “Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence.” This article has been quoted so often Martindale (1997) refers to it as a polemic which has been canonized. While there are issues with the way in which Rich categorizes “lesbian existence” in terms which support a transhistorical, transcultural view which I do not support, I have chosen to use Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality because of its wide use and recognition. Other terms, such as heteronormativity may well succeed compulsory heterosexuality, but for now Rich’s concept works best for my purposes. According to Judith Butler (1993, p. 312), “compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic: the norm that determines the real.”

"To assist particularly North American readers in understanding the context, I will explain in more detail. Generally speaking, there are two groups within the Northern Irish context, Catholics and Protestants. Catholics tend to be interested in cutting ties with Britain and supportive of reunification of the entire island, with the seat of government in Dublin. Northern Irish Protestants have a long standing loyalty to the British monarchy, which they feel very strongly about maintaining. While I lived in Belfast, 1979-1983, there was a considerable amount of tension and blood shed; people were killed in sectarian shooting virtually every day.

"My feeling of welcome must be placed in context, as I recognize that if there had been a life or death situation, which demanded separating people on the basis of religion, things could have changed very quickly. One day my cohort group, with whom I had been close through all four years of college, was sitting watching the news, and a story came on about an IRA shooting of a Protestant civilian singled out for no reason other than his religion. A heated discussion ensued about the tactics of the IRA and other paramilitary. Everyone in the discussion was Protestant except me, and at one point one of the group asked the rest:

“If someone were to walk up to you in the street with a machine gun and ask you if Cari was Protestant or Catholic, what would you say, I mean whose side are you on anyway?”
Despite four years of friendship, I recognized in that heartbeat that most of the group would have turned me in.

"Gaelic sports such as Hurling and Gaelic football are taught in many Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. Some Catholic schools that attract middle-class students play rugby (boys) or field hockey (girls).

"I have read from educational theory, curriculum theory, feminist theory, queer theory, gay/lesbian theory, cultural studies, political studies, gender studies, women's studies, feminist theory, feminist epistemology, psychology and sociology.

"This essay first appeared in Quest: A Feminist Quarterly, vol. 5 no. 1 (Summer 1979).

"The focal point for this work was the “Create Our Destiny” conference. As I describe in greater detail in chapter three, I collected material before, during and after the conference, i.e., transcribed recordings of all planning team meetings and follow-up interviews, along with all written material produced at the event itself.

"Some critics have decried the political nihilism of postmodern theory that emphasizes identity politics, the relativism of knowledge, and discursive practices while undermining individual agency, psychological coherence, and shaped perspectives (Anson, 1994; Beyer and Liston, 1992). The assumption that a postmodern position is by definition relativistic is not accurate, as detailed in Best and Kelner (1991) and Roseneau (1992). I contend that the combination of a postmodern feminist perspective with an interest in integrity prevents a credible charge of relativism being leveled against my work. I accept Davion’s (1991) position, which states that integrity requires an unconditional commitment to monitor who we are becoming, to pay attention to the changes we are making in our lives. Many of the participants in this study are people for whom multiplicity and marginalization, whether their own or that of a close loved one, have been part of the driving force which motivated them to pay attention to what will support their own ability to be themselves. Viewing integrity in this way, allowing for this unconditional commitment, avoids charges of relativism without dictating any particular action in any particular situation. This position also allows for the importance of the context and political realities to be genuinely taken into account.

"This description of Barbara Smith was provided as an opening to her chapter “Homophobia: Why bring it up?” In H. Abelove, M. Barale, & D. M. Halperin, (1993). The lesbian and gay studies reader (99-102). New York: Routledge.


"Unless otherwise stated participant’s contributions were drawn from our follow-up meetings.

"William Hawkeswood died in the summer of 1992 one year after defending his dissertation and being awarded a doctoral degree from Columbia University. His work was edited for publication by Alex W. Costley.
INTERLUDE

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

To assist the reader, I have provided clarification on some terms which might be unfamiliar. However, this list is offered with a proviso that terms used throughout this dissertation are contested and must be read as terms which have multiple meanings.

**AIDS**: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a specific set of medical conditions that occur when the immune system of a person infected by the HIV is no longer able to fight off disease.

**Ally**: “People who are not uncomfortable with the notion of other than heterosexual relationships.... There are people who are allies but aren’t really activist, who are friendly and supportive in your one-on-one relationships, but I get really frustrated cause I want them to DO MORE!” (Laura). She goes on to explain there are different levels of allies, like her brother who was “very supportive” when she came out to him. Laura’s other brother “has moved beyond, and has donated money to a [LGBTQQA youth support group - name omitted] so he’s even more than an ally, as far as I’m concerned he’s more supportive of me.”

**Alphabet paradox**: If we don’t name our difference in explicit terms, we remain invisible as LGBTQQA people, but if we do name it, we’re typecast as little more than sexual or gendered beings, and the vast complexity of our lives disappears.
An economy of rights and privileges: Those rights and privileges afforded to people who comply with the edicts of compulsory heterosexuality. Those who comply benefit, whereas failure to comply results in social scrutiny and suspended rights (Rhoads, 1993).

Becoming other: The experience of becoming-other “inspires a mode of thinking about how people get along, how various forms of belonging are articulated, how individuals conjugate difference into manners of beings, and how desires to become are played out in everyday circumstances” (Probyn, 1996, p. 5).


Gay: “Once [and still does for many] included any person identifying with their same sex attractions, but recently, has come to refer mainly to men with almost entirely same- sex attractions.” (Rhoads, 1993, p. 14). Lesbians and gay men of color have consistently challenged “gay” as a term “reflecting the middle-class, white homosexual men who established its usage” (Gamson, 1996, p. 404).

Gay by association: Fear that one will be outing oneself by simply supporting a gay friendly event or being seen in a public setting with someone who is publicly out.

GSA: Stands for Gay Straight Alliance. Numerous high schools have Gay Straight Alliances, student groups whose missions can include raising awareness about the homophobia and heterosexism and support for LGBTQQA students.

Gender: Hawkesworth (1997) calls for an enrichment of our conceptual terminology. She urges feminist theorists to take advantage of distinctions between terms
used in this study such as sexual identity, gender identity and sexuality, rather than collapsing then into one umbrella term gender.

**Gender duality:** Concept that there are two, and only two, mutually exclusive genders.

**Gender Identity:** Refers to the individual’s own feeling of being a man or a woman (Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 656). Note that for the purpose of this study gender identity may also refer to feelings of being other than a man or a woman — as one participant put it “a horse of a different color.” Hawkesworth (1997) adds this “feeling” may be defined in a rudimentary sense as having a conviction that one’s sex assignment at birth was “anatomically and psychologically correct” (Stoller, 1985, as cited in Hawkesworth, 1997), or more expansively as a patterned subjectivity that bears some relation to cultural conceptions of masculinity or femininity. From my perspective the converse can also be true: one’s sense of disconnection with cultural conceptions of masculinity or femininity norms also relates to one’s sense of gender identity.

**Gender role identity:** Captures the extent to which a person approves of and participates in feelings and behaviors deemed appropriate to his or her culturally constituted gender.

**Gender role:** Is a set of prescriptive, culture specific expectations about what is appropriate for men and women (Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 656).

**Heterogeneity:** The concept of heterogeneity implies the need for people to locate themselves within networks of differential power and meaning in an effort to enhance our consciousness of difference. Heterogeneity urges us toward specificity in order to destroy male hegemony by highlighting and questioning it. Emphasizing specificity in both
analysis and practice aims at disrupting hegemonies, highlighting differences for examination and question, and rendering all people accountable for their positions and actions (Phelan, 1994).

**Heterosexism:** Is “the belief that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual,” (Friend, 1993). This belief in turn can be accompanied by “a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (Lorde, 1985, p. 3).

**HIV:** Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus which is understood to cause AIDS.

**Homophobia:** Is “a terror surrounding feelings of love for members of the same sex and thereby a hatred of these feelings in others” (Lorde, 1985, p. 3-4). Friend (1993, p. 211) points out that homophobia can also be experienced internally by those who identify as LGBTQ as “the fear and hatred of homosexuality in one’s self and in others.”

**LGBTQ:** Used to represent people who identify with, or are identified with the sexuality and gender identity categories lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning.

**LGBTQQ:** Used to represent people who identify with, or are identified with, the sexuality and gender identity categories lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied. I chose this language because it is the most commonly used in the geographic location. While allies are not in a position to come out for purposes of overcoming invisibility, one can argue that they can come out about their lack of support for normative standards that privilege some identities over others. Therefore, if one
perceives the illustration of the inequities created by compulsory heterosexuality and
gender duality as a rationale for coming out, then anyone, regardless of their own
personal experience or potential, can come out.

**Moral agency:** Defined as “each one of us having a self-conscious sense of
ourselves as moral agents in a community of other self-conscious moral agents”
(Hoagland, 1988, p. 145).

**Out:** Being out means “an awareness by significant people in your life, personally
and professionally, that you are not straight” (Morgan).

**Passing:** The ability to present “socially acceptable heterosexuality while
maintaining the secrecy of their inner homoerotic life” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 184).
Post-operative transsexual people whose gender identity raises little question might
describe themselves as passing. When I lived in Belfast and I spent time with both
Protestant and Catholic groups, I felt as though I was “passing,” being considered one of
“us” as opposed to one of “them.”

**PWA:** Person with AIDS.

**Political:** Many of the participants in this study appeared to be very disconcerted
by the idea of getting involved in anything “political.” While there appear to be wide
differences of opinion on what constitutes something political, I am comfortable with
defining it as “passion about ideas, policies, and social justice” (Vaid, 1995, p. 395).

**Queer:** There are several definitions of the word queer. “For many queer identified
people, the term is used as an equivalent to ‘lesbian, gay and bisexual people’ and to the
term ‘gay’” (Rhoads, 1993, p. 40). In this sense the term queer is intended as an inclusive
term used “to highlight the common bond amongst lesbian, gay, and bisexual, people”
The term queer was reclaimed in the early 1990's from its position as an epithet for people identified as gay or lesbian. As it is used by "queer activists" and "queer theorists," the term "queer" is not limited to those who mark themselves as gay or lesbian, but includes anyone whose "proclivities, practices, or sympathies defy the strictures of the dominant sex/gender/sexual identity system" (Ault, 1996, p. 322).

Joshua Gamson (1996, p. 415) used the term queer not to indicate a group with no boundaries, rather to indicate a strategy of identity destabilization. I agree with Gamson's position that the ultimate challenge of queerness is its ability to question the unity, stability, viability and political utility of sexual identities. "Queer means different, interesting, free, and I identify with gay, but queer more. Gay to me sort of has like a first generation kind of sound to it, you know my forebears call themselves" (Terrence).

Research study: Refers to the work being carried out for my doctoral dissertation. The focus of my study was a social change project, the "Create Our Destiny" conference.

Singularity and Specificity: I have taken the concepts specificity and singularity from the work of Elspeth Probyn (1996) for their ability to capture the participants' description of their experience with LGBTQQA identification as both specific and singular. Specificity can be understood as the necessary zones of difference, e.g., race, class, sexuality, or gender. These zones are the points from which we depart in order to live out our singular lives. This notion of singularity, that each of us is made up of several zones of differences, and that no one aspect of our being can ever explain our complexity, presents a fundamental shift from the constraint created by identity categorization.
Sex: Can refer to the biological features such as chromosomes, hormones, internal and external sexual and reproductive organs, or to acts romantically characterized as lovemaking (Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 656).

Sexual identity: Refers to designations such as heterosexual, homosexual/gay/lesbian/queer, bisexual, or asexual (Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 656).


Social change project: Refers to the “Create Our Destiny” conference which was the focus of my research study.

Straight: Generally refers to someone who is heterosexual. Can also refer to people who have not questioned the normative standard implied by compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality.

Transgender: Is “used to designate the lives and experiences of a diverse group of people who live outside normative sex/gender relations [i.e., where the biology of one’s body is taken to determine how one will live and interact in the social world]. The transgender community is made up of transsexuals [pre-, post-, and non-operative], transvestites, drag queens, passing women, hermaphrodites, stone butches, and gender outlaws who defy regulatory sex/gender taxonomies” (Namaste, K. 1996, p. 208).

* The paradox articulated here is an alteration of a paradox presented in Stein, A. (1993). *Sisters, sexperts and queers: Beyond the lesbian nation* (p. 3). New York, NY: Penguin Group. The term the “Alphabet” was coined at the “Create Our Destiny” due to the list of letters used to describe the participants, LGBTQQA. I use it here to identify the particular paradox under review. Within the paradox the need for visibility, which leads to a need to be included in the acronym, is explained.


"For other information and insight into the lives of transgender people Namaste recommends, Leslie Feinberg’s (1992a) ground breaking pamphlet *Transgender liberation: A movement whose time has come* for an excellent introduction to these issues. Her novel, *Stone butch blues* (1992b) is equally useful in more clearly understanding the lives of transgender people.
CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXT

I love the way you have been able to work on a work project that is helpful for the community, that has really been wonderful. (Zeke)

My purpose in chapter two is to provide readers with sufficient background information for them to move into the rest of my dissertation with an understanding of the context in which this study was set. In chapter two, I review some of the recent events that took place in the Seacoast area of New Hampshire and which help to explain the context for the “Create Our Destiny” conference. As I explained in chapter one, I followed a grounded theory approach, which meant that rather than starting with a particular theory that I was trying to prove or disprove, I focused my attention on a particular context, and through in-depth analysis, I uncovered a general theoretical framework to help explain what I saw in that context.

To provide readers with at least a basic understanding of the geographical and historical context, I will describe some of the previous community building activities and some political events that can be linked directly to the current project. In addition to setting the context, my intent in presenting this brief chronology is to honor the large amount of the work that has preceded the project under review. One can not understand the current context in the Seacoast without some knowledge of the efforts that provided the foundation for the work that took place at the “Create Our Destiny” conference.
Following a brief history, I will discuss the process by which the name “Create Our Destiny” was chosen for the conference. The naming process for the conference is important for two reasons. First, because it helped the planning team to clarify our purpose in designing and implementing a social change project, and second because it foreshadowed the importance of labels in the lives of LGBTQQA people. I will also recount the process used to ensure that a diverse group of participants attended the conference.

Setting

The geographic location for the conference was a non-urban area, within an hour’s drive from several urban centers. The population of the region, the Seacoast of New Hampshire, is ethnically very homogenous, with the vast percentage tracing their roots to Northern Europe. In recent years, immigration of Asian people, particularly Cambodian and Laotian people, has slightly altered the ethnic diversity in the area. Recently Money magazine voted Portsmouth and the rest of the Seacoast area as the fifth best place to live in the United States. Reasons for the high rating included low crime rates, a diversified job market and low unemployment, low taxes, geographical attractions such as proximity to coastal beaches, lakes and mountains and free arts and music shows in the summer (Fried, Kim, and Walmac, 1997).

It is important to note that research has indicated living in non-urban areas can be problematic for LGBTQQ people. Rural gay people often experience intense isolation due to the limited availability of social connections with other gays (D’Augelli & Hart, as cited in Cody, & Welch, 1997). Within certain geographical and social contexts, the “closet” is still the main location where adult and youth LGB identities are negotiated.
(Due, 1995). For some LGBTQQA people, the Seacoast is still one of those places where lives are “dominated by fear, permeated by discrimination, violence and shame” (Vaid, 1995, p. 7). In June 1998, a subcommittee of the board of trustees for the University System of New Hampshire (USNH) voted unanimously against a proposal which would have extended benefits to the domestic partners of USNH employees. The Merrimack and Mascenic school systems recently made national headlines for instituting policies limiting or excluding any expression of sexuality beyond the heterosexual norm, and New Hampshire is one of two states in the union where it is illegal for gays and lesbians to adopt or foster children. However, despite these disturbing signs of discrimination, progressive work has taken place in the Seacoast area prompting some promising signs of political progress. For example, just weeks before the “Create Our Destiny” conference in April 1997, New Hampshire became only the tenth state in the union to enact a law barring discrimination, in housing, credit, and employment, on the basis of sexual orientation.

**Background Information**

In 1993, a conference titled “Respect for all Youth” took place in the Seacoast area. This conference, organized by the local P-Flag chapter, was targeted towards educators and other people who worked with youth, who may or may not have identified as LGBTQQA. The focus of the “Respect for all Youth” conference was to educate educators about the experiences of, and implications for, youth living in an environment which does not allow for any fluidity in its definition of sexual orientation and gender identity. Due to the momentum created by “Respect for all Youth,” “Seacoast Outright” was formed. Seacoast Outright was the first support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and
transgender youth in the state of New Hampshire. At the time of writing, there are six
Outright organizations operating in the state, and Seacoast Outright has plans to add an
Exeter group to their original group in Portsmouth."

In 1993-94 people who identify as LGBTQQA created the Open Door City
Coalition (ODCC), with an intent to pass an ordinance that would have required the
Seacoast’s largest city to do business solely with companies whose non discrimination
policies included sexual orientation. While the ordinance failed, the collective efforts of
the ODCC and other groups such as the Dover Group, Seacoast P-FLAG, Out and About,
Seacoast Gay Men, Seacoast Outright, the Rainbow Network, and the Tuesday Afternoon
Group increased the visibility of work in the area of equality for LGBT people in the
Seacoast area.7 The increased visibility in turn led to an increased interest in LGBT issues
by the Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation (GPCF).

Progressive social change initiatives received a boost in 1994 when the GPCF
sponsored a two-year initiative to promote equality and understanding for people of all
sexual orientations. Through a national grant and matching local donations, a $100,000
fund was created. GPCF, which was the only non-urban foundation to receive this grant,
created the Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership (ASCP) to oversee the fund. As
a condition of the grant, the ASCP carried out a Community Scan and Needs Assessment
(“Scan”) in 1994-95. The goals were to:

1/ identify issues and concerns facing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgenderal
(sic) (LGBT) people in the Seacoast,
2/ formulate program objectives and grantmaking priorities for the matching
grant, to ensure the funds could be distributed to have the greatest impact on the
community.
Community Scan and Needs Assessment:

The Community Scan provided a more comprehensive picture of the lived experiences of LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area than had previously been available (Appendix B). The results from the Scan were drawn from two sources: focus groups and a survey. The picture revealed by the Scan was of fragmented communities which were not providing for the needs of the Scan participants. The Scan results showed constituents were interested in larger scale, integrated, community development efforts to increase cohesion in GLBT communities and to reduce the sense of isolation. In the Fall of 1996, the ASCP decided to support a Future Search conference in the Seacoast area to address the realities of trying to develop and support large scale integrated community development initiatives in a fragmented and isolated context.

Future Search. The Future Search model, which was used to structure the “Create Our Destiny” conference, brings together between 60-70 people who have diverse perspectives and who live in the same geographical location to work on an issue of mutual significance in order to create common ground for action in organizations and communities (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995). By bringing together interested parties with diverse perspectives, the model enables participants to develop an understanding of the complexity involved in dealing with a given issue. The model consists of a series of exercises which help the participants:

- Review the Past
- Explore the Present
- Create Ideal Future Scenarios
- Identify Common Ground
- Make Action Plans (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995, p. 5)
Two types of small groups are used during the weekend-long process: randomly assigned groups used to explore the past and the future and "lens" groups (also referred to as stakeholder groups) used to examine the present. Lens groups are those with whom one might expect to find certain similarities: members have some shared perspective on the focus topic — e.g., if the model were being used in a hospital setting, the lens groups might be nurses, doctors, administrators, clerical staff, janitorial staff, health insurance carriers, patient advocates and service providers. Creating opportunities for interactions among and between participants supports the development of action steps which have been constructed with a broad array of perspectives in mind.

**Planning Team.** After deciding to fund, plan and implement a Future Search conference, the ASCP engaged in a great deal of discussion about who ought to be involved in the planning process. The ASCP determined criteria by which community members were invited to participate. Planning team members needed to be energetic, to be "movers and shakers," to be known in and to know the community, to be thinkers and philosophers, and to have the capacity to accomplish a complicated task, along with the ability to help logistically plan a conference in a short period of time. It was on the basis of these criteria that I was invited to join the process in January, 1997. In all there were seven members of the planning team. In addition, two facilitators were identified to facilitate both the planning process and the conference. One of the facilitators was an ally who did not live in the Seacoast area, but had extensive experience with the model; the other facilitator was a local LGBTQQA community member who also had experience with the model.
The planning team had to address two different agendas, keeping our work in line with the principles of a Future Search conference and satisfying the needs of the Seacoast communities as expressed in the Scan. The following description, based on my fieldnotes from the Feb. 1, 1997 planning team meeting, shows how the planning team merged those broad goals with the general principles (underlined) of the Future Search model.

1. The whole system needs to be brought together in the room for a sustained period of time. The concept is to bring a diverse group of people together with a common focus. This creates a situation where there can be chaos, complexity, and uncertainty, but the potential is also created for the discovery of mutual values, innovative ideas, commitment, and support. In our case, the whole system we hoped to draw together was the population of Seacoast residents interested in providing for the needs expressed in the "Scan." Logistically, given the numbers, we know we were aiming to gather only representatives of the whole system to attend the conference. The facilitators asked the planning team to keep in mind how close to the ideal we could really get. Who were the stakeholders, and what different positions did they hold?

2. Information from the whole system increases the conference’s potential for success. The planning team needs to bring in as much information as possible; every voice counted. Our focus is to get as many broad and wide perspectives on the focus topic as was possible, and part of the responsibility throughout the planning process is to use our connections within various aspects of the community to ensure that no part of the constituency was absent from the discussion. The model necessitates the inclusion of multiple and conflicting views, which are identified but not resolved during the event. Our focus is to create a communal experience, which focuses on the past, present, and future in an effort to determine action plans designed with maximum access to the information held within the diverse populations which would be impacted or implicated by whatever actions resulted.

3. The work is focused toward common ground as a foundation for action. The focus is to honor differences, not to work to resolve them. The Future Search model concentrates energy on the commonalities, not on the differences. The planning team and the facilitators were responsible for ensuring that a tone was set that would make this principle workable.

4. Action planning - commit to whom, what, when. The conference is a public event, a forum, where people publicly made commitments to themselves and to others concerning the action steps they intended to carry out as a result of the weekend.

The role of the planning team was to merge the principles just outlined with the goals for the Seacoast Future Search conference. As described in the funding application sent by
the ASCP to the National Lesbian & Gay Funding Partnership, the conference goals were very broad, to bring a diverse group of Seacoast residents together to:

- Learn from each other and educate new participants to the process of social change,
- Bridge the cultural, regional or values differences represented by participants,
- Identify shared values,
- Generate consensus,
- Create achievable strategies.

We met as a planning committee six times prior to the conference and once after the event ended. Meetings varied in duration from full to half days throughout spring 1997.

Determining the Focus Topic for the Conference

Backdrop

One of the first challenges the planning team faced was to create a focal point for the conference that encompassed the requirements of the Future Search principles and the conference goals and was broad enough to capture people's imaginations so as to sustain two and a half days of discussion. The process of determining a focus topic forced us to gauge the pressing issues for our constituencies, which increased our consciousness about the level of skepticism within LGBTQQA communities in the Seacoast. People's skepticism was fostered by previous community building efforts that had raised people's hopes and enthusiasm, with little long term impact to show for their efforts. Another reality we faced was that social change on issues concerning sexuality and gender identity tends to be slow and frustrating. Yet, as such change slowly evolves, LGBTQQA people face the challenge, and potentially huge personal toll, of deciding whether we wish to point out the extent to which compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality pervade the environment. The planning team faced the challenge of trying to inspire potential
participants who had been through disappointments before — especially those who had given freely of their time for years — to give up an entire weekend to attend the “Create Our Destiny” conference. We clearly got the sense that potential participants in the various communities and sub-groups wanted to believe their efforts at the conference would make a difference — in other words, that they would see concrete results emerge from their efforts.

Focal Point

After the first day’s discussion to develop a focal point for the conference we had agreed on “Dream! What quality of life will we continue to create for the Seacoast LGBTQ and allied communities for the 21st century?” Throughout the planning process, the team members kept in close contact with LGBTQQA individuals and the various organizations with which we were affiliated. These connections allowed us to communicate and receive feedback on the planning progress. The message we got back from our constituencies was that the initial “Dream” focus did not capture people’s imagination: “Isn’t this the same thing we have tried before?” seemed to be a common response.

By the end of the second planning meeting, taking feedback into account, we had agreed to “constructing a healthy future for LGBTQA people” as the second half of the conference tag line. We still needed a “bit before the colon,” that was “catchy,” that “rolled off the tongue,” that was “memorable and implied action.” The degree to which LGBTQQA people referred to “Respect for Youth” as an historical marker motivated the planning team of the “Create Our Destiny” conference. As we planned the conference, we hoped that in time it, too, might be seen as an important moment for LGBTQQA people.
in the Seacoast area. Optimistically, the planning team hoped we were "building a brand here" which might have a life beyond the event itself. The National Gay Lesbian Task Force has reused their "Creating Change" tag by adding a new subtitle to indicate the focus for each year’s conference, and we hoped for a similar source of continuity.

We brainstormed a list from which our tag line was chosen. The planning team, like many LGBTQQA people, focused our attention on the message we were trying to send, whether through the name of the conference or through the use of a certain label. Realizing the importance to LGBTQQA people of coding and decoding messages embedded in names and labels, the planning team wanted to ensure there would be a high level of consistency between the message we sent and the one which was received. To provide the reader with a taste of the complexity with which we were dealing, I now share issues which came up regarding two of the possible tags, "Reach for the Rainbow" and "By Our Own Hand." While planning team members generally liked the former, several expressed concerns about the potential for confusion between the event and the Rainbow Network (the Net), a local organization that had previously tried to organize some community building projects. Despite the rainbow’s ever increasing popularity as a symbol of unity within LGBTQQA communities, we chose to avoid potential misconceptions of a connection between the conference and any particular organization. This was a somewhat contentious decision. In making this decision, we let possible external misperceptions weigh more heavily than our interest in maintaining the concept of the "rainbow" as an all inclusive symbol.

"By Our Own Hand" was presented as an empowering tag, one which encouraged agency and which denoted the power within ourselves to create change. However,
members of the planning team responded to other potential readings of the tag. Some immediately thought of a homoerotic subtext that created visions of men masturbating in "jerk off" circles. Others, particularly those of us who worked with youth, thought of the connotation of one taking one's own life, by one's own hand. Due to the shockingly elevated risk for suicide for LGBTQQ youth, we could not risk such an association."

Even the acronym, a constant feature in LGBTQQA circles, spelled out B.O.O.H. linking LGBTQQA people's interest in a healthy future with something scary! Interestingly it was all too easy for us to connect external perceptions of tag lines to sex and death, so often the first things which come to mind when one thinks about gay people (and/or lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, if people think about us at all). After several hours of debates and votes, the planning team settled on "Create our Destiny: Constructing a Healthy Future for the Seacoast LGBTQQ People." Even the acronym, COD, was not only safe; it was memorable and catchy.

Assembling People with Diverse Perspectives

The conference goals directed the planning team to ensure that people from a wide variety of perspectives attended the conference. Our discussions about how to assemble a diverse group started with an examination of the make up of the planning team itself. We were concerned about the degree to which our vision, and our sphere of influence among the people we knew and could encourage to attend the conference, might be limited based on the demographic representation on the planning team. Planning team members were mostly white, middle class, able bodied and out about our interest in social change. Due in part to people's availability and the demographic make-up of our area, the efforts of those who constituted the planning teams had failed to attract people of color and people
who identified as bisexual or transgender to participate in the planning process. We discussed where our strengths lay (e.g., general conference logistics, Lesbian & Gay concerns) and for what areas we knew we needed to seek further assistance (e.g., transgender issues, HIV, issues concerning race and class). We sought external feedback about whether we needed to increase the number, or type, of voices around the table.

Selection of Participants for the “Create Our Destiny” Conference

Issues of inclusivity and representation provided the basis for the philosophical tensions the planning team felt as we discussed creating a selection process. The issue here for LGBTQQA people is whether we are seen as individuals in our own right or as members of a larger group. Do you interact with me, value me, see me, invite me to a conference, as Cari — or as Cari the lesbian? Uppermost in our minds was the significance within LGBTQQA communities of wanting to belong while fearing the almost inevitable rejection inherent in living as an LGBTQQA person. We recognized that inclusion was particularly pertinent because exclusion and invisibility were two of the motivating factors for creating the conference in the first place. However, simply stating that the event was inclusive might not be enough to encourage people from marginalized groups within the LGBTQQA community to come forward.

Given certain logistical constraints, which I explain later, we were prevented from simply inviting everyone in the surrounding communities to attend. In determining whom to invite, the planning team had to define our target audience for the conference (e.g., should we limit attendance to people already working on social change or include people new to the process; ought our limited numbers be reserved for ‘gay’ people or should we embrace allies working on social change?) The limitations on the number of attendees
required that we speculate about what to do if 50 lesbians wanted to come and either no bisexuals or transgender people applied, or if they faced being shut out on by a first come first serve basis." The questions here are very complex, as anyone who has worked with marginalized people already knows. While there are no emphatic answers, my work aims to highlight consistently emerging patterns. We needed a comprehensive plan to deal with two major issues, one logistical and the other philosophical.

Logistical Constraints

Given the dynamics of group process and the logistics involved in sharing findings from small group exercises to a large group, the Future Search model operates optimally with 64 participants, including eight people from eight different lens groups, representing specific perspectives. However, the Future Search model was not the only factor limiting our capacity to invite participants. The size of the physical space booked for the event could not comfortably accommodate more than 64 people. In addition, we also had budgetary constraints to consider. In an effort to make the conference accessible to all regardless of income, we budgeted to provide all meals for two and a half days at no cost to the participant. Therefore, given the constraints of the model, the space, and the budget, the planning team perceived that attendance by more than 64 participants would adversely effect the entire group's experience.

During the planning process our initial conference site became unavailable. In looking for a replacement, we were very deliberate about our criteria. Suitable sites had to be centrally located and close to public transportation, because transportation was seen as a potential obstacle for younger people and/or people with lower income levels. The Memorial Union Building (MUB) at the University of New Hampshire was chosen
because it was accessible, both literally, i.e., ramps, public transportation, close to the highway, and figuratively because it was seen as a relatively gay friendly site. "Our new venue provided more room and lower cost and so left resources available to cover any additional food costs." 

With the space and budgetary concerns solved, the only constraint to open admission was the Future Search model. The Future Search model is designed so that several of the exercises are carried out in the company of people with whom one has some common perspectives or lens pertinent to the focus question. Participants are often invited to a Future Search conferences based on their ability to participate using a particular lens (e.g., doctor, accountant etc.).

**Philosophical Constraints**

As mentioned earlier, the issues of inclusivity and representation are particularly sensitive for LGBTQQA people, and they provided the basis for the philosophical tensions the planning team felt as we discussed creating a selection process. Almost immediately, the members of the planning team foresaw issues with this aspect of the model. For example, one planning team member shared his concern about the "presumption that because of their affiliation under one of these prescriptors (bisexual, transgender) they share certain concerns, say lesbians share some concerns, gay men share concerns."

**Seeking Inclusivity.** The planning team, sensitive to the particular needs which arise when working with LGBTQQA people, designed the following process to ensure that a diverse group attended the "Create Our Destiny" conference. For clarity, I have
broken up the process we created into segments: the delineation of lens groups, the announcement, the invitation process, altering the model, the “Alphabet,” and outreach.iii

Lens Groups

Initially, we adhered strictly to the Future Search model, seriously discussing which lens groups would be most conducive to the goal of the conference. The following list of potential lens groups were considered: gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, transgender people, youth (along with the question of what age constituted youth — under 24?), allies, service providers (LGBTQQQA people who are service providers and/or people whose work meets the needs of LGBTQQQA people?), queer, non-labeling, questioning, closeted people, parents (parents of, or LGBTQQQA parents?), HIV+ and people living with AIDS. To narrow down to eight or nine, we jockeyed for positions, making arguments for our categories of choice, bargaining around which we could cut and accommodate in other ways at the event itself.iii The defined categories that we eventually chose were Youth, Allies, HIV+, Service Providers, Lesbians, Gay men, Bisexuals, and Transgender people.iv

Announcement

The goal of the planning team was to select eight people who identified with each of the eight predetermined categories (Youth, Allies, HIV+, Service Providers, Lesbians, Gay men, Bisexuals, and Transgender people) to attend the event. To ensure widespread awareness of the conference, the planning team placed announcements in LGBTQQQA newsletters and displayed hand bills in various places throughout the Seacoast Area known to be LGBTQQQA friendly. We also disseminated information through electronic news groups, informed the local press, and placed the information on events calendars.
Word of mouth is an essential form of communication for any community based project, and the planning team took an active role advocating for people to attend the conference. Several prominent locations, identified as gay friendly, were utilized as places where people could find applications. These were public commercial places where someone who was not out could inconspicuously pick up the information without having to out themselves to get it.

It is important to remember that at this point in the planning process we were issuing an invitation for people to apply to attend the conference. The potential participants did not know to whom they were sending their application; the actual names of the planning team members were not listed on the application material, not had they any way to know their likelihood of selection. The planning team made it clear in the initial invitation that the purpose of an application process was a genuine attempt to capture the diversity within and among local constituencies. However, there is no way to know how many people chose not to apply rather than face potential rejection.

**Invitation Process**

The degree to which the conference was announced in very public settings is testimony to the planning team's interest in encouraging conference attendance by people not already connected to local social change efforts, i.e., we wanted to attract people not already overcommitted who could provide new insights and energy, people who were closeted but on the verge of making connections, and people who were non affiliated. We informed all of the local LGBTQQA groups about the conference, both to ensure their members were aware of the event and to draw broad support for the event. In addition, we also wanted to attract certain people who by virtue of their leadership positions in
Seacoast LGBTQQA organizations would be integral to the success of the conference. Therefore, personal invitations were sent to a number of people in the area. As we brainstormed the names of people to invite into the lens categories, we discovered the difficulty of trying to describe someone by using one signifier. For example, a name would be called out, and someone would say lesbian, someone else might have assumed differently, a third might know how the person self identified, perhaps as bisexual. Discomfort with our comprehensive plan was growing.

Altering the model

As we proceeded with the process of creating the application forms, concern over the static nature of the categories continued to arise as an issue for several people on the planning team. We worried about negative feedback we were getting from potential participants who did not want to be locked into one of the lens groups or who could not decide which lens group to check because more than one applied. We began to address these concerns by creating an expanded definition for the terms, e.g., “lesbian” became “women who love women,” “gay men” became “men who love men” and so on. As one of the planning team shared:

[Expanding from “lesbian” to “women who love women,” etc.] seems to be the thing to do now, and maybe we need to just work around [broader categories] and self select into [broader categories] ...I certainly am against labels, but we just live with them... We have to stick with these labels and think about the past and then envision a different future.

The team agreed that part of the role of the conference was to model a vision, part of which could be “showing that there is a pragmatic use of labeling but supporting the position that there is no permanent categorization” (planning team member). Another member remarked that s/he wanted the conference to offer an opportunity “to sit at a table
where I am recognized for all of who I am in this community” (planning team member).

This shift in our thinking, that we could be more creative than simply sticking with predetermined sexuality and gender identity categories had to be incorporated into the comprehensive plan.

After continued discussions we realized that merely opening up the categories on the application form was not enough to satisfy our growing concerns about the restrictive nature of redefined lens groups. One planning team member summed up our dilemma:

1/ The nature of the conference requires that we need to have lens groups;
2/ We as a group didn’t like the idea either and really struggled around it, and people should know we struggled around it;
3/ We are going to take time to honor queers, and we are going to take time to make sure that we know that while we are sitting in these lens groups that there is a larger movement and shift happening for our people.

With a succinct summary on the table, we could be clearer about the assumptions upon which we were basing our decisions at the time. One of the facilitators pointed out the power we had over our own destiny here. “If the model does not fit the needs, or if it is going to turn into a battle, then maybe we need to rethink the model.”

We now contemplated a more dramatic shift, from pre-determined categories to self-selected affinity groups. This potential shift caused concerns:

1/ what if the integrity of the model would be compromised by altering it to such an extent that there would be a loss of cohesiveness throughout the exercises?
2/ would accommodating the individual make us lose sight of the ways in which issues affect us in a collective sense? By continuing to give people the chance to meet in affinity groups, would they miss out on a rare experience to get together in pre-determined group, which is how they are commonly perceived, as gay men etc.?

We also remained conscious of, and sensitive to, the tensions the labels present to people, “that [pre-determined] group is part of their identity, is part of the history, their pride, and yet for some it is a restrictive label.” Our common concern was how to prevent
participants from responding negatively to being forced into pre-existing groups that some might find overly restrictive.

Self-Selection Process

As the planning discussions continued, a new comprehensive plan started to take shape. In support of the movement towards self identification, we acknowledged that people’s affinities are not limited to only one group, and we sought to alter the model to accommodate the reality. Finally, the facilitators, with plenty of input from the planning team, designed the start of the Saturday morning exercises as follows:

- Participants brainstorm labels/ lenses that they would be interested in putting on for the exploration of the present. Their suggestions will be placed on newsprint and posted on the wall.
- Participants will then be asked to choose one of the labels/ lenses through which they could view the present trends and pressing issues.
- All lenses will be seen as viable; if an individual chooses a lens to which no one else gravitated, so be it. Lenses can be as multifaceted as the participants wish to make them, e.g., Immigrant lesbian educator.

Shifting from the rigidity of the ideal — eight lens groups, and eight tables — removed the pressure we felt about the number of people who could attend the event. By making these changes to the model, we created a situation where the participants could voluntarily determine which perspectives they chose to bring to the conference rather than forcing them to identify with one predetermined aspect of themselves. The mere possibility of exclusion of a majority person (in this case say a lesbian) with interest, ability, experience, and expertise needed at the event in favor of someone in an arbitrary lens group by virtue of less competition in that group due to fewer people indicates one of the pitfalls of identity politics. In addition, we prevented energy from being focused on a turf war between (often disempowered marginalized) groups because of which groups we included and which we left out.
Targeted Outreach.

The alteration of the model meant that we no longer had restrictions on the number of attendees or on their personal identifications. While this change solved one difficulty, it created another. Feedback from constituencies informed us that people were watching to see that we followed through on creating a diverse participant pool. If we were not very cognizant of the need for diverse voices, particularly bisexual and transgender ones, the conference could be perceived as exclusionary and would therefore have less public credibility. If the only people who attended the conference identified as women, regardless of their diversity in terms of other signifiers, the conference would not be seen as inclusive or diverse. We faced a paradoxical situation; after determining that categories used to describe people's sexuality and gender identity can be limiting, we had opened up our use of lens groups to much broader interpretations, while at the same time our constituents wanted us to acknowledge the extent to which these socially constructed categories are still viewed as though they are relatively static. Our comprehensive plan was amended again to include targeted outreach.
We engaged in targeted outreach to different groups at different times during the planning process to encourage the attendance of transgender people, HIV+ people, youth, bisexuals and allies. Our approach to targeted outreach varied. Based on the demographics in the Seacoast, outreach to various organizations allowed us to get information about the conference to HIV+ people, youth, bisexuals and allies who could then determine whether they were interested in attending the event. We also discussed the event with people who had access to those populations and urged them to encourage people to attend.\textsuperscript{viii}

Next, the planning team made very pointed efforts to encourage transgender people to apply, to personally invite people, and to contact the local transgender support group.\textsuperscript{ix} We knew that there was a limited percentage of the population who currently identified as transgender or transsexual, particularly in rural communities.\textsuperscript{ix} We were also aware of a history of transgender exclusion within LGBT communities.

When I found out about the conference, I was hesitant to apply because of feeling rejected about not being included, being turned away, and when I found I was accepted I was kind of overwhelmed. Then I thought wow maybe they still don’t know who I am and when I get there I will be asked to leave. I have a bad thing with rejection. I’ve been dealing with it all my life....I had to really dig deep to be able to come and when I did, I thought I might see someone I knew that would help, but I saw nobody. (Anne, male to female transsexual)

Anne’s comment clearly confirmed the planning team’s belief that claiming the conference would be inclusive might not be enough to convince people to take the risk and express interest, particularly when we had added the hurdle of an application process.

From the planning team’s perspective, allies\textsuperscript{ix} who were actively engaged in the work of social change already were an integral part of the population to whom the invitations were sent and/or directed. Interestingly, we discovered during the planning
stages that people identified by LGBTQQ people as allies often had no personal attachment to the term. As I discuss later, allies who are generally unmarked found the experience of being marked both exhilarating (I have a label) and confining (what implications does that have for me). Some allies wondered whether their attendance at the event would be intruding, perhaps in part due to initial debates about whether allies would be included. While the presence of allies was significant for a number of reasons, one of them was that their presence insured that attending the “Create Our Destiny” conference was not tantamount to outing oneself. If attending the conference had been restricted to those who identified as LGBTQQ, then by attending one would have outing oneself to all others present, in turn reducing levels of confidentiality for some.

Actual Attendance

Due to the changes in the model, in location, and in cost we were able to accommodate everyone who expressed interest in attending the “Create Our Destiny” conference. Ultimately 57 participants attended the “Create Our Destiny” conference. While there is no way to tell whether people chose not to apply for fear of rejection, we do know of several participants for whom personal contact with a planning team member was a key factor in their attendance. Therefore, the participant pool may have been skewed in favor of people who had access to the members of the planning team.

Participants differed on how successful they believed the planning team had been at attracting a diverse group to the conference. One participant urged me to place:

...caveats around who we got in the room, who we are pretending to represent. I knew a lot of those folks. That says something; it means they are not like closeted. [This dissertation] describes that community of people, at that point in time. (Daphne)

On the other hand Joe told me he:
...was pleased that what was collected together as a group of people was a very diverse slice, because in my own [random] group there were three lesbians, two gay persons, a transgender person and a straight person. Well, in my own personal friend group I don’t come close to having that kind of a slice of life. I just don’t. And so that exposed me to things, a perspective that I never listened to before in a way that I listened to at that conference.

The lack of attendance by teenagers at the conference was also very disappointing; the youngest participant was 20 years old. Three young women (16-18) were scheduled to attend but withdrew at the last minute; one had too much homework, and her girlfriend did not want to go without her; the third youth didn’t want to go on her own. This domino effect is very understandable and shows the importance of recognizing in advance that one is going to find others with whom one can form a sense of belonging before taking the risk to attend something like the conference.

In summation, the planning team created the conditions to support the goals of the conference, we

- Informed invitees of our interest in having a broad and diverse group in attendance.
- Selected a neutral space, which was accessible, where we hoped a wide variety of participants could feel welcome.
- Distributed publicity widely. We also provided invitees with an advanced opportunity to inform us of their accessibility or dietary needs.
- Targeted outreach towards those groups for whom additional barriers might prevent them from attending the event.
- Altered the model upon which the conference was based to prevent participants having to limit themselves by choosing one aspect of themselves at the expense of others.
Introduction to Follow-Up Interview Participants

Following the conference, I carried out 34 one-on-one or two-on-one interviews with participants who had expressed an interest in talking with me about their experience.

Participants are introduced here by their name or pseudonym along with their age, and their self-selected lens group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lens group</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allies</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>45-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allies</td>
<td>Helen B.</td>
<td>65-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allies</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>45-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Builders and Service Providers</td>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>40-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Builders and Service Providers</td>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>35-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Builders and Service Providers</td>
<td>Melody</td>
<td>50-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Builders and Service Providers</td>
<td>Mikki</td>
<td>45-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Builders and Service Providers</td>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>35-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeted &amp; Non Closeted Gay Teachers/Professionals</td>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>20-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeted &amp; Non Closeted Gay Teachers/Professionals</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeted &amp; Non Closeted Gay Teachers/Professionals</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>35-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeted &amp; Non Closeted Gay Teachers/Professionals</td>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>25-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeted &amp; Non Closeted Gay Teachers/Professionals</td>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>35-39</td>
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<td>Gay Man</td>
<td>Zachary</td>
<td>30-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Man</td>
<td>Bud</td>
<td>60-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Parents</td>
<td>Zeke</td>
<td>50-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Parents</td>
<td>Howard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Benders and Big Queens</td>
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<td>20-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Benders and Big Queens</td>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Benders and Big Queens</td>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>40-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Benders and Big Queens</td>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>30-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbians</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-life Lesbians</td>
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<td>Out</td>
<td>Morgan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out</td>
<td>Xena</td>
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<td>Switch Hitters and Our Supporter</td>
<td>Helen C.</td>
<td>35-39</td>
</tr>
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<td>Switch Hitters and Our Supporter</td>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>30-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switch Hitters and Our Supporter</td>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>30-34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following table compares the participants from the conference with those who participated in the follow-up interviews in terms of gender identity and age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>Follow-ups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Participants</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender Identity</strong></td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Transgender</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age range</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>25-29</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
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<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-70</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants were adults who attended the “Create Our Destiny” conference and received no compensation for their participation. To be consistent with my interest in foregrounding the participants’ own experience, I decided to use the participants’ self selected lens group as a signifier throughout the text. However, I have also used other signifiers which the participants identified as appropriate during the follow-up interview, e.g., I may refer to someone as an ally in one section of the text and a ‘Closeted & non closeted gay teacher/ professional’ in another.

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' Area population: 221,900
Unemployment rate: 3.4%
Price of an average four-bedroom house: $112,000
Property tax: $3,080, sales tax: none
Top state and local income tax rate: none
Violent crimes per 100,000 people per year: 224
Annual sunny days: 205
For more information: (603)436-3988; <www.seacoastnh.com>

"P-Flag is a national organization, parents, friends, and families of lesbians and gays.

Concord Outright 463-5608
Manadnock Outright 654-5474 or 547-2545
Nashua Outright 889-8210
Seacoast Outright 431-1013
Outright/ North Conway 888-688-6711
Manchester Outright 625-5785

"The following groups are active in the Seacoast area:
The Dover group, social/support, mixed genders,
Seacoast P-Flag, social/support, mixed genders, half allies, half LGBT.
Out and About, social/support, for women.
Seacoast Gay Men, social/support, for men.
Seacoast Outright, social/support, for youth, facilitators of mixed gender.
The Rainbow Network, community change, focus on community center, mixed gender.
Tuesday Afternoon group, social/support, for faculty and staff at the University of New Hampshire, focus
on equity in University System of New Hampshire policy.

"The Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership was created by the Greater Piscataqua Community
Foundation to distribute funds received from the National Lesbian Gay Community Funding Partnership.
The relationships between various groups are outlined in detail in Chapter 4 which focuses on the "Create
Our Destiny" conference.

"For the record, I was a participant in one of the Scan focus groups. I also attended the brainstorming
meeting to determine candidates for the Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership (ASCP), but never
served as a member.

"Focus group participants were identified by ASCP members. There were five focus groups which
consisted of adults and one comprised of youth.
The focus group demographics were as follows:
Total attendees: 42, Women: 25, Men: 17.
Age range: Early 20's to Mid 50's (Adults), 16-21 (Youth).
Race: 39 White, 2 Black, 1 Hispanic.
Sexual Orientation: 19 Lesbian, 16 Gay male, 3 Bisexual, 3 Unidentified/Ally.

"The distribution of surveys was targeted, with the intent of accessing lived experiences of various
demographic continuums (i.e., Gay AA attendees and bar attendees, social groups and political groups,
"closeted" and "out" people). Surveys were distributed through focus group participants, partnership
members, LGBT organizations and service providers. Surveys were also made available in strategic public
places such as LGBT bars and the Lesbian/Gay section of a local bookstore. Community surveys were
distributed to 750, and 144 surveys were returned.
"My purpose in this study is not to critique the Future Search model per se; therefore I am presenting very limited information here regarding the model itself. There are several sources to which I direct those interested in more detail, particularly Weisbord & Janoff (1995) and SearchNet <SEARCH@hermes.circ.gwu.edu>.

According to Dale Zand, stakeholders are:
- people with information,
- people with authority and resources to act,
- people affected by what happens. (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995, p. 121)

The Rainbow Network was a group which was created to develop a plan to enhance the sense of community in the Seacoast area. Founded in the mid 1990's, the Rainbow Network (the Net) held two large community wide functions which drew a lot of attention. During the planning stages, many community members appeared to have been excited by the energy they felt during the Net events, and disappointed that more had not come out of their social change efforts and financial investment. Other ongoing, and emotionally taxing, social change work includes the Coalition to End Discrimination group who fought for several years to add sexual orientation to the state of New Hampshire's Non-Discrimination clause. Their hard work paid off just prior to the conference when N.H. became the tenth state to adopt a non-discrimination policy inclusive of sexual orientation. The long running efforts to obtain partner benefits for employees of the University System of New Hampshire (USNH) have yet to bear fruit.

Unattributed quotes are from the planning team process.

The following list of tags were discussed but ultimately rejected:
- Build the plan
- Sexuality extravaganza
- Reach for the rainbow
- Living / growing together
- Dream, lead, act
- Common ground, uncommon visions
- Act out
- Blue print for the next century
- Inclusivities
- Breaking Bread
- Acting on a vision
- Cultivate common ground
- Foundations for action
- Dream out
- Grow our destiny
- Build our destiny
- Creating change
- Reach for a proud tomorrow
- Strange attractions
- Design our destiny
- Reinventing lives
- Supporting each other
- By our own hand
- Synergy's
- Reach Out
- Towards the next millennium
- Dreams into action
- Creating our lives
- Build out
- Dream our destiny
- Date with Destiny (laughter)

A Reagan-Bush administration study entitled Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide concluded that a large number of young people attempt suicide because they have nowhere to turn to address questions about their sexual identities (Vaid, 1995). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) captured the sentiment here with her remark "I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents."

Concern about proportionality was not unreasonable given the disproportionate number of lesbians actively engaged in social change in the Seacoast area. After the planning team brainstormed names of people we felt would be key to have in attendance, I noted about half were women/lesbians. Another planning team member, a gay man, replied "they do all the work!"
UNH has a history of supporting queer events in the past and was not readily identifiable with any particular group, at least not to the extent that it might impact participation. There are LGBTQQA groups at the university: the Alliance and the Tuesday Afternoon group. However, UNH and the MUB are also sites for community wide LBTQQA gatherings, i.e., the Respect for All Youth conference, numerous LBTQQA speakers and performances, and the Reel Out Film Series which screens LBTQQA related film and video.

Other measures taken to insure accessibility included a request for information about needs for interpreters, large print workbooks and/or special food concerns.

Please note these were artificial boundaries, and the activities contained within them were discussed and/or occurred simultaneously.

For example, one member moved “to take out non-identified but with an idea around doing something more creative around honoring people’s identity...throughout the conference...[creating] space where we can say all the things we are.”

The following explanation of the list of labels was included in the mailing which went out to the participants on April 15th. The second Q was explicitly added to the list prior to the conference, but as you can see both queer and questioning were listed in the mailing “LGBTQA refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people and can also include those who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or reject labels. The conference format allows all participants to honor their gender and sexual identity. ‘Queer’ can encompass any sexual orientation or identity, and ‘allied’ generally refers to those who work to build an affirming community for LGBTQ people.”

Potential participants indicated they would be willing to represent the following categories, lesbian = 22, gay = 18, bisexual = 13, transgender = 3, youth = 4, HIV + = 5, Ally = 11, service provider = 12.

One of the planning team members felt strongly that the announcement ought to list the names of the planning team so people would know with whom they were interacting. This suggestion was not adopted, primarily as several other planning team members saw it as an unusual approach. No one could remember seeing the names of planning team members attached to an event before, and most felt it was unnecessary.

Friday Night Meeting - Gay AA
SGM
AIDS Response Seacoast
Dover Group
Alliance
Sexual Minority Advisory Committee (SMAC) to the Portsmouth Police Department
Women’s Health Consortium
GLSTN - LGBTQA Educators
Gender Talk North
Softball league
The Elvis Room
The Episcopal Church
Connections - support group for people with AIDS
Bisexual group - under the Women’s Health Consortium also Women’s Discussion Group
Positive Action - statewide organization for people with AIDS
Lifeguards - men educating men having sex with men, HIV education
NCBI coming soon (never happened)
Gay owned or friendly businesses were also discussed as outlets for information
While the possibility of altering the Future Search model had been raised as early as our March 8th meeting, it was not until the issue of the categories came up again at our April 5th meeting that the possibility of changing the model caught the planning teams’ imaginations.

I couldn’t help but wonder at the time what influence being heterosexual had on the facilitator’s willingness to loosen up the categories, compared to LGBT identified people in the room who struggle with the labels and yet gain visibility through them.

I present participants’ reaction to the opportunity to self identify in chapter three.

This shift reduced the competition for space based on affinity group, pressure which would have been felt most intensely by lesbians, as limiting the numbers based on demographic representation would have necessitated some lesbians would have been chosen over others.

Adapted by permission of the publisher from Harne, L., & Miller, E. (Eds.), ALL THE RAGE: REASSERTING RADICAL LESBIAN FEMINISM (New York: Teachers College Press, © 1996 by Lynne Harne & Elaine Miller. All rights reserved.), p. 55, (see Appendix T).

We were careful not to use the term recruitment in connection with encouraging attendance. The following exchange was part of the planning team’s response when it came up on that week’s agenda. Five of the seven lesbian and gay people present simultaneously got into the discussion, which served as a form of tension release, and marker that people were conscious of the charge that gay people go out recruiting in new members.

"Is that some sort of veiled reference to what gay and lesbian people all across this country are doing all the time (laughter)"
"Yes"
"Are we going to do a presentation about that in the conference?"
"Recruitment techniques!"
"The lesbian avengers are due about two o’clock."

One of the lesbian avengers slogans was “10% is not enough recruit recruit recruit!”

At this point the planning team determined the conference would be an inclusive space. There had been an increasing effort to include transgender people in lesbian, gay, and bisexual social change efforts, and the planning team wanted to support that trend. The deviation from focusing attention on sexual orientation to sexual orientation and gender identity was not part of our discussion. We did not determine a rationale as to why transgender people ought to be included, or what the connection was between sexuality and gender identity, My sense is that many of the individual members of the planning team could not have given a more in-depth rationale for inclusion other than we felt it was the thing to do. I believe the planning team as a whole saw the inclusion of transgender people as an important perspective to have at the conference, so we simply did not feel the need to explain our rationale. In the planning process, issues which were causing resistance or friction tended to attract attention, not those which fostered agreement.

Wilson (1998) reported about .025 per cent of Americans identify themselves as transsexual, and about 2 per cent of Americans consider themselves transgendered, based on information from a non-profit group, the International Foundation for Gender Education, in Waltham, Mass.

According to Cody and Welch (1997 p. 21-2) one of the differences between living in rural versus urban communities has to do with more traditional, restrictive attitudes regarding gender roles in the former. The rural gay men in their study described being oppressed in their development by the gender roles they had been taught, due in part to the assumption of heterosexuality which is implicit in conservative definitions of roles for men and women.
Allies, for the purpose of this discussion, are taken to mean heterosexual people who are actively working to ensure that the seacoast area is a place where LGBTQQA people can construct healthy lives. I do not mean to imply that people who identify as other than heterosexual can not be allies for each other, or that only heterosexual people can be allies in the distinct but interrelated struggle for broader understanding concerning gender identity.

The total number of interviewees breaks down as follows: Thirty two conference participants, three of whom also participated in the planning process, another planning team member who participated in the conference as a recorder, and one facilitator.

The significance of using pseudonyms within communities where people struggle with issues of invisibility will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three. Reader please note: Some participants chose pseudonyms which were also the real names of fellow participants, conversely some participants used their real names, but I do not indicate which are which. Some of the pseudonyms chosen are traditionally associated with a particular gender. Making assumptions about gender based on these pseudonyms may not be accurate in this case. Other participants chose names which were ambiguous in terms of their gender connotation.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Inquiry must be carried out in a “natural” setting because phenomena of study, whatever they may be,...take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves....No phenomenon can be understood out of relationship to the time and context that spawned, harbored, and supported it. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 189)

In this chapter, I outline the methodology used to conduct this research study, which should not be confused with the methodology used to plan and implement the conference itself. To explain how my role as a researcher varied during the study, I outline each of the three phases where material was gathered: the planning process, the “Create Our Destiny” conference, and the follow-up interviews. As this is a methodology section, I place greater emphasis on the interviews where I had a greater degree of control over the process. In addition, I highlight conditions that fostered dialogue and reciprocity and the importance of trust for making sense out of the data. Issues concerning the tension between confidentiality and visibility emerge throughout my research experience, particularly in connection with my methodology. To conclude this chapter, I present some of the challenges and ethical dilemmas inherent in conducting qualitative research, especially when one is working with participants who are marginalized.
Changing Roles

There were three distinct stages to this research project — the planning process, the conference, and the follow-up interviews — and my role varied, from participant, to observer, to interviewer. My interest in enhancing understanding of how LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area understand their individual and collective, social and political identities, and in illustrating the concepts and relationships which emerged in this context, led me to determine that I was conducting my work using a grounded theory approach. The process by which material was collected at each stage, and the role I played in both creating and collecting material at each phase of the study are integral to that claim.

The Planning Process

My role throughout the planning process was that of a participant observer. As mentioned in chapter two, my participation in the planning process came about because of my ongoing involvement in local social change efforts related to sexuality and gender identity. At the same time as I received an invitation to participate in the conference planning, I was looking for a topic for my dissertation. At the first planning team meeting, I shared my interest in participating and also documenting the process. The group granted me permission to document the planning process and also gave me permission to utilize the material created during the “Create Our Destiny” conference for my research needs. The planning team met on a regular basis throughout the spring of 1997 to ensure that all of the aspects of the conference were carefully organized so the event would fulfill its purpose as a major social change project for the Seacoast area. Aside from the first planning meeting where I obtained permission, I recorded and later
transcribed the approximately 38 hours of planning team meetings from March 8th to May 18th, 1997. I also made fieldnotes at each meeting.

My impulse was to create ways to collect material in the least invasive way possible during the planning process. I chose simply to record the meetings and file the tapes but not to transcribe planning team meetings until after the conference had taken place. Therefore, I approached planning team meetings like other members without the added benefit that close examination of the transcripts would have brought. To the best of my ability, my participation as a planning team member was in line with the effort I would have made had I not been engaged in a research project. Due to a professional commitment, I missed one meeting that the team recorded in my absence; I then had an opportunity to attend the next meeting with the audiotape of the previous meeting fresh in my mind. That experience supports my contention that transcribing the planning process as it occurred would have adversely altered my ability to maintain my participant status by making me more aware of themes and tensions as they emerged. It is likely that I would have had increasing difficulty in avoiding interjection of insights prompted by the increased familiarity with the process which would have altered it in ways I wished to avoid.

My choice to try and record and analyze an event as it happened, without direct intervention from my perspective as a researcher, is not intended to cast doubt on the importance of research carried out with the expressed intention of using the research lens to inform a particular ongoing experience such as Michelle Fine’s participatory activist research (1994). A given social change process may benefit greatly from such intervention. However, my goal was to detail a community-driven process that was
responsive to the needs of the participants, as opposed to one which was driven or altered by a research agenda.

Nevertheless, the planning process and my role in it cannot be totally separated from my involvement in this research project. There were times during the planning process when I raised questions which were only relevant to my study, e.g., the wording of the consent form. When issues about my research arose, I raised them with the planning team, and we came to decisions on how to proceed in a communal way. The planning team co-constructed what aspects of the conference were open to me for research purposes; for example, I was not permitted to record participants as they engaged in the activities at the conference. Members of the planning team also played an integral part in developing the materials shared with the participants, such as the consent letter. As a participant in the planning process, I am equally responsible for all of the decisions we made. However, I retain sole responsibility for the presentation of my findings.

The “Create Our Destiny” Conference

My role and my responsibilities were dictated by the Future Search model which requires that a recorder make a record of all of the written work produced at the conference. The conference consisted of several different large and small group exercises. Generally, during each exercise, groups of between three and a dozen people worked on a specific exercise articulated in the conference workbook (Appendix C) and described to them by the facilitators. Each small group discussed the topic for the designated period of time, took careful notes of their discussions and highlighted the most important points. When the exercise was completed, the small groups shared their perspectives with the
larger group. Finally, all of the written material was shared with the recorders before being placed on the walls for the remainder of the week-end.

Three recorders — myself, another planning team member, and another volunteer — sat at a table in the corner of the large hall away from where the conference activities took place. There we recorded all of the written work directly onto laptop computers throughout the weekend. Recorders were not actively involved in the production of any of the material recorded at the conference. While participants worked on a particular exercise, we typed material from the previous exercise, then merged the three sets of material into one file, and reviewed it for accuracy. After each small group exercise, participants returned to the large group where they shared their insights. The recorders typed every third speaker's reflections to maximize the accuracy for our record. During the “Create Our Destiny” conference, approximately 18 hours of written work was recorded directly into laptop computers.

Follow-up Interviews

The final aspect of this research project consisted of follow-up interviews in which I served as interviewer. In all, I conducted 34 follow-up interviews which occurred between 6/4/97 and 7/4/97. Several attempts were made to contact all of the participants who expressed an interest in follow-up interviews, but I was unsuccessful in arranging meetings with ten of them. Three other participants canceled our meeting times due to life circumstances and did not reschedule. Additionally, six participants who had not initially shown interest changed their minds. Of this group, three people changed their minds during the conference itself letting me know at the time; two others agreed to join in
while I was setting up meetings with their partners, and one person participated as a stand-in for his housemate.

In the consent letter I informed participants that they could obtain a copy of their transcript upon request. During our meeting, I explained to the participants that given the number of interviews I was conducting, I did not envisage that I would be transcribing their interview in its entirety. However, as I became more involved with the richness of the participants' lives as told through their stories, it became clear that I had to transcribe fully the meetings in order to adequately analyze the concepts and relationships which emerged. Anything less would have required some form of advanced delineation between what mattered enough to be transcribed and what did not. Such advance determination runs counter to a grounded theory approach.

Dialogue

In this section, I describe my rationale for the approach I used in the follow-up meetings. My explanation includes why I believe this approach fostered dialogue through format (individual versus group), through location, through content (questions asked), and through the balance of power (reciprocity). As I reflect on my research experience, I believe I tried to conduct the follow-up meetings as dialogues rather than as interviews. The term dialogue is used here to describe an interaction where the effort to engage with others "presupposes a 'tacit sense of relevance'" (Bernstein, as cited in Gitlin, 1990, p. 447) where all participants see the importance of their interaction and have the ability to determine the course of the interaction. Andrew Gitlin, whose research interests include political activism and educational research, characterizes dialogue as follows:
- One does not attempt to sway someone else's point of view; rather dialogue enables collaboration in developing new knowledge about the subject being discussed.
- One is not precluded from holding a different level of understanding from the person with whom one is engaged. Dialogue also does not preclude "prejudices and prejudgments" from occurring. Rather the aim of the dialogue is "to make the prejudgments apparent and to test them critically in the course of inquiry." (Bernstein, as cited by Gitlin, 1990, pp. 447-8)

My research goal was to develop deeper understanding about participants' lived experiences as LGBTQQA people. Using a dialogue approach allowed me to gain that deeper understanding through two-way conversation rather than a one-sided interaction. These meetings provided me with opportunities to gain insights from a variety of people; in the process, I constructed new ideas, communicated them to myself and other participants, which in turn helped them reframe old ideas, and created opportunities to ponder ideas we might not otherwise have encountered.

**Individual versus Group Interviews**

Originally I had planned to carry out one-on-one interviews. However, in order to facilitate the scheduling of so many interviews and to limit the amount of alteration to the participants' regular schedules, I agreed to carry out four two-on-one interviews. This arrangement was mutually agreed upon by the participants and myself when I called to schedule the interviews. The same approach was used in the two-on-one interviews as in the one-on-one interviews. While group interviews or focus groups could have stimulated the recall of participants (Minister, 1991), I share some of following concerns about the potential drawbacks of focus groups when dealing with information of a sensitive nature:

- Individuals are hesitant to bring up confidential issues and are careful about what they consider politically sensitive. In a group context, anxieties may be heightened.
• The group interview would probably be impacted by the very concept under review, i.e., the social and contextual construction of understanding. Therefore the individual perspective might be lost.
• Historically, the dominant view has been that which receives attention, potentially silencing those in marginalized groups (Kezar, 1995).

Nevertheless, group work does not necessarily preclude dialogue, nor do I wish to suggest that simply meeting one-on-one guarantees it.

Location

In keeping with the planning team’s concern about the significance of location to LGBTQQA people’s comfort level, I wanted participants to choose the location for our meeting. As a result, the locations of our meetings varied widely. Some meetings were in their homes; some people preferred to meet at my home; and because it was June and the weather was good, several participants wanted to meet outdoors, a request I was happy to honor. As I listened to the tapes of these meetings I was struck by the extent to which the follow-up meetings were integrated into people’s every day lives as evidenced by the sounds of phones ringing, dogs barking, church bells ringing, lawn mowers roaring, the buzz of mosquitoes, sounds of children playing, and ice clanking in glasses liberally sprinkled throughout the tapes. The tapes also chronicle how our meetings paused for opportunities to comment on such everyday occurrences as how amazing the sunset looked, to answer a student’s inquiry, to save my notes from the rain, even to listen to the sound of taps from the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. In my experience, engaging with the participants in environments where they felt comfortable fostered the creation of new knowledge through our dialogues. Meeting in settings where participants felt at home helped to link the conference to their everyday life. Not only were these meetings an
opportunity to collect material for my research study: they provided me the profound experience of truly connecting with people in my communities.

Questions Asked

As I embarked on this project, I was aware of feminist critiques of traditional approaches to interviews. Asking all participants the same set of predetermined questions carries with it implicit assumptions which emphasize the interviewer’s agenda, which runs counter to my grounded theory approach. Rather than risk losing the potential for rich dialogue by holding too closely to a list of predetermined questions (Minister, 1991), I developed a broad array of possible open-ended questions based on my experiences with the planning process and the “Create Our Destiny” conference (Appendix D). Then using these questions as guideposts, I interacted with each of the participants individually, attempting to let them lead the interview in the direction in which they wanted to go. This flexibility allowed me to pay more attention to the particular interviewee’s perspectives than would have been possible had a set format been driving my time with them.

Due to the flexibility of my interview format, there were only two questions which were asked in almost every interview; one remained fairly consistent throughout, but the other changed slightly almost every time. The question which remained constant throughout the interviews was

- What do I need to be particularly conscious of as I plan to write up this experience, perhaps for publication? What is your pearl of wisdom?

My point in asking this question was to provide the participants an opportunity to wrap up the interviews on their own terms by drawing together thoughts which might have been woven throughout our meeting. This question also placed value on the participants’
insights, providing them with an opportunity to make a more general contribution: the “pearls of wisdom” which emerged appear throughout this dissertation.

The second question helped me learn more about participants’ day-to-day experiences with labels and their reactions to self selecting an affinity group at the conference. The basic question was

- How do you see yourself as a person who identifies with, or is identified with, the categories gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied?

I added the caveat “or are identified with” in order to access participants’ perceptions of whether they feel positioned by others due to their signifier(s) of choice. Depending on the direction of the interview, my sense of the comfort level of the interviewees, and my sense of the participants’ capacity to theorize about their experience, I presented the question in a variety of ways including:

- “So what is your relationship to the labels right now?”
- “I am interested in this whole business of labeling ..., the idea that because there is such a presumption of compulsory heterosexuality that in order not to be tarred by that brush ... you need to mark yourself as other .... How do you view this point in time in our history?”

In addition to maintaining a high level of flexibility for participants to take our meetings in whatever direction they wanted to go, I limited the number of standard questions because of the wide variety of participants’ experiences. Based on their differing backgrounds, certain questions were only relevant to some participants. For example, during the conference it was very clear that the current legal situation, which precludes marriage between members of the same gender throughout the United States and precludes legal adoption in New Hampshire, caused great pain and frustration for many LGBTQ people. Therefore, only allies could discuss what it felt like to attend an event where their
current reality i.e., having legal rights to marry, to job security, represented the future LGBTQQ people struggled to envision.

**Reciprocity**

My struggle with conducting original research has given me insights far beyond the academic, teaching me lessons about how to be a better friend, a better neighbor, and a better community member. These insights lead me to consider the extent to which my work modeled reciprocity. Reciprocity, the requirement of give and take, is an important feature of feminist research and is a necessary component for dialogue to occur (Lather, 1986). My original purpose in conducting a study in the local community was to contribute to a local social change effort. This intention might be described as philanthropic in nature, yet I just mentioned that I gained a tremendous amount from the experience. My sense of personal gain and my original goal are not inconsistent.

Feminist theorists have pointed out the problematic nature of the lack of reciprocity in traditional approaches to research where the researcher departs with the data and the researched stay behind, no better off than before (Patai, 1991). In an effort to encourage future dialogue, I am interested in sharing this work with the participants and the local community. Therefore, I plan to write a grant to allow me to produce copies of my completed dissertation to ensure all of the participants have an actual record of their participation (Lather & Smithies, 1997). Ensuring that participants have copies of my work to date may elicit additional feedback which could be incorporated in future versions of the work. As a researcher, I have felt a tremendous level of responsibility in conducting a project like this, for which so many people invested so much time and
personal energy into the effort, yet I have control over the final written product. Participants placed their trust in me to articulate their efforts fairly and accurately.

The interviews conducted for my study occurred after the conference, encouraging participants to engage in self-reflection. My hope is this experience helped participants to create a deeper understanding of their own particular circumstances (Lather, 1986: see also, Heron, 1981 as cited in Kezar, 1995). Given the close proximity of the meetings, 6/4/97 to 7/4/97, each conversation was still very fresh in my mind as I went to additional meetings. This provided me with many opportunities to recycle data during the interviews, sharing one participant's insights with another, gathering responses to a variety of positions. These practices fostered reciprocity, as did member checks.

**Member checks**

[Member checks are] the process of continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator's reconstruction of what he or she has been told. (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, as cited in Rhoads, 1993, p. 94)

While my study does not use the traditional standards of objectivity, reliability and validity, I am no less concerned about the need to determine credibility for the material. Face validity refers to the use of a subset of respondents to confirm the trustworthiness of the researcher's emerging analyses (Lather, 1986). This method determines if the researcher's descriptions and explanations are in keeping with those of the participants. I enhanced face validity for this study by sharing drafts of each chapter with at least four people, two of whom attended the conference, in addition to my dissertation committee.

**Other Validity Checks**

In addition to member checks, I sought feedback from numerous readers about the flow of the piece and the level of 'inside' information required to access my work. When
I think of the target audience for my work. I picture people with a wide variety of background knowledge about the lived experiences of LGBTQQA people. People who read drafts, particularly allies, were very helpful at highlighting where I needed more information for those who did not perceive themselves as insiders. Readers also gave me feedback on where I needed more signage in the text, where more or less detail was required, and indicated which parts of the work they found particularly compelling or confusing. Due to the sheer volume of the work it was unreasonable to ask any reader to view the entire work; therefore I received feedback from several people on distinct selections of the work.

My dissertation committee has been particularly helpful throughout the writing process. Several members have provided critical, yet supportive feedback which I have integrated into my work. In addition, I publicly discussed my research, while I was still actively engaged in making sense of my material, to the volunteers at Seacoast Outright and to the local chapter of P-FLAG. Both groups, including several participants in both the “Create Our Destiny” conference and the follow-up interviews, allowed me to develop a different level of familiarity with my work prior to finalizing its form.

My support for member checks ought not to be taken to mean that I believe one’s interpretations have to be validated by our research participants. I do not. While my work has benefited from critique and I have truly appreciated the support, I was cognizant when I asked for this feedback that feminist researchers must guard against foisting onto others a demand or a wish for reinforcement in our work and our concerns (Borland, 1991). My intent was to listen and expand my thinking, but not to abdicate my intellectual responsibilities and training in pursuit of participant approval. The work I

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present here foregrounds participants’ stories. To do so I have incorporated my own knowledge, experience, and concerns. I am convinced that the end result is a richer, more textured understanding of the meanings made in day-to-day lived experience with LGBTQQA identity.

The Importance of Trust

The importance of fostering a trusting relationship cannot be overlooked when one is conducting and describing qualitative research, particularly when it is carried out in one’s local communities. Trust, a condition for dialogue, which in turn fosters integrity, is defined here as the ability to:

 Make oneself or let oneself be more vulnerable than one might have been to harm from others — to give them the opportunity to harm one, in the confidence that they will not take it, because they have no good reason to. (Baier, 1986, p. 230)

Participants interacted with me with a genuine openness, divulging concerns, worries, and differences of opinion that they had not often, if ever, shared publicly. Readers ought then to recognize that the material in section two, where I present participants’ experiences in detail, represents thoughts in process. In some cases, participants would give me the same response if asked the same questions today, but in other cases they might not. I believe I fostered a level of trust with the participants that enabled them to take risks and to discuss issues about which they did not yet hold fully formed positions. During these meetings, some participants uncovered insights that had been previously unknown to them. Their thinking is likely to have evolved further since.

 Participants placed their trust in me to accurately portray their interactions; however people’s views change. Even if I have reflected accurately what the participants told me, their comments may not have clearly expressed their thinking at the time.
Therefore, the reader must understand the following: participants may no longer hold positions they took in June 1997. With all that said, it is also clear to me, having transcribed my own thoughts as they developed, that the roots of my current understandings were present long before I was fully conscious of them. The same is true for many participants. One of the potential strengths of my work is its ability to highlight areas of day-to-day life which had previously been “culturally invisible,” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 198) perhaps even to the participants themselves.

**Making Sense of the Data**

There is an important difference between describing and analyzing material. When describing material, one addresses the question, “What is going on here?” Analysis of material addresses the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelations among them — in short, “how things work” (Wolcott, 1994). Given the complexity of the material, along with my sense that most readers lack familiarity with the full extent of the complexity involved in LGBTQQA people’s lived experience, there is a necessary degree of overlap between my description and my analysis. Much of the work presented throughout section two is descriptive analysis. In addition, I used analysis to determine interconnections between various concepts, to determine how the participants made meaning in their own lives, e.g., what is the work of labels in this context. In section three, I present the theoretical and practical implications I see following from my analysis.

The methods I used to make sense of my material consisted primarily of looking through “examples, fragments, bits and pieces,” taking up anything and everything I could in the hope of recognizing the concepts, themes and tensions which emerged
(Probyn, 1996, p. 15). After spending a lot of time working with the transcripts from the planning process, the “Create Our Destiny” conference and the follow-up interviews, patterns did start to emerge. When I determined which concepts appeared most often, I reread the transcripts from the follow-up interviews and coded where the concepts appeared. Then, I created an individual file for each concept or theme (e.g., burnout, gender identity) and extracted, from the follow-up meetings, the material pertaining to each theme. " From there, using a very subjective process, I reviewed each theme file for further themes and subdivided into the range of topics covered. During the writing process, the interconnections continually became more visible. Therefore material was moved from one chapter to another up to the last moment.

Due to the complexity involved in the language used by the participants, I chose not to use a computer program to manage my transcripts. Since many of the words used vary in meaning from person to person, any generic approach would have minimized my ability to reveal the nuances that make this work so exciting.

Confidentiality vs. Visibility

Historically, confidentiality has been a fundamental principle guaranteed to people who participated in research projects. My research study focuses attention on a social change project aimed at increasing visibility; one of the four major findings of the Scan was concern about the lack of visible role models. For many LGBTQQA people, visibility, such as coming out, is seen as a key political strategy to counteract the overwhelming assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality. In such a climate, confidentiality takes on an added significance. Therefore, a tension emerged between the principle of ensuring that people’s input in a research study will not be
directly connected to their identity and the goal of participants to increase visibility to support their own sense of identity as an LGBTQQA person. This tension was particularly difficult to balance because of the likelihood that my research project would increase my visibility as an LGBTQQA person.

This tension emerged in two separate and distinct areas: issues of confidentiality for participants at the conference, which the planning team had responsibility for deciding, and issues that emerged about confidentiality in my research study, which are my responsibility. The University of New Hampshire institutional research guidelines and my dissertation committee members’ recommendations assisted my decision-making process around confidentiality in my research study.

Confidentiality at the “Create Our Destiny” Conference

Paradoxically, the planning team, which was responsible for planning a conference to counter feelings of isolation and fragmentation in the Seacoast, also felt obligated to those not out publicly to keep the publicity of this major community event down to a minimum. The following comment made during the planning process indicates the level of sensitivity used by the planning team who recognized that some participants’ lived experiences made confidentiality extremely important:

[In terms of the participant workbooks, it is] often the case that a list of names and addresses and phones are included. I am concerned about that because of the confidentiality piece and making that judgment ahead of time and I wanted to ask your advice; an alternate way to get the information out would be to have a sign up sheet at the conference for folks who want to put their names and addresses and then some way to make sure that gets reproduced and mailed to the folks who are there.

This tension between visibility and confidentiality causes a moral struggle for LGBTQQA people. Social change agents, such as the planning team, must determine the
extent to which visibility, such as publications of attendees’ names and phone numbers, would create an unsafe environment for attendees, while simultaneously recognizing that self erasure maintains the status quo.

The “Create Our Destiny” planning team decided not to invite any media to the conference. In the event the press showed up, I was designated as the media spokesperson because my role as recorder allowed me more flexibility than either the facilitators, who would be coordinating the timing of the exercises or other planning team members participating in the conference. If the need arose, we agreed I would explain the importance of respecting participant confidentiality and encourage the media to leave.

Concerns about confidentiality were not limited to the actual event itself; they also impacted the extent to which we promoted the results of the event. The following remarks were made at a planning team meeting, April 13th, 1997. The discussion shows concerns about using the media to disseminate the results of the conference, such as which action projects conceived at the “Create Our Destiny” later received funding:

I should say the media in general, especially broadcast media, don’t know what to do with stories that don’t have faces....As far as getting the word out to the public, the only way you are going to be able to do it, given that you can’t say for instance person x volunteered to lead the paint the rainbow project on the side of the MUB, because there’s some confidentiality right, then what I would do is through the process of reporting grants being awarded by GPCF, acknowledge that this was an outcome of the conference, and I think that is about as good as it’s going to get.

The planning team’s concerns over participant confidentiality also determined the parameters of my access to the material collected at the “Create Our Destiny” conference for research purposes. During the planning process, I inquired about taking photographs and/or video of the event as this was not unusual at Future Search conferences.

According to one of the facilitators, “We usually do, but we can’t with this because of the
confidentiality piece.” Another planning team member used some dry humor to point out the difficulty in this situation: “This is a safe space, but we have note takers, cameras, and do you mind if we have a tape player going!” One planning team member seemed to sum up the concern: “I think that if you bring a camera with a flash into that room there are people who are going to feel uncomfortable.” As a group we agreed I could “Take the pictures after everybody has left,” capturing the completed work but not the participants who carried it out.

The following journal entry captures what I was thinking at the time about the planning team’s decision to keep additional forms of documentation at the conference to a minimum.

May 4th, 1997
I’m exhausted! We had the last planning team meeting today. It was successful to the extent that we got through the agenda, but I am feeling really burned out on all of this....

In chatting about the recording duties of the recorders it became clear that ... our need as a planning team is to make the participants as comfortable as possible. That means that there will be no recording devices in the room. I asked about recording the [lens] groups, and the response was that the planning team did not need the information, and there was a lack of support for me doing it either. I worked on putting the researcher me out there in a way that supported the work of the planning team. They know that this is a struggle too so they were not making it harder.”

Anyway, [facilitator] in particular said that I would have enough information as it was, that the taping would only lead to more transcription time and a level of detail that would be captured in the reports’. I didn’t argue the point too much. My planning team self, who knows that tape machines can be daunting for people, really agreed with the decision. It is the ‘right’ thing from the activist perspective. I asked [planning team member] during a break if I should even bring up the notion of videoing the vignettes, s/he said no. I knew that would be the response, but I needed to check it out. So I have to let go of a level of detail, but it seems more important to honor the process.

I am going to take pictures of the mind map [a large visual image created during one of the exercises] and the timeline after the participants are finished working on them, to ensure confidentiality. We talked about the confidentiality a lot today. I understand the need for confidentiality in the research study; so when I am wearing that hat, I have to increase my personal level of comfort with the

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highest level of confidentiality. I was surprised in a way at the planning team's response on this. No one called us on the level of confidentiality we were interested in maintaining or noted that some people might not need to have such a level of confidentiality. Given that the research needed to have the higher level of confidentiality, I did not argue the point. If I was just a planning board member I might have pointed out the assumptions that we were making about how comfortable we were or thought others would be. Having thought about this, but not brought it up, I saw that it was really more editorial than germane to the discussion. We have to safeguard the confidentiality for those who need it; those who don’t can take care of themselves.

In this commentary I am describing a tension I experienced between my role as a participant in the planning process and my role as a researcher. In this case the planning team’s conservative approach to confidentiality was in keeping with levels required for responsible research. But my participant self felt concerned that we are reinforcing the closet for everyone else in the process.

Michael, who ironically described herself as not out professionally, was also the one participant who in the follow-up meetings mentioned wanting to have a record of the event.

I really came away wanting photographs. I wish I’d brought my camera and taken photographs of the walls, the mind map"....The past, present, future, and I’m hoping somewhere in the documentation that will be captured somehow whether it’s even a copy of a photograph or a Xerox. There’s just so much on there that you don’t want to lose.

Ultimately, in addition to recording data produced on newsprint, I and other conference attendees recorded facilitators’ instructions to the participants for accuracy purposes. We also videotaped the participants’ work which was displayed on the walls. In another shift from traditional research methodology, I did not maintain control over that process as the work was conducted by all three recorders and two other participants. The video documents the progression of work throughout the weekend and a handful of still pictures were taken, but no record of the participants who created the material exists. The
Confidentiality in the Research Study

The tension between confidentiality and visibility for LGBTQQA people also affected my research study. Not identifying participants by their legal name is one way in which their confidentiality is assured. Assuring the participants their identity would be kept confidential, and therefore invisible, in a study that focused in part on the need for increased visibility, is clearly problematic. Therefore, the issue of whether or not to use pseudonyms created an ethical dilemma for me. The fact that my name was going to be proudly displayed on the cover of whatever I produce, yet participants who chose to use their own name might not be afforded the same privilege, occupied my thoughts on a regular basis. As a member of the community working shoulder-to-shoulder with the participants, I wondered whether depriving people of their name made me complicit in perpetuating some remnant of patriarchal patronage.

At the end of each follow-up meeting, I invited participants to create their own pseudonyms in an effort to at least give them control over the name attached to their input. The irony of asking someone for a false name at the end of a conversations that revolved around issues of integrity and belonging was not lost on some participants:

Sophia- Isn’t that funny, now isn’t that an interesting question based on the conversation....
Sully- So do people have to have a pseudonym?
C- This tends to be the response that I get. (laughs) In and of itself this could be a chapter!
Sophia- Well, names, it’s so tied to who you are.

One participant felt so strongly that his/her real name ought to be used, even if it must be called a pseudonym, that unless I complied I was not to incorporate our meeting in the
final study. The person’s rationale was that it had taken many years for her/him to feel comfortable as a sexual minority and s/he is not interested in going into hiding again. As I recounted that reaction to Sully and Sophia they wondered,

So- Once you tell that story to people how many people choose to keep their own name instead of inventing a fake name because you have just given them permission to be themselves....You know 98% of the [participants] who have struggled with their identity and their sexuality decided to choose their own name rather than remain anonymous. I would choose my own name.
Su- Yeah I would too,
So - When you say it that way, when you give permission, I would have come up with another name, but when you say this person did this. I’m like I don’t care go ahead.

Given my ambiguity about asking for a pseudonym, I was not prepared to be emphatic at our meeting about how people would be presented in the final work. As it was the truth at the time, I informed people who asked that I was not sure about whether their real names could be used in a dissertation. But several participants said they were comfortable using their real first name, but all except for the one person mentioned earlier gave me a pseudonym in the event that using real names was a violation of UNH research policy. Whether people sensed my personal discomfort with this part of the process and felt as Sophia did that I had given her permission or whether they thought being out was the appropriate political position to take, I cannot be sure.

This project has certainly been a learning process for me, and part of my own evolution can be seen in my change of heart about the use of pseudonyms which I now find much more palatable. As my work progressed, the degree to which I controlled the presentation of the voices became clearer. Despite my efforts to present large sections of text in the participants’ own words, the final presentation has become other than the words of the participants who said them. Each individual’s input now belongs to a
tapestry woven together from a variety of stories. As I wrote up my insights about the planning team’s decisions on confidentiality issues, I recognized some ways in which we failed to provide the participants the opportunity to support their own moral agency. With that realization fresh in my mind, in an effort to support participants’ personal agency, I decided to call, or e-mail, all of them about my discovery that I was now uncomfortable with real names, preferring to refer to them by their pseudonym. Participants responded in various ways to my request. The response I received most often can be summed up as “Whatever”! A couple of the more creative people facetiously told me to “Get a life” and to “Let it go” which I took to mean that in their view I was much more concerned about all this than they were. After all it was only their first names; after all it was only a dissertation! In addition to updating participants about my progress, contacting people about my shift in thinking gave them an opportunity to give me suggestions to deal with the concern. Independently, two people came up with a suggestion that in turn received unanimous approval from the rest of the group and was used in the final version — use pseudonyms in the text and list real names in the introduction without any connecting identifiers. Not only did contacting the participants support their agency in this matter, the solution was more creative.

It is likely that due to the size and nature of the Seacoast’s LGBTQQA communities, some people in the immediate setting may be able to identify specific events or individuals contained in the final account. However, I have tried not to use material which will, in my judgment, and where possible in the participants’ view, threaten to compromise the psychological, physical, social, or economic well-being of the people who contributed to this work.
Informed Consent. Initially I was granted permission by the planning team to record the planning process and to use the material produced at the conference for research purposes. While it was imperative that I gain consent to directly from the participants, determining exactly to what we were asking participants to consent was not easy. During the planning process we discussed how to word the consent form in order to inform participants about my project without making the research sound as though it would be invasive to the “Create Our Destiny” process:

[What] I can’t guarantee, and none of us can, is if a person participates in the project [and refuses consent] and I write up what happens in the conference then I cannot extract 1/64 of the woven threads that came from that individual; that’s just not feasible...What I could do is not take in a personal interview; certainly that can happen. (planning team tape, April 5th)

The consent form simply asked the participants to acknowledge their understanding that the material produced at the conference was going to be used for research purposes:

____ I understand that the “Create Our Destiny” conference is being documented, and that the data will be used for research purposes (see also Appendix F.)

On the same form, conference participants indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview by checking a section on the consent form:

____ I am interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview.

Participants were sent the consent forms in advance along with other conference materials and asked to return their signed form during registration. Not one person refused to sign. In fact, several people wished me well, letting me know how pleased they were that I was working on this project and offering their assistance as the work progressed. Because forms were collected during registration, participants indicated their interest in a follow-up interview prior to the conference. This also meant some people
were agreeing or declining to participate in a follow-up meeting prior to meeting me. As I mentioned in chapter two, six people who had not initially expressed interest in a follow-up meeting did participate. There may have been other people who changed their minds after they experienced the event; however, I chose to honor the participants’ original wishes and did not follow up with people unless they made their interest known to me.

Opportunities and Limitations

Research methodologies ought to be chosen for their ability to provide tools and to support the researchers’ efforts in asking the types of questions in which they are interested. Conversely, there are limitations which arise from all methodologies and these must be presented. Given my interest in accessing different participants’ lived experience and in accounting in some way for their multiple realities, I chose to take a qualitative/grounded theory approach to this study. In articulating what I see as the opportunities and limitations of this approach, I want to avoid giving the impression of a false dichotomy; as in most cases, the pros and cons of this approach are two sides of the same coin, so they are not separated here.

Some have charged that qualitative research permits wide exploration at the expense of the economy and precision with which quantified results can be summarized and tested (Gersick, 1988, as cited in Gersick, 1992). It may well be accurate to say that qualitative approaches do not provide the type of generalizability which can be obtained from a quantitative study by providing too little indication of the degree to which the case is representative of the larger population (Stake, 1988). However, “the trouble with generalizations is that they don’t apply to particulars” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 110), and the immense complexities of people’s lived experience, especially for marginalized
people, are simply not accessible without using qualitative methodologies. Taking the point even further, I believe that the type of responses one can gather from qualitative instruments must be analyzed in very critical ways to ensure that the type of generalizations people are likely to make from such material do not erase the existence of differences in favor of similarities.

The time it takes to conduct a research study of this type is also a strength and a weakness; therefore, such studies tend to concentrate on much smaller groups than quantitative work. There is a significant amount of time-consuming and painstaking effort required to collect and transcribe material for qualitative research (Beyer, 1992). For example, each of my thirty-four follow-up interviews lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours, then in turn took eight or nine hours, or over 300 hours total to transcribe. There was also a comparable amount of work involved in the collection and transcription of the tapes from both the planning team process and the conference itself. All of these efforts occurred before I started the coding and sorting process which continued throughout the duration of the writing process. All of this effort to find out something about a small number of people might seem excessive. However, I feel very strongly that the amount of time taken and the consequent level of intimacy with the material enhanced my ability to gain much deeper understanding of participants' experiences than is conceivable using quantitative methodologies. In turn, those who read this work will have access to a more comprehensive, complex, and nuanced picture than they could from a broader, less intimate approach to research.

Someone might question the degree to which the material gathered accurately represents participants' personal beliefs as opposed to only those thoughts they were
willing to share publicly. Of course, there is no way to determine how much our discussions were affected by my taping the interaction. What I can say is that some of my follow-up meetings were with people I know on a social level, and I know I engaged in deeper conversations than I generally do within my circle of friends and acquaintances. As Sophia pointed out when she asked me what it is like to carry out research in my own community,

Certainly we all have never had this [conversation], and I think people in the community that know each other for years don’t necessarily always have these conversations because it brings it to a different level so I guess I wonder what that is like for you? (Sophia)

Sophia noted that our discussion had been on a deeper level than our previous personal discussions. It is also important to mention that, in my opinion, participants were really excited to tell their stories and were eager for a more nuanced and realistic picture of LGBTQQA people’s lived experience to emerge from our efforts. If anything, my sense is that people took very seriously this opportunity to share their stories with a larger audience.

**Ethical dilemmas**

The increased level of personal intimacy made possible by qualitative, particularly ethnographic, research methods also has ethical considerations. Years ago, there was little thought given to the possibility that researchers’ representations might legitimately be challenged by those for and about whom they wrote. Folklorists and anthropologists rarely considered their field collaborators to be political audiences for their publications (Borland, 1991). Researchers entered the field, studied what they saw going on there, and left planning to shared their findings with the academic community, not with those whose
lives constituted the foundation of the work itself. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, feminist theorists have helped to inform researchers of the importance of reciprocity.

While these qualitative methods have the ability to provide much greater respect for, and power to, one's research subjects, the same appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach makes a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation possible (Stacey, 1991). In this section, I discuss the ethical implications of my work, taking into account the potential complications of working on a grassroots community based project that are heightened when the participants in the project are people whose stories have generally been silenced. In such situations it is essential that researchers are sensitive to whose agenda is being furthered through the voices, or on the backs of, those referred to as marginalized.

Factors which affected the level of intimacy I reached with participants in this project include my role as a visible community member and social change agent; participants' previous experience, or lack thereof, with me; and my identification as a woman, a lesbian, an immigrant, and a person with an education. My personal relationships with the participants ranged from introductions at the conference to long-term friendship. In almost all cases, the participants had some sense of my being out, being active in the local community in support of LGBTQQA equality, particularly for youth, and being a member of the university community and the planning team. Therefore, the degree to which creating a healthy future for LGBTQQA people is a continuation of my previous work in the community was no secret to the participants. It is not possible to accurately articulate or ignore the impact of my personal history as a factor in the level of access I obtained when conducting my research. Feminist
researchers have argued that the likelihood of exploitation and unethical behavior is increased when the researcher is interviewing "down," that is, among groups less powerful (economically, politically, socially) than the researcher herself (Patai 1991, p. 137). In this case, I do not consider my research an example as studying down because most of the participants were also white, educated, LGBTQQA, and middle class or professionally employed.

However, claiming my position was similar enough to most of the participants in my study raises another ethical concern. Motivating my concern was the challenge of differentiating between "telling it like it is" and "hanging our dirty laundry in public." There is so little positive writing about the day-to-day lives of LGBTQQA people that I worried I might find myself wanting to use this opportunity to provide some positive balance to the external negative context. One of the challenges in using a grounded theory approach is allowing a picture of the participants' experience to emerge. So my concern was whether my immersion in the context might block my ability to see the situation from a fresh perspective. Prior to starting my research I wondered whether I had the discipline and the sharpness of mind, particularly when conducting interviews, to differentiate between questions that were driven by personal curiosity and which would provide access to a more nuanced and complete picture of LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area. With this concern in mind, I sought external perspectives about what was interesting and thought provoking in early drafts of my work from people who were not very familiar with LGBTQQA lived experiences. In addition, my task of staying grounded in the context has also been aided by my continued community involvement and almost constant contact.
with some of the participants. Several participants have read and provided feedback on various drafts of this final version.

Another ethical challenge inherent in conducting this type of grounded research within one's own social networks is differentiating between material one gathers through one's research methodologies and material one gains access to by virtue of one's position in the community, but not as a result of one's research activities. For example, on the first night of the conference, I noticed that two participants who had previously been involved in a relationship had been assigned to the same small discussion group. Working with, or coming into contact with, one's ex-partner(s) is a common reality for LGBTQQA people in small communities where our populations are small. At the time, I made a mental note of the occurrence thinking it might be interesting to ask participants how they balance their personal lives, including working with ex's, as they try to engage in social change work in a healthy way. However, I also contemplated whether even mentioning the situation might be an invasion of their privacy. Ultimately, when I met with the individuals for our follow up meetings, I chose not to raise the question, although one of the participants did very briefly allude to the situation when we talked.

In other cases my prior relationship with particular participants prompted me to make certain follow-up remarks during our meetings. For example, in this segment from our interview, Faye, a gay teacher/professional, described the conference as an opportunity to be in the majority for a change, but she then qualified the statement by implying this was not a big deal to her. Based on my previous interactions with Faye I had a hunch her qualification did not accurately reflect her true feelings on the matter:

C- It's not a little thing, let's be honest
F- Ok it's not a little thing
C- Two and a half days out of your life time it is not a little thing
F- You are right. It is not a little thing....It is not a little thing, it is a major thing. I
guess sometimes I am so sick and tired of being the minority.

Later in our meeting, Faye returned to this point.

F- When I first tried to make it sound little and you called me on that, is I think
being part of the conference being part of that weekend it was so reassuring, that I
finally was not the minority and the more I think about that, the more it's huge.

Had I not known Faye well, I might not have taken the risk to probe in this way. We have
a trusting relationship, and my hunch that she was holding back was based on my sense
of what mattered to Faye.

My familiarity with Faye, my recollection of the excitement at the conference, and
my personal familiarity with the daily toll it takes for LGBTQQA people to live in an
environment where we are the minority allowed me to recognize the crucial nature of her
comment. The result of my pressing the point with Faye confirmed for me that there is
real value in not taking remarks at face value, in trying to dig deeper into the underlying
assumptions upon which one's beliefs are based. However, despite the significance of the
finding in this situation, I am not recommending one confront participants so bluntly due
to the potential risks involved in intimidating or alienating them. My suggestion is that
open ended questions such as “Tell me more about your experience as part of the
majority at the ‘Create Our Destiny’ conference” would achieve the goal without the
same level of risk.

During the conference, I publicly acknowledged the participants’ support for this
project and pledged that I would do my best to be fair and true to their experiences as I
understood them, knowing that there might be some difficult decisions to be made. My
pledge to the participants represented a moral contract for me which I have done my
utmost to fulfill. Perhaps because I envisioned that keeping perspective would be my greatest challenge, the task was actually easier than I had expected. My decisions about what to retain and what to cut were based solely on what I believe will enhance understanding of LGBTQQA people’s lived experience. I can honestly say there is nothing that I left out of this final piece of work because it might offend or upset anyone, either within or outside the LGBTQQA communities.

One might ask, with all of the ethical dilemmas inherent in the approach under consideration here, is this type of research worth the risks? My answer is an emphatic yes. There is no doubt that too much ignorance exists in the world to allow us to await perfect research methods before proceeding. Ultimately, we have to make up our minds whether our research is worth doing or not, and then determine how to go about it in ways that let it best serve our stated goals (Patai 1991). At least for now, I am prepared to say that this research project was not only worth the risks, but I believe as educators, we have an ethical responsibility to open up the spaces which have historically been neglected. However partial and idiosyncratic our current feminist-oriented approaches to research, we can achieve contextuality, depth, and nuance unattainable through less dangerous but more remote research methods (Stacey 1991).

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1 One of the members of my dissertation committee attended the “Create Our Destiny” conference.

2 The method through which materials are organized into themes is referred to as “categorical analysis” by Strauss, 1987.

3 Painting a rainbow on the side of the MUB was a hypothetical project used as an example for discussion purposes during the planning process of an action step which might come out of the conference.

4 What I meant here was that I was volunteering in both capacities, as a researcher and as a planning team member to collect whatever information would be beneficial. I was not attempting in any way to undermine the planning team or usurp the process; the others on the planning team recognized my motivation and accepted it in the spirit it was intended.
Two reports were scheduled to emerge from the conference. One to the GPCF board was created and presented. The other, to be distributed to the participants had not been sent out at the time of writing. There have been a couple of attempts to create a report. I have participated in two attempts to compile and distribute a report. Although two different reports have been written, in both cases, the people who volunteered to distribute the reports were unable to complete the task due to personal circumstances.

The mind map was a particular exercise during the conference.

On the consent letter the Alphabet appears as LGBTQQA. The development of the LGBTQQA occurred verbally on March 22, with queer and questioning being included. It was later in the planning process that the Alphabet become written with two Q's. By the first meeting in April we were clearly supporting the LGBTQQA; so my hunch is that the April 15th mailing where there was still only one Q in the list was an oversight.

In the interest of full disclosure and letting the reader know whose agenda is being served here I must state for the record that I am solely responsible for the content of this work. The University of New Hampshire provided me with a professional leave in order to write up my study, but placed no constraints on the work itself in terms of scope or direction. While there is community interest in the work, I am under no financial or contractual obligation to any party concerning the project.

One of the important features of the conference was that some marginalized people, at least gay and lesbian identified people, experienced being in the majority for a change. At the "Create Our Destiny" conference, heterosexuality was clearly not the only acceptable expression of sexuality. Therefore, allies who came to the event found themselves in a situation where the basic ground rules deviated from the normative standard. This would not have been the case had the conference been a primarily "straight" event to which some gay people were invited. However, framing the conference in those terms allows us to see that for bisexual and transgender people the conference did not necessarily vary a lot from their everyday experience. As I will explore more fully in later chapters, not only were the numbers of people who identified as bisexual and/or transgender quite small, LG participants were not necessarily familiar with how bisexual and/or transgender experiences were similar or different from their own.
SECTION TWO

CHAPTER FOUR

THE “CREATE OUR DESTINY” CONFERENCE

[The “Create Our Destiny” conference] made me feel like we are a diverse community and we do come from many different directions and we do need to find common ground. (Penny)

The groups really supported each other and really validated everybody’s experience....I think it was one of the first times that I have really seen...validation across the board...in a larger group of people that weren’t really my close friends. (Sophia)

Chapter four, detailing the “Create Our Destiny” conference, is the first of four chapters in Section two. The remaining chapters in this section focus on the concepts of coming out, labels and gender identity, and on their connection to the tension between integrity and the need for a sense of belonging. My focus throughout section two is to detail what participants told me, along with what I observed directly, about the conference, people’s coming out processes, labels and their uses, and gender identity. In this chapter, I present a brief description of the various exercises that comprised the “Create Our Destiny” conference, the social change project that provided the basis for this study. In addition, I present participant insights about their conference experiences, both those they articulated at the time and others shared with me during our follow-up meetings.
At the ["Create Our Destiny"] conference, you and your co-participants will be brought together in a structured format to build common ground and exchange ideas in a non-confrontational environment. Conflicts that arise are noted, but no attempt is made to resolve them at the conference.

Fifty-seven participants, plus two facilitators and two recorders, accepted this invitation to come together for a two and one half day conference. Their focus was on how to “Create Our Destiny: Constructing a Healthy Future for the Seacoast LGBTQQA People” and was broken down into parts, Friday night — review of the past; Saturday — review of the present; Sunday — vision for the future. This free conference took place on May 16, 17, and 18, 1997 in the Strafford Room of the Memorial Union Building (MUB) at the University of New Hampshire. The conference provided an opportunity for participants to experience structured interaction with others, with whom they may or may not have had common affinities, but who shared similar interests in social change.

Friday Night, (5:00 to 9:30 p.m.)

At registration, which occurred between 4:00 and 5:00, participants checked in and received their nametags. Each nametag displayed a number between one and eight corresponding to randomly assigned groups. The planning team chose a random group assignment because it generally ensured that friends who registered at the same time did not end up in the same group. The conference consisted of a number of exercises described in the conference workbook (Appendix C), which participants received at registration. At this time, I collected completed consent forms and answered any questions people had about my research project. Participants ate dinner between 5:00-6:10 p.m. The planning team felt it was important to start with a meal to provide an opportunity for interaction, where people could meet or become reacquainted.
When dinner ended, the members of the planning team introduced ourselves to the entire group so that participants would know who the members of the group were that had convened the conference. Our goal for the introduction was to inform participants about the various groups and organizations whose support had been integral to the conference’s creation. To present this information in a humorous way, one of the planning team members wrote up the initials of the various groups on newsprint in big letters. He chose to use initials in this way to highlight the tendency in the Seacoast area of referring to various entities, particularly LGBTQQA ones, in this shorthand form. The planning team member then went through the list with a yard stick pointer, asking the participants to say the names of the organizations out loud as he pointed to them. Participants really enjoyed the humor as it launched the event on a positive note and lessened some of the anxiety in the room. We also learned that the majority of those present were familiar with the names of the organizations involved in supporting LGBTQQA community building in the Seacoast area. This illustration of using initials instead of saying the complete name of an organization seems to have prompted people to start referring to the abbreviated list of sexuality and gender identity categories, LGBTQQA, as the Alphabet.

Due to the structured nature of the conference format, the facilitators presented ground rules for the conference at this time, encouraging participants to contribute fully throughout the weekend. Participants needed to balance the time constraints of getting through the entire sequence of planned exercises with the need to have enough time for discussion and dialogue during each exercise. Facilitators asked participants to consider that each person had a different level of understanding, along with different lived experience with the issues that might arise during the weekend. They also highlighted the
central role listening plays in supporting productive dialogue, along with the importance of being respectful of others when asking any questions.

The planning team recognized that language was likely to be problematic because in the struggle for liberation, language and who does the naming tends to be an area of grave concern. Participants had different levels of sophistication with LGBTQQA issues. Therefore, facilitators encouraged them to try to make language work, but not to debate the nuances that arose, and to remember our goal was to determine our collective common ground. To achieve this goal, facilitators suggested looking for ways to learn and grow, to recognize that differences exist, but to put energy, not into attending to difference, but into focusing attention on places where collaboration was possible.

Additionally, the conference ground rules requested:

- Put the highlights of small group discussions on newsprint.
- Maintain confidentiality: Talk about what happens here, but do it collectively without attaching individual names (unless the group unanimously decides otherwise).
- Enjoy!

With the ground rules established, the facilitators asked participants to share their advance hopes and fears for the conference to the entire group (Appendix G). Facilitators recorded the issues raised on newsprint, then posted them on the wall where they stayed throughout the weekend for all attendees to see or to add to if necessary. The purpose of this exercise was to increase participants' level of awareness about the hopes and fears of their fellow participants and to help let them recognize the commonalities and differences that existed. After sharing their hopes and fears for the conference, facilitators asked participants to introduce themselves to each other. At this time the participants were in their randomly assigned small groups. To assist with introductions, the planning team had
asked each participant to bring an item that symbolized their experience as an LGBTQQA identified person. One by one, each participant used their object as part of their introduction to the other members of their random group.

The conference model requires that some structure and consistency exist within all the small groups throughout the conference, as participants engage in the variety of exercises scheduled throughout the weekend. The members of each small group monitored themselves to ensure that they self-assigned certain roles during each exercise:

- Discussion leader - ensuring people who wanted to speak got the opportunity. Helping to keep the group on task.
- Time keeper - informing participants when allotted time had gone by. Maintaining two-three minute time limit for small group reports to the larger group.
- Recorder - responsible for making sure the small group’s ideas are reflected in the speakers’ own words.
- Data Manager - taking material recorded during the small group meeting to the right part of the room so all could see a visual depiction of the ongoing, unfolding dialogue.
- Reporter - reporting out the highlights of the small group discussions to the larger group in the time period allotted for report-outs.

Timeline (7:52-8:24 p.m.)

The timeline provided an opportunity for participants to visually co-construct their collective understanding of LGBTQQA history, the purpose being to indicate to each other what we knew about:

How we have come to be where we are as individuals, as a society, and as Seacoast LGBTQQA people. This sets the context for understanding our present situation and for understanding our common future. ("Create Our Destiny" workbook, Appendix C)

Facilitators created the timeline out of 3’ by 20’ newsprint hung on the wall in strips. Each strip ran from the 1940’s to the present and represented one of three areas: the global context, the history of Seacoast LGBTQQA people, and personal history. The
process of adding the historical information to the timeline was highly energetic and social. People conversed, hugged, and wandered freely during the exercise, which involved people physically accommodating each other as they tried to cram relevant facts onto the newsprint. Once all of the participants had placed their information up on the timeline, the randomly assigned groups then synthesized the material. At this point, participants also had an opportunity to note areas of omission, such as lack of commentary on activities organized by and/or for transgender people, people of color, and youth. Such omissions may have been due to a complete lack of activity, a lack of awareness of our history, or some combination of both.

As Laura indicates, the opportunity to add events that were significant to their lived experience as LGBTQQA people was very moving:

I loved the time line, The time line was really powerful for me, to see how people have been influenced, impacted by AIDS. And to see how many people didn’t have much [understanding about life in] the Seacoast area in the 60’s and 70’s. I moved around all the time when I was growing up, and I kind of grew up thinking everybody else was at home, in a home town, they all know everybody and I was the only one who was shifting from place to place. And just (laughs) seeing [the timeline] was like, oh god we have all kind of been implanted here....I just loved how personal people got. They were able to really express some powerful, painful, beautiful things up on there. I thought that was amazing for one of the first activities for people to expose so much.

Saturday (9:00-6:00)

As early as the second morning, participants visibly displayed their support for each other by collecting approximately $200 for a participant who had recently lost all of her possessions in a house fire. Facilitators then reconvened the conference. As they started to create a comprehensive picture of the current issues and trends, participants were asked to recall the historical context they created on the timeline.
Creating Lens Groups (9:20-9:55 a.m.)

As described earlier, the planning team decided to deviate from the Future Search model by not predetermining what lens group participants would view the present through, i.e., lesbian, gay, youth, ally. Instead, the planning team chose to support participants' ability to self-select a lens, in part because we wanted to model a future where sexuality and gender identity categories might not retain their current significance. The facilitators asked participants to think about the conference theme of a healthy future for Seacoast LGBTQQA people and determine the lenses through which they wanted to view the present. Facilitators pointed out that our different lenses, the different aspects of our identities, affect the information that we generate. Facilitators also assured participants that the lens they choose was not meant to represent all the dimensions of who they were as people; rather it represented an aspect of themselves they wished to have contribute to the discussion about the present.

During the brainstorming session to create the lens groups, people called out possibilities, which facilitators wrote on newsprint and displayed around the room for all of the participants to see. As a result, 40 possible labels/ lenses hung on the wall (Appendix H). Participants spent about ten minutes walking around, talking with each other, determining which lens group they were going to choose to be in for the purpose of the morning's exercises. Ultimately, participants chose to use ten of the 40 lenses brainstormed, some of which represent a combination of a couple on the brainstormed list.

- Allies (3)*
- Bridge Builders and Service Providers (12)
- Gay Men (3)
Gay Parents (3)
• Gay Teachers and Closeted and Uncloseted Professionals (8)
• Gender Benders and Big Queens (5)
• Lesbians (3)
• Lesbians in Mid-Life (5)
• Out people (7)
• Switch Hitters (6)

One of the aspects of the lens groups which impressed Ben, a “Bridge Builder and Service Provider,” the most was the degree to which the lens groups chosen had “nothing to do with demographics, absolutely nothing.” Where the planning team’s original categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, ally, youth, service provider, HIV) had limited the participants by certain demographic information (sex, age, HIV status), the participants’ choices tended to take a much broader perspective, drawing from a variety of aspects of their lives, including their professional, spiritual, relational, and social interests.

For readers unfamiliar with LGBTQQA community based social change work, the following attention to what might appear to be subtle nuances concerning words might seem unusual. One of the participants wondered:

If you asked a group of heterosexuals to label themselves in that way like wives, husbands, maybe they would put their race, or religion, something professional. I wonder if you would get [so many lens groups], and my guess is that you wouldn’t. For some reason [in] our community [developing a large number of lens groups] was a metaphor for our struggle for identity. You know like that need to find the label that will really fit and that you can feel comfortable with and is there a label and the whole discomfort around labels. These are people who have really thought about labels in their life. It’s not just a lackadaisical, like sure, whatever. It is so important to them that the labels be said. Perhaps because our community has been like ‘You’re all gay,’ you know, and it has been pejorative, we have been called things we didn’t want to be called, it’s like a reclaiming. (Daphne)
Mind-Map (10:35 a.m.- 2:37 p.m.)

The self-selection process provided participants an opportunity to discuss current trends and issues in a group of people who had similar perspectives. The Mind-Map exercise was the first of these exercises. Participants first identified the most pertinent issues of current and/or future significance using articles they brought for this purpose. They then reported the issues that emerged in a highly visual way, on a 20’ by 20’ sheet of newsprint with “Healthy Future for Seacoast LGBTQQA people” written in the center. To displayed the identified issues on the mind-map, participants were asked to determine whether each issue flowed directly from the central concept, i.e., that it was something that related directly to how we can create a healthy future for Seacoast LGBTQQA people, or whether their issue was something that connected several of the issues already identified. For example, “LGBTQQA people supported in legal system, workplace, home and school” was seen as a main issue, while “recognizing connections between racism, sexism and classism” connected across several issues.

Next, facilitators gave each participant seven adhesive dots that they could place on the mind-map to indicate which issues were most pertinent for them as individuals. Planning team members then tallied the number of dots on each branch and displayed the result on the wall, in descending order, so the participants could see the consensus on where peoples’ collective interests lay (Appendix I). Finally, while remaining in their lens groups, participants picked three of the areas listed to examine in more depth. During this exercise they discussed what they saw happening currently, and they identified what they thought was not taking place to address each of their three issues. Each small group then presented its findings to the full conference (Appendix J).
Prouds and Sorries (Appendix K) (2:37 - 3:20) p.m.

I think it was very humbling. It was incredibly respectful .... It is almost like a communal of guilt and sorrow and shame and loss, and people instead of carrying that alone, carry it together, and I think in carrying that together it was able to be shared and spread. (Sophia)

Remaining in their lens groups, participants began the next exercise by generating a list of what made them proud and what caused them sorrow, with no commentary or discussion. Facilitators asked participants to use I-statements to indicate that they were owning their own prouds and sorries. Then, within their lens groups, participants came to a consensus on their three proudest prouds and three sorriest sorries without identifying the individuals who initially raised the issues. After the small groups had finished their work, they reported out to the larger group. In what one participant described as "crushing silence," participants, surrounded by others who had faced similar experiences, acknowledged the joy and pain they felt as LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast. For example the Gender Benders/Big Queens group presented the following:

Sorries:
• Self-abuse, using chemicals, and consenting to sex we’re not comfortable with
• Keeping silent in the face of bigotry
• We project our internalized self-hatred onto other people in our community

Prouds:
• We’re out in our neighborhoods, at our jobs, to our families; we’re role models
• We’re educators, role models, sexuality educators and public speakers on safer sex
• We’re here, and we’re alive, despite being at higher risk of suicide

This activity allowed participants to acknowledge publicly their perceptions of their behavior, whether good or bad. In the process, participants modeled moving beyond blaming and complaining and toward taking responsibility for their present experiences (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995).
Participants recalled difficult choices they faced as LGBTQQA people. In particular, they described decisions about whether to be honest with loved ones. Several participants mentioned experiences they had where their honesty had backfired as a result of incorrect assumptions held by some of their loved ones.

The thing about the prouds and sorries that really was powerful for me was when people talked about being sorry that they had not always been honest, and that felt kind of like validation. I have not always been honest about this. (Laura)

The most interesting thing about the prouds and sorries for me was the level of similarity that appeared between all of the groups. During this exercise, the participants were in their lens groups, arguably their most differentiated groupings. Because people joined lens groups where they perceived an affinity with a particular perspective or lens, one might expect to lead to fairly distinct responses about what made people proud and what made them sorry. That was not the case, however. Participants were particularly proud to be as out as they were and as engaged in social change work as they were. Conversely, they were sorry they had not come out earlier and that they were too busy to do more work to improve the current situation. From this finding my sense is that participants found their moral and ethical dilemmas to be of paramount significance in their lives. Issues such as choosing between honesty and openness on one hand and safety and security on the other were described as ongoing for LGBTQQA people, causing heart wrenching concerns by many participants regardless of what lens they chose. I discuss these concerns in greater detail in chapter five.
Check in- Reactions and Reflections (3:20-3:37 p.m.)

After the intensity of the prouds and sorries, participants “checked in” with each other and shared their thoughts and emotions with everyone at the event. Some examples of responses and reflections include:

- Happy that so many groups and people have made an effort to learn about gender identity and to be so inclusive. Really nice to hear a large group of people saying that.
- As a planning team member, I am proud that self selecting groups have been so powerful. We struggled with this for hours and hours. The time we put into the process, and it was a process, really paid off (much applause).
- It’s a real edge for me to identify with labels. I have rebelled against labels throughout my life, and it was a real edge to pick a label with which to be identified, and I got a lot out of the process, of picking the label, and of working with a great group within that label; so I appreciate that process.
- I was really pleased about the decision to try something new in this conference around how we created our groups. I was concerned about being boxed in, and it was very successful and energizing to try out for a day or a half day, thanks to the planning team.

Future Scenarios (3:27-5:55 p.m.)

[The future scenarios were] remarkable and monumental in their impact because not only was [the exercise] humorous and fun but it enabled you to actually see a world that was different....It gave us a common point of departure and to see how feasible it was. It was like we can do this. It was a fast way to create a common vision. (Michael)

Keeping the central question of the conference in mind, “How do we construct a healthy future for Seacoast LGBTQQA people?,” participants created short scenarios or vignettes (seven minutes) to represent the future. The planning team demarcated the year 2005 as the “future” because it was far enough away to give the group some distance to strive towards but close enough to foster reasonable and concrete goals. Scenarios had to be feasible, not fantastic, focusing on ideals that were possible. Back in their random groups, the participants had to make their vignettes desirable and motivating, not only to the members of their groups, but to the entire conference. This activity required
participants to be very specific and to discuss the barriers to achieving their goal. To stimulate people's creativity, the planning team had brought in several dozen props, such as a tool belt, a boa, a telephone, a tennis racket, and table lamp, which participants were free to use.

**Sunday (7:45 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.)**

**Good Morning & Agenda Setting (8:05-8:11 a.m.)**

The process I am about to describe took place on Sunday morning. Facilitators asked participants to identify the common ground that had emerged during the previous day's exercises, and then connect up with others to begin discussions about how to address the areas that interested them as individuals. Facilitators foregrounded the morning's activities by announcing there was grant money available for people to actualize the action plans they were about to create.

**Identifying Common Themes, Creating Common Vision, Common Ground & Unresolved Differences (8:11-8:55 a.m.)**

Facilitators guided participants in a consensus-based process to collectively develop and discuss their sense of the common future vision, using insights they gathered from the vignettes as a starting point. Participants wrote the various aspects of the common vision on strips of newsprint and laid them on the floor, e.g., “equal housing rights”; “no discrimination in commercial ventures”; “legal marriage.” The next task was to sort out the “common ground” and the “unresolved differences” from the overall common vision. Facilitators then asked participants to remove any aspects of the combined vision that caused them discomfort. The strips that remained were named the “Common Ground” (Appendix L), and those which were removed became the
"Unresolved Differences" (Appendix M). The concepts that remained in the common ground did not necessarily have unanimous support among participants. Rather, they did not conflict with participants' vision for their future, regardless of whether they personally wanted to work on a particular issue or not.

There was just something really empowering about that, because I remember I walked over to the artificial insemination one which I have a lot of questions about, about fertility drugs and fertility treatment I have a lot of thoughts and feelings and emotions I think mostly about how children are conceived, and I remember thinking, you know, I don't have to make up my mind right now but I can take it out of here because I am not sure about this.... It was a really small tiny chunk of something, but it meant a lot to be to be able to pull it up and say I don't know how I feel right now, there is something sticking in my heart about this and I am going to put it [in unresolved differences] for now and now I am just going to look at [the common ground] and I feel wholehearted about all of this stuff. (Laura)

The focus point of the conference was "Create Our Destiny: Constructing a healthy future for Seacoast lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people." The common ground exercise provided participants access to what they as a collective group thought it would take to construct a healthy future. For the purpose of textual clarity, I present the various aspects of the common group in eight sections, combining ideas under more general headings where I felt it was appropriate. The original headings and subheadings are presented in Appendix L. No significance ought to be given the numerical ordering here.

1. The ability to live and work free from discrimination based on sexual orientation and/ or gender identity so they can be evaluated on their merits. Participants specifically mentioned legal and political factors which impacted their ability to live free from discrimination, the importance of domestic partner benefits, equal housing rights, and protection against discrimination in commercial ventures. They also called for
sensitivity on the part of those in the legal and political systems, which included electing LGBTQQA people into office.

Given the central role of schools in the lives of youth, attention needs to be given to making schools safe places where children will be free from discrimination based on sexual orientation and/ or gender identity. Participants felt strongly about the right of youth to experience life free from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, placing under “Youth Issues” the importance of visibility in safe schools; having “out” youth in the schools; open and inclusive early childhood education; and LGBTQQA teachers and LGBTQQA friendly & knowledgeable schools/ curricula. Informed and affirming curriculum is needed to open the closet on history. Schools ought to provide all youth access to visible role models who do not support the further entrenchment of compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality. There is also a need for the creation of Queer studies programs at the university level. Some other practical examples are presented in chapter nine.

2. The ability to live without fear of violence and harassment. Safety was presented as a priority. One suggestion offered by participants was the importance of sensitivity training for police” and service providers. The goal of such training would be to ensure that police and service providers were better prepared to deal with particular situations and as a result individual LGBTQQA people have their needs met, rather than be placed in the position of having to educate the people from whom they sought assistance.

3. Control over their sexual and reproductive lives. Participants were interested in access to Lifespan services and availability of support groups including support for
healthy couples, family support, child care, adoption / foster care, and retirement communities for LGBTQQA people. More tasteful same-sex and general public displays of affection (PDAs) would be visible in supportive communities.

4. *The legalization of marriage and the decriminalization of adoption in New Hampshire.* Participants also suggested that LGBTQQA-friendly fertility clinics would facilitate their ability to establish their own families. There were some differences of opinion on the issue of childbearing by LGBTQQ people, although the majority of participants seemed to be in favor.

5. *Accessible and affordable health care* which responded to health problems disproportionately faced by LGBTQQ people, such as AIDS, breast cancer, and other gay health issues. Participants were particular interested in a cure or vaccine for HIV.

6. *The ability to be visible,* through development of opportunities for dialogue designed to help community members gain deeper understanding and acceptance of difference. Dialogue could support people’s ability to become conscious of their own unexamined assumptions helping spread acceptance by decreasing the presumption of heterosexuality and gender duality. These types of dialogues are needed between LGBTQQA-affirming and non-affirming people, as well as among and between LGBTQQA affinity groups.

7. *A sense of humor.*

8. *Spiritual growth.*

What I saw at the “Create Our Destiny” conference reminded me that achieving these goals will not be easy. The very challenge of envisioning a future where marginalization
was not the norm for LGBTQQ people was almost inconceivable. Edina’s reaction was as follows:

To envision a world where all this stuff existed, where there were so many resources - where people don’t feel as isolated as they do...I don’t think the world is ever going to be like that frankly...at least not in our lifetime. But you know, it’s good to think about the next generation too (laughter).

Discussion, (9:14-9:35 a.m.)

During the conference, participants reflected on the process of creating common ground. The following remarks were typical of those presented at that time:

• Sad that the straight community takes all this for granted and we have to fight for this [marriage, partner benefits, non discrimination policies].
• We can still maintain our individual identities and still fight for the common vision.
• This process teaches us to keep peeling away and peeling away layers of difference to build bridges. We can become our own worst enemies by focusing on the differences and letting them tear us apart.
• I hope we can listen to each other’s differences as respectfully outside this room.
• A participant lamented that our lives revolve around leaving parts of ourselves at the door in order to participate: At work, in family settings. But this process isn’t about leaving things behind. It’s just about clarifying what we’re unanimous about.

Action Projects (9:35-11:28 a.m.)

With a clear understanding of the co-constructed common ground and unresolved differences in hand, participants had a basis from which to develop action projects.

Facilitators encouraged participants to brainstorm action projects that held a particular interest for them. Participants used the common ground as information showing them where the energy lay in this group, but they were by no means restricted to working on aspects of the common ground. As each participant with an idea announced it to the entire
group, s/he wrote the action project on newsprint and hung it on the wall, e.g.,

"LGBTQQA community center."

The next step was the creation of action project groups. "Go where you have passion and you’re willing to place your commitment and take responsibility" was the advice from facilitators as participants perused the various action projects proposed. Facilitators also invoked the law of personal mobility, encouraging participants to move around while making their decision so they would find a project to which they were truly committed. Participants could work independently or in groups, and there was no minimum size for an action group. The following action projects emerged from the conference with short and long term action steps designed to construct a healthy future for Seacoast Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people:

- Community center
- Community newspaper/Web page/Resource guide
- Gender issues resource center
- HIV/AIDS education and prevention
- Leadership development/Networking
- Rainbow PAC, Political organizing/Legalized same-sex marriage and adoption
- Real dialogue with no specified outcome
- Weekly queer biking
- Youth stuff/Sensitivity training for those who work with youth

Reflections on the Conference/Close (11:28 a.m.-12:10 p.m.)

As the end of the conference approached, some participants recognized that they had no way to keep in contact with each other (the planning team chose not to provide a printed list of all attendees). So participants who wanted to maintain contact added their names and contact information to a mailing list. One of the action teams volunteered to distribute the information to those who indicated interest by adding their name to the list.
To conclude the "Create Our Destiny" conference, facilitators invited all of the participants to gather in a large circle. At this point, I left my recording post and joined the circle, leaving my fellow recorder to capture the proceedings. The following participants' reflections clearly indicated the profound impact the conference had on people even before the event had ended.

- Two things. One is that it was wonderful to be here with all of you. When have I ever done that? So many of you are my friends. The conference was run superbly. A lot was generated, and a lot of planning happened here. I learned about what it means to be a participant, not a facilitator. But it was really hard for me to be here through this conference on one level because part of me wanted to be more fully present but I was grappling with personal issues that didn't fit into the conference model. To have this much time with you all and not have time to share all my emotions as well made it hard to hold back. But that's a great learning experience: We're doing wonderful work. We heard our voices and built a community.

- I want to say thank you for letting allies be invited to this. Every time I do this, I learn so much more about my daughter, and it helps me understand my daughter and her life, and it is so good for me, thank you so much.

- This conference has helped me to become more comfortable with who I am and with what I do at school. The last time I knew a gay youth, who I really felt a connection with, at the time was a peer, and he killed himself, and I am haunted with that ever since. So connecting with gay youth is really a gift, and I'd like to acknowledge the youth who are here; it's really great to see them.

- I've been really excited about coming to this, but I just realized that I was coming with some apprehensions about not being good enough - that everyone else would be much more involved. But I want to thank you all for allowing me to take a part of this and dive in and get involved.

- We need to think about the time it takes for the butterfly to do its work. It takes its time. We need to learn that "doing it easy does it." Sometimes we don't know what the next step is, but we've got a vision. We'll get there, and we don't need to get there fast.

- I came kind of burnt out as a person active in the community. Last night was very powerful for me when I left here. I left here early to go, my dad died in January, and I left here to go spread his ashes out on the ocean. I was all charged up from leaving here; so I had a lot of good energy. Usually I have this big fear of staying 10 feet away from my two sisters, who are fundamentalist Christian and at that moment on the boat, and having all of this energy from here and not feeling as burned out as I did, I was able to hug both of them for a really long time, and I owe that to this conference.
During the final planning team meeting held later on the Sunday afternoon after the conference ended, the degree of similarity which existed between the suggestions for LGBT (sic) community development which emerged from the ‘Scan’ (see appendix B, p. 9) and the action teams was recognized. As one planning team member put it:

The cynic [in me] says nothing that came out of the conference was a big surprise. I think the model would have amazed us all if we had not already done some of that (Scan)....[The participants] came away with a lot of barriers broken down, they smacked up against people they probably didn’t know existed before....All that social stuff that came out of it, that will go so much further than [just pointing out we need social options]....To me the conference was to meet people and get motivated [and recognize] we are all kind of on the same page.

Another planning team member, who also acknowledged the degree of similarity between the action teams and the needs expressed by the Scan participants, pointed out a fundamental difference between the two outcomes:

Although the community “Scan” may have made those observations, the people who made those statements or [expressed] those desires in the focus groups or the survey from which the “Scan” was generated weren’t aware of when they were talking about common ground versus when they were talking about their own particular interest. All they knew is these were all things they wanted and what I think we witnessed [at the conference] was that these people worked through defining in an explicit way which [of their needs] were common and which parts weren’t.

After filling out their conference evaluations (Appendix O),” the conference ended with an Aikido/Tai Chi ritual. We all spread out throughout the room. Then one of the participants, a Aikido/Tai Chi instructor led us through some large bodily movements to symbolize the achievements of the weekend and the challenges that lay ahead. At the end of the ritual the entire group of approximately 60 people experienced one enormous group hug. After the closure exercises, some participants seemed almost relieved to leave
and start to process all they had experienced throughout the weekend, while other people were more reluctant, hanging around and savoring the end of the event with others who were not quite ready to leave.

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1 This quote, expressing the general process engaged in during a Future Search conference, came directly from the invitation letter sent to those who expressed interest in attending the “Create Our Destiny” conference.

* Friday nights exercises were carried out in randomly assigned groups.

“ The list below charts some of the history which led up to this planning process. GPCF: Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation applied for and received a $50,000 matching grant from NLGCFP: National Lesbian Gay Community Funding Partnership, GPCF then formed ASCP: Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership and the BKFIC: Bob Karaan Fund for Inclusive Community (Named in honor of a local minister who was a member of the ASCP and died suddenly during the process).

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ASCP conducted the CS + NA: Community Scan and Needs Assessment
The CC: Catalyst Committee was a sub group of the ASCP set up to determine the best course of action to meet the needs identified by the CS + NA which resulted in the proposal of a FSC: Future Search Conference

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ASCP went back to the NLGCFP for some more financial support to initiate the FSC which was named the COD: “Create Our Destiny” by the planning team.

“ Groups 1 & 8 were asked to look at the Personal History timeline independently of each other and use it to develop a collective story of the individuals in the room. Similarly groups 2 & 7 took the Global History timeline. Groups 3 & 6 took the History of Seacoast LGBTQ+ People timeline. Groups 4 & 5 synthesized all three timelines.

" The number of participants choosing each option is given in parenthesis.

" Rules for placing dots: Each person gets 7 colored dots which they attach to the issues which they feel strongly about. The dots are counted to monitor the priorities of the group. Dots on the connecting line between related issues are allowed.

" Lunch took place between the Mind-map analysis and the report outs.

" I decided not to include the information presented from this section as an appendix because I felt the level of specificity involved would render it obscure to people who were not present or who do not live in the immediate area.

" I feel very comfortable that the participants understood the directions about the common ground aspect of this exercise. I am not sure the same can be said for the “Unresolved Differences” list. The purpose of the exercise is to take only those common themes which emerged from the vignettes and look at them carefully to see if there are aspects of those common themes which some people determine to be unresolved differences for them. Those aspects of the common vision which give any person difficulty are put in the unresolved differences pile. In this case, I think participants may have written out some of their unresolved
differences. So rather than the unresolved differences pile consisting only of aspects of the common vision which some people would have supported, there were perhaps concerns in the unresolved differences which no one would have put in the common ground.

* In “Virtual quality”, Urvashi Vaid presented an agenda for “full civil equality” (Vaid, 1995, p. 376). Interestingly all of the aspects of the common ground created by the participants also happen to fit into aspects of her agenda. The extent of the similarities between the needs expressed in the Seacoast and those identified elsewhere suggest that other insights presented here may also have significance for other people engaged in similar social change efforts.

” The police department in Portsmouth created a community wide watchdog group called the Sexual Minority Advisory Committee, which also assisted in developing a series of sensitivity trainings for the department which were conducted in 1996. Public hearings about the city ordinance around 1993-4 revealed a lack of trust on the part of local LGBTQQ people to report harassment to the police.

** The following list of action projects was developed during the brainstorming process. These projects provided the basis for the action teams which were finally created.

- LGBTQQA community center
- Community newspaper
- Legalized marriage and adoption
- Safe schools
- Community resource guide
- Leadership training and development
- Weekly queer biking
- More networking between LGBTQQA groups
- HIV/AIDS education and prevention
- Web page
- Central resource center for gender issues
- Sensitivity training for those who work with kids
- Youth stuff
- Real dialogue, unspecified outcome
- Political organizing
- Increasing dialogue at local Unitarian Universalist church
- Direct-action group (like ACT-UP)

*** The term youth means different things to different people. The youngest person in attendance at the conference was 20. So, while I was disappointed that we did not attract more younger people, there were a number of attendees in their early to mid twenties who were seen as youth by other participants.

**** The evaluations, presented in Appendix O, capture some of the passion participants felt as a result of their conference experience. The only alteration I made was to remove any names that were present.
CHAPTER FIVE

COMING OUT

There are all kinds of ranges of coming out. I don't even know what closeted is any more. People say “Oh, you are out!” Well I guess so, I didn’t buy a ticket. (Bud)

Whenever a person comes out of a closet [to] be whatever it is they are supposed to be, their life just grows and flourishes, and then neat things happen. (Joe)

Coming out emerged as a central concern for LGBTQQA identified people in the Seacoast area. The significance of the coming out process to the “Create Our Destiny” participants became evident when I reviewed the participants’ contributions during the timeline exercise, the first exercise at the “Create Our Destiny” conference. As I described in the previous chapter, the timeline consisted of 3’ by 20’ newsprint hung on the wall in three strips, one representing the global context, one the history of Seacoast LGBTQQA people, and the last the participants’ personal history. Participants were asked to share what they believed to be significant historical issues from the 1940’s to the present pertaining to the conference’s focus — creating a healthy future for LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area. Participants covered the personal history section of the timeline with references to when they came out to family or friends or when a family member or loved one came out to them. The material shared by participants about coming out, both on the timeline and during our follow-up meetings, ultimately led to the development of this chapter.
The process of coming out and one’s decision to identify with an identity category(s) are intertwined. However, in an effort to provide readers with a clear explanation of the complexity, flexibility and fluidity inherent in both, I will present participants’ thoughts on the two separately, coming out in chapter five and labels in chapter six. While I focus on sexual orientation in both chapters, coming out and label selection are not limited to issues of sexual orientation. Transgender people and people starting to deal with gender issues face similar decisions about when, to whom and to what degree to come out, as well as how to identify themselves when they are out. However, the majority of participants in this study had little experience considering their gender identity in ways that deviate from the norm. Therefore, to give the ‘minority’ (transgender) view the attention it deserves, I have presented it separately in chapter seven.

In general, coming out can be described as both a universal and an extremely personal experience for LGBTQ people. It is universal in that there are commonalities in recognizing and being open about one’s own sexuality and/or gender identity, and personal because each and every one of us experiences coming out differently according to our own life situations. "The stories presented throughout this chapter indicate both the universal and deeply personal nature of coming out as experienced by the participants. While all of the participants, including people who identify or are identified as allies, had undergone some form of coming out process, each individual had his/her/hir own unique experiences with the process."
Due to the invisibility perpetuated by compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality, LGBTQQA people face what I call the Alphabet Paradox:"

If we do not name our difference in explicit terms, we remain invisible as LGBTQQA people, but if we do name it, we are typecast as little more than sexual or gendered beings and the vast complexity of our lives disappears."

The invisibility that LGBTQQA people often experience is compounded by our ability to "pass" as something we are not (Vaid, 1995). Passing well means that neither our sexuality nor gender identity raises questions for those with whom we have personal contact. While passing means that we remain hidden within the mainstream, making us less likely to face certain kinds of overt homophobia, another implication is that we are less likely to connect with other LGBTQQA people. The Scan showed the lack of community to be of concern to LGBT" people in the Seacoast. Participants’ interest was greatest in community development projects that supported:

- Cohesion amongst the LGBT communities
- Visible role models
- Information
- Collaboration / Info sharing among LGBT groups
- Social options
- Integration within the larger community

As we build community, however, we risk being identified by our sexuality alone.

An additional risk exists in the inverse connection that can exist for LGBTQQA people between safety and visibility. If we are organized and visible, not only can we find each other; people who wish to harm us can too. As Sophia pointed out, referring to the Holocaust," there may be “some other shmuck that will try and annihilate us again.” Sophia also acknowledged the moral component to one’s decision to come out. She
connected gaining integrity with making the greatest sacrifice, choosing to lose one’s life rather than deny one’s true self.

There is pride in standing tall. There is integrity in that as well, and I think that you know how many people stood up and said I am a Jew and got shot right in the head because they were a Jew, but they did it with integrity and pride. And how many gay folks did that as well, and how many gay folks do that every day. I suspect a lot. That’s a tough burden to carry for many people.

Unfortunately, LGBTQQA people can perceive that we have two options from which to choose - lie or die.

One way to overcome the Alphabet paradox is to see the diversity that exists among people, in this context particularly LGBTQQA people. Those of us willing to increase our visibility and discuss these issues create possibilities not only for ourselves, but also for a broader audience to begin to recognize that when we base our understanding of each other on any one aspect of a person’s being, we are left with a limited picture.

One way to learn about each other in our full complexity is by acquainting ourselves with each other’s stories, in turn learning our history. We can do this by looking

...at the lives of others. Reading a biography, you can learn so much. Buy the biographies of your local gay, lesbian, transgender and bi-sexual people, and look at their lives, How was it? How is it? (Joe)

With Joe’s words in mind, this chapter provides the reader with a window into some of the day-to-day experiences faced by LGBTQQA people dealing with the tensions inherent in the Alphabet paradox. In this chapter, I present participants’ experiences coming out about their sexual orientation ranging from a single act of revelation, to coming out as part of a life long process of becoming gay. In my opinion, there were no
completely closeted people at the “Create Our Destiny” conference. However, several participants described themselves as out to only a limited segment of friends and/or family, while others appeared to have made a conscious decision to be out in all aspects of their lives.

One group at the “Create Our Destiny” conference used the “Ugly Duckling” story as a metaphor for coming out. The Ugly Duckling story details a journey from feeling out of place in one’s family of origin, to feeling isolated, through first attractions, self-awareness, and ultimately to connection to a larger group. While the Ugly Duckling story does not provide a perfect parallel it is a good framework through which to see the individual coming out stories presented in this chapter.

The Ugly Duckling

Once upon a time... down on an old farm, lived a duck family. The Mother Duck had laid some new eggs. One egg was bigger than the rest, and when it hatched a strange looking duckling with grey feathers that should have been yellow gazed at a worried mother. The ducklings grew quickly, but Mother Duck had a secret worry.

“I can’t understand how this ugly duckling can be one of mine!” she said to herself, shaking her head as she looked at her lastborn. As the days went by, the poor ugly duckling became more and more unhappy. His brothers didn’t want to play with him, he was so clumsy, and all the farmyard folks simply laughed at him. He felt sad and lonely, while Mother Duck did her best to console him. “Poor little ugly duckling!” she would say. “Why are you so different from the others?” And the ugly duckling felt worse than ever. Then one day, at sunrise, the duckling fled, still looking for love.

One day at sunrise, he saw a flight of beautiful birds wing overhead. “If only I could look like them, just for a day!” said the duckling, admiringly. Winter came and poor duckling left home to seek food in the snow. He dropped exhausted to the ground, but a farmer found him, “I’ll take him home to my children. They’ll look after him.”

However, by springtime, he had grown so big that the farmer decided: “I’ll set him free by the pond!” That was when the duckling saw himself mirrored in the water. “Goodness! How I’ve changed! I hardly recognize myself!” The flight of swans winged north again and glided on to the pond. When the duckling saw them, he realized he was one of their kind, and soon made friends. “We’re swans like you!” One day, he heard children on the riverbank exclaim: “Look at that young swan! He’s the finest of them all!” And he almost burst with happiness.
I have divided chapter five into five parts:

- First realizations. This section discusses how participants spent some time, in some cases years, deliberating the possibility that they were LGBTQQ before sharing that realization with others.
- Creating a sense of belonging. Over time people, like the Ugly Duckling, start looking for others with whom they can make connections.
- Personal “coming out” stories. This section details various aspects of the coming out process. Coming out to one’s family poses specific concerns to people, as do various factors such as one’s work environment, community living in a non-urban area, economic stability, class and gender.
- Political “coming out” stories whose purpose includes displacing compulsory heterosexuality in the order of knowledge, thereby more accurately representing the experience of the world in which we live (Blasius, 1994).
- Resonances.

My purpose in choosing this order of presentation is to present the commonalities amongst participants’ coming out experiences while maintaining the unique quality of each individual participant’s story. Participants tended to describe a process of first coming out to themselves, then coming out to personal friends and family. This more public coming out occurred in a wide variety of locations, which in turn altered the experience.

Participants also described their coming out experiences as influenced by a number of factors such as their economic stability, class and gender identity. Some participants described taking a more political approach to their coming out process, increasing their visibility for reasons beyond their own immediate personal need. It is important to note, I am not trying to make a case for any sort of linear progression here, although that certainly was the experience of some participants.

First Realizations

I hear this, uncounted stories from gay and lesbian people specifically, that they knew they were different from the time they were 3 years old, 4 years old, 5 years old. Long before they adopted a label, they knew they were different, and I think about that, what that means is really like Hans Christian Anderson who was...
apparently gay. His story, “The Ugly Duckling”. We suddenly feel like we hatched out of an egg that was in the wrong nest.” (Ben)

Participants discussed a time delay between their first sense that their sexuality and gender identity might set them apart from their peers and any public acknowledgment of that realization. Gabrielle, a member of the “Gender Benders and Big Queens” lens group, experienced a considerable time delay between first realizing an attraction for boys and any public acknowledgment of his attractions:

My first crush was Eliot from ET, and I’ve always been attracted to men throughout, ever since I was like eight, six or eight, but I just managed to, I recognized it and shoved it in the back of my head....I knew probably when I was twelve that I was most likely gay, and said I’m gonna force myself to be straight.

Participants also described a range of responses to their first realizations. There were participants who recalled with humor how in hindsight their earliest recollections indicated they were not likely to grow up to be heterosexual. Sophia joked with Sully in our interview, describing her experience: “You knew from birth, you were probably staring at the nurse that carried you out (laughs) ‘Hi, I’m gay!’ There is like no question in your mind. There never really has been.” Here we see a difference in comfort level between Gabrielle and Sully, as Sully seems to have been more comfortable in her realization than Gabrielle. Participants also recalled differences in the factors that precipitated their first realizations.

While both Gabrielle and Sully indicated that their realizations about their sexuality and gender identity occurred independently of interactions with other LGBTQQA people, for some participants it was a personal interaction that prompted their first realizations. For example, at the age of 32, Mikki met and fell in love with another woman.
I never had any inkling of being involved with a woman, and then I met Vera! We fell in love, boom, like that, and we have been together ever since...It didn't freak me out, it didn't scare me, it didn't throw me into a tizzy. Okay. This is who I am supposed to be with.

Despite her own pleasant experience, Mikki understands others have not been as fortunate: "I see the pain people have gone through in terms of recognizing that they are lesbian and want anything not to be, and want to fight that." She went on to ponder what the difference might be:

Maybe it was because I was older, maybe because I was in my thirties. You know, pretty well comfortable with myself and my life and thought it was the right thing to do!

Participants described these first realizations as private thoughts and feelings about the likelihood that they were different, that their sexuality and/or gender identity violated the conventional normative standard. Determining the answer to whether one might be gay is difficult to do in a vacuum; therefore, seeking others with similar realizations was described as an important part of the coming out process.¹

Creating a Sense of Belonging

[Coming out is] the whole process whereby a person comes to identify himself/herself as homosexual, and recognizes his/her position as part of a stigmatized and semi-hidden minority. The development of a homosexual identity is a long process that usually begins during adolescence, though sometimes considerably later. (Altman, as cited in Pope, 1995, p. 301)

The coming out stories in this section reflect a shift from peoples’ internal recognition to external acknowledgment of their realization. Once LGBTQQA people personally acknowledge that our understanding of sexuality and/or gender identity differs from the normative standard, there are numerous opportunities to make that understanding public, which we can choose to take or leave. Unlike many other marginalized people, LGBTQQA people are not easily identifiable even to each other. In
this section, I look at the importance of finding peers and bridging generational gaps in order to develop a sense of community.

Finding Peers

Why would I ever want to be in a minority group? I have enough minorities in my life, being Italian American, being overweight, and whatever all my issues were, you know, why would I want one more minority (laughs) especially an outlawed class. (Zeke)

Finding peers with whom one can develop a deeper understanding of particular aspects of one’s identity is part of the motivation for people as they shift from their initial personal realizations to coming out publicly.

In keeping with the Ugly Duckling story, many participants described the experience of longing to find other people who had had similar experiences to theirs. Xena, who is out to her family and out at work, selected the ‘Out’ lens group at the “Create Our Destiny” conference where she found a group of swans she was not expecting. “I have never come across [an opportunity to sit] with ‘out’ people before...[Because] for ‘out’ people to come together and talk, it is excluding people who aren’t ‘out’.” During our discussion, Xena came to the realization that she had organized her social interactions based on what she believed to be a norm in LGBTQA communities, which dictated that one ought not engage in exclusive interactions. She perceived that to engage with other “out” people, even periodically, would be seen by other LGBTQA people as inappropriate because it would promote exclusivity. However, in coming to this realization she also recognized that in turn her ability to interact with, and learn from, other ‘out’ LGBTQA people had been curtailed.

However, unlike the Ugly Duckling, who enjoyed a sense of belonging when it found it was a fine swan among other swans, several participants told me how they did...
not welcome their affinity with LGBTQQA people, particularly during the early realization period. Given the steady diet of negative messages we see about ourselves and the lack of visible role models, LGBTQQA people tend not to have much evidence to counter these homophobic claims, particularly before we come out. Without role models to counter stereotypes, it can be very difficult for individuals, especially adolescents, to come to terms with the feelings and experiences that cause them to question normative standards. This makes finding an affinity group with whom one can relate or work with collaboratively an even more daunting prospect. Patrick described being frightened and isolated when he discovered his sexual orientation was not consistent with the normative standard, which in turn prevented him from seeing himself as a gay man.

Anything about gays I have ever heard has been negative.... I really didn’t have exposure to homosexuality when I was a teenager, notions of it, and whatever images I did have were extremely stereotypical. So in other words, I was sort of thinking in my head, I am not effeminate, and I don’t wear leather clothing and I don’t wear bright jewelry so I can’t be gay, you know, and I honestly thought that.

Faye described the quandary she faced discovering that her personal affinities differed from those with which she had been socialized to associate. Growing up an upper middle class child, Faye’s received everything she ever wanted or needed from her family. She was a debutante who realized that she was paying more attention to the other debutantes than to potential dates. Faye described her sense of not belonging in the world of debutantes, and although she worked hard to play the part she

never really felt right. I never really felt comfortable. I never felt like I belonged...I think my freshman year I walked into an Ani Difranco concert at [college]. And the room was very small..., and there were a lot of lesbians there, and all of a sudden it was the first time in my life I felt like I came home and I felt like I finally fit in to somewhere. I finally had [choked up], I finally belonged. And yet it was so scary because this was the group I’m not supposed to belong to!! [laughs] This is the group I really shouldn’t belong to. I think that is why it’s taken me as long as it has to get to where I am.
Faye simultaneously discovered her groups of swans and recognized that accepting herself as one of those swans required a complete shift in her thinking about her place in society. Such alterations involve risk and loss and take time.

Gabrielle, who also experienced difficulty making connections with other LGBTQQA people, described his understanding of why people project their own internalized self-hatred onto the very people with whom we could find affinity. The “Culture says we’re deviants, we’re not normal, we’re evil and all that fun Catholic stuff.” So when Gabrielle, and the other “Gender Benders and Big Queens,” perceived there were others like them,

It all led to self hatred because we’re not normal so we can’t like ourselves. Which led to the self-abuse...seeing other people even if we saw other people like us or similar to us ... because culture ... ingrained us to hate them, .... Oh, my god! That person’s awful. Look at what he’s doing, he’s wearing a dress!

While it is very difficult to determine accurate information about LGBTQ youth, it is generally accepted that LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for suicide (McFarland, 1998), substance abuse, homelessness, utilization of psychiatric services, and difficulties in school (Remafedi, 1987; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991 as cited in McFarland, 1998).

What did the ugly duckling do [when it hit adolescence]? It went off, all by itself and wanted to die over that winter.. only a lot of them [LGBTQQ youth] like the ugly duckling don’t just go into that swamp in the middle of winter. They don’t make it out. They’re successful. It’s why suicide is the leading cause of death among gay and lesbian adolescents because they can’t resolve who they are. (Ben)

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the pioneers of queer theory, reminds us, “Everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents” (as cited in Raissiguier, 1997), a reality that did not escape me during this study. Gabrielle described
to me how he started to come out to himself "Freshman year in college, cause that’s when I had my first real deep sexual experience with a woman, and I didn’t like it.” This was a very difficult time for Gabrielle: “I got very suicidal, very depressed, and felt like I had nowhere to turn.” Gabrielle also told me

I guess I’m a suicide survivor, but I don’t like that term because I still deal with it every day, and I don’t think I will ever really survive it because it’s something I go through every day and just being alive day by day is like a big accomplishment for me and dealing with all the self-abuse, the self-hatred.

Gabrielle recalled hanging out with a group of peers who exhibited transphobic behavior as a mechanism to confirm to each other that they met the normative standard. “At least we know if we also hate these weirdos (transgender people), we’re at least part of that group [presumably the non-weirdos].” As Gabrielle struggled with his own gender identity he knew that belonging to a peer group that exhibited this type of transphobic mentality was not in his best interest, but they were his peers and he had no realistic alternative. Stories like these reiterate the significance of peer groups in the development of a sense of self in community. Yet, in part, the struggle faced by LGBTQQA youth and adults comes from a lack of access to peer groups who are accepting of LGBTQQA people.

Clearly, participants pointed to their lack of peers as an important hurdle in the process of creating a sense of belonging for LGBTQQA people. An interrelated concern raised by participants was the lack of intergenerational communication, which in turn perpetuated invisibility and a lack of a sense of belonging.

**Bridging Generations**

There is considerable stratification between generations of LGBTQQA people. One of the reasons for this stratification is that support for coming out, and increasing
one’s visibility as LGBTQQA person, is not consistent across age cohorts. The level of stratification between generations was a concern in the Seacoast area long before the “Create Our Destiny” conference. According to the Scan, there was an interest on the part of LGBT people for an increase in the number of visible role models in the Seacoast area.

It is like all the similar age groups hang out together...in a lot of communities you have elders, but in our community it seems like there is passing of cohorts, individually through time, and disjunction between them and very rare connections. (Pat)

It is ironic that even though many youth feel very isolated, they frequently have a very short distance to wander before they find an older LGBT person. However, these people who are potential swans for the LGBT youth seeking connection often cover themselves in camouflage for fear of discovery. This situation is nowhere more evident than in schools where LGBT educators still remain invisible to youth often fearing the loss of their jobs or the accusation of recruiting youth or promoting the gay agenda (whatever that is!) (Harbeck, 1992). As a result youth often find little support and can face rejection from the very teachers, administrators and other youth advocates who recognize them as part of their affinity group. The result is a loss of connectedness, particularly across generational lines, which is especially detrimental when one considers the risk of rejection our youth face from their biological families.

Several participants shared the often agonizing decisions they made concerning whether they felt safe enough to come out to the LGBTQQA youth with whom they worked. When discussing her feelings about what not being out at work was like, Laura, a teacher, described the implications she felt when she chose not to be visible:

I work with kids, and I’m a very upfront person. I tell people everything about myself, and there is this huge part of me that I’m not upfront about. And that sucks cause I know [being bisexual] is not bad, but I am afraid that it seems bad.
Laura described not feeling safe to come out about her sexuality at work. However, she was also burdened by how her decision may perpetuate what she believed to be false assumptions about LGBTQQA people because she chooses not to offer her own experience as an alternative perspective.

Patrick, also a teacher, described a similar loss by not coming out at school: "I am not being that visible role model, and I worry about that student in my class that's gay.... If he or she never knows I am gay." While the impact of his lack of visibility is of concern, Patrick perceived coming out to be an equal threat:

If I were to come out to my school let’s say prematurely ... of legal protection or whatever else, personal comfort, and a real negative situation were to occur [I ask-like what happened in Merrimack] then how are the students going to perceive homosexuality?"

Patrick discussed with me his daily struggle with the decisions he makes about whether he ought to come out at school:

I know one day a student might ask me am I gay, you know, and right now I am not sure I'd be comfortable answering the question... I could say to the student, "Well, what if I were? Would that change your perception of me?" and just challenge them on that. Because, really, my sexuality is not the issue. It's sexuality in general.

Recall the first side of the Alphabet paradox; if we don't name our difference in explicit terms, we remain invisible as LGBTQQA people. Patrick and Laura share the quandary of how to help their students uncover some buried assumptions about how normative standards of compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality operate without making their personhood the issue. "How would your perception of me change if I told you I was gay?" or "How differently do you think people would perceive you, if you told them you were gay?" are questions worth asking ourselves over and over when thinking...
about visibility and sexuality and/or gender identity. On the other side of the paradox, if we do name our sexuality or gender identity, we’re typecast as little more than sexual or gendered beings and the vast complexity of our lives disappear. Patrick believes his visibility as a gay man could have a positive impact on his students. He also sees how he would then be connected to much larger issues regarding homosexuality.

Readers thinking about strategies to bridge the generations may initially think about the role older people can play by choosing to make themselves more visible to youth. However, given the difficulty of developing a healthy sense of personal identity while surrounded by an environment hostile to one’s sense of self, there can be interesting reversal of roles between older and younger people within LGBTQQA communities. As Ben points out, younger people have grown up in a world that, due to changes by their elders, is now more sustaining and nurturing.

Most of the time our role models are those who are older and more experienced, and to some degree that certainly happens to gay and lesbian people, but what I have also witnessed, paradoxically, is that the older people learn from the younger ones because the younger ones had benefit of slightly healthier soil.

Several components make up the healthier soil such as more gay characters on TV and the fact that “The gay characters in [current] movies [don’t] all die of suicide.”(Ben)

The ability of both LGBTQQA and non LGBTQQA people to see each other in our uniqueness and our complexity can be enhanced by an increase in opportunities to create a sense of belonging, which in turn can be facilitated by increasing opportunities to find peers and bridge generations.
Personal Coming Out Stories

Coming out is a continuous process, and LGBTQQA people constantly face the decision about whether to come out or not any time we meet a new person or are in a new situation (Pope, 1995). For example, although I am out in all aspects of my life, I regularly have to weigh up whether I want to invest the time or effort to engage in a conversation about my sexuality and/or gender identity. Take a regular occurrence such as telemarketers. Calls for “Mr. or Mrs. Moorhead,” pose a dilemma. Do I choose the truth, “I am Ms. Moorhead,” the whole truth “they live in Ireland!” or nothing but the truth “There is no Mr. Moorhead. I am a lesbian living with a long term partner.”

Based on the participants’ stories, it is clear that coming out is not a singular act: it is a complex process of self-reflection, self-recognition, and self acceptance leading to and partly affected by a public presence as gay (Mohr, 1992). Participants’ decisions about coming out were contingent on a number of factors differing from location to location and changing over time. Several participants referred to being out in some places, but not others, being out to some people but not others, or just being out some of the time in a particular location.

Coming Out to Family

People’s fear of rejection from their biological family makes coming out to their next of kin particularly significant and difficult.

I think that unlike any other minority that we have witnessed in this culture, you know an African American person goes home to dinner and they might have encountered prejudice and bigotry all over the place, but they probably aren’t going to get it at the dinner table. They are going to have their identity — and their sense of belonging reinforced at that dinner table. Not true for gay and lesbian people. (Ben)
The decision not to be out to one’s family can have serious implications for one’s relationships. For example, Faye who was not out to her family at the time of our meeting indicated that as a result of not being out:

I choose to go home less and less which is unfortunate too because these people are great people, and that is something I have got to deal with. I need to come out to them, I just need to be in a good enough space to come out to them so I don’t hurt myself.

Faye’s example points to the level of effort involved for a LGBTQQQ person weighing up the risks involved in coming out, particularly to family. Her solution, to make the conscious decision to separate herself from her family until she is ready to come out to them, is not unique. Faye’s balancing levels of outness can be understood as more common than unusual when people are negotiating coming out on a personal level.

Laura’s description of the difficulty she faced when she came out to her mother may also sound familiar to readers.

My mother and I have had really horrible times where she’s said that I’m a gay wannabe and I am only doing this because my friends have died of AIDS and sick twisted stuff.... I am sorry that there is so much homophobia in the world cause it has meant that I’ve had a really difficult time with my parents that I wouldn’t have had otherwise, cause I have certainly never done anything to displease them except for BE GAY.

Societal expectations loom large here. As Laura put it, “It’s not like I just had to grow up to be a good daughter,” the implication being that we all have to be heterosexual. Many LGBTQQQ people perceive coming out as a moral act, a way to be honest and to support their integrity. Yet there are those who still equate simply acknowledging one is gay with admitting one is immoral. Laura’s mother not only chose not to interpret her revelation as an act of honesty and integrity, she turned Laura’s intentions around, implying that her
motivation was very different. Distorting and disrespecting acts of honesty in this way can be devastating for the person taking the risk to be forthcoming about themselves.

Not all the participants faced rejection when they came out to their families. For several years, Patrick had struggled hard to be “straight.” Despite ongoing attractions to men, Patrick dated women. He chose to wait until he was very sure about his feelings before sharing them with his family, in part because he believed his family would have some difficulty if he were to come out. After falling in love with another man, Patrick felt he had the confidence he needed to share his experiences with his father.

A couple of weeks prior, I was terrified of telling him, and actually at that moment I was terrified of telling him too, but it just came out really nice, and I was very confident. It felt like the right thing.

Patrick, who had made contact with a local P-FLAG* chapter, used some techniques he gathered from the meetings to increase the potential for his coming out process to have a positive outcome. Before coming out, Patrick reminded his dad of an earlier pledge, that no matter what happened he would love and support his son. During their discussion, Patrick reassured his father by telling him “I am not telling you that there is something wrong with me. I am telling you that I have come to a realization about myself and I am very happy about it.” Patrick also offered his dad all the time he needed to think, and he offered to answer any questions that might come up as he had time to think about their conversation later. The relief that accompanied this milestone for Patrick was evident in his demeanor. He had taken the risk to be honest with his father and was accepted for it, which mattered a great deal to him.

Melody, a mother and ally who has also been an active member of the local P-FLAG chapter, discussed the experience of being on the receiving end of a coming out
story. Melody found her life had opened up in ways she could not have imagined before her daughter came out to her. “I thank my daughter for giving me [access to the world beyond compulsory heterosexuality].” She now interacts with numerous people who identify as LGBTQQA, and she sees the personal benefit she has gained from those relationships.

I feel sorry for the people who have been left out of this part of life because their ignorance is too strong, their naiveté about the whole issue keeps them from being sympathetic, involved, understanding. Keeps them from being active. In fact keeps them from knowing a lot of people who are close to them who don’t dare be open. They miss out on some of the most important relationships that are in their lives just because they don’t have a clue how to open the doors to let those people get closer.

For some participants, the shift from self-awareness to a more public acknowledgment of their sexuality was accompanied by the emotional and logistical complications of ending marriages and worrying about custody of children. However, even participants coming out under circumstances where such added responsibilities exist described very positive experiences as they came out. Despite divorcing his wife of over twenty years after he came out as a gay man, Zeke found he became closer to his family. He described the experience of coming out as “Part of the whole package of mid-life reassessment and changes, and in my case it means having probably the best relationship I have ever had with my ex-wife and my kids.”

Coming Out in our Communities

Having discussed participants’ experience with coming out to their families, I now turn readers’ attention to some of the other aspects of people’s everyday lives that cause participants to expend energy wondering about the implications of coming out. My attention in this section focuses on some of the particular challenges for LGBTQQA
people posed by coming out at work; by their decision to live in small non-urban communities; their economic stability, their class and their gender identity.

Coming Out at Work

Participants described the process of determining whether to be out at work as complicated. Their concerns tended to focus on how their increased visibility might overshadow their skills, talents and abilities. For example, Sully explained that she has no problem with people knowing she is gay, but she does not want her sexuality to gain more prominence than other aspects of her being. Sully described being out at work “Because it is part of who I am. I didn’t walk into my job and say ‘Hire me, I’m gay and my name is Sully.’ It’s I’m Sully, and I happen to be gay.” The balance and order here appeared to be very important, and not just to Sully.

When Faye decided she was not going to hide her sexuality at work she also made a conscious decision to get more involved in certain work-related activities.

When you are closeted at work, you are forced to go to work leaving 60% of yourself in the car. And when I took the job [at a private high school], when I moved to Portsmouth, I was not going to leave that 60% of me in the car any more. And in doing that I have made a real conscious decision to be out everywhere. I don’t hide it from the students, I mean I don’t go around announcing it, but people know, my boss knows, everyone there knows, and I am active with the GSA there. Even having the rainbow flag on my car.... I don’t hide it anymore.

Prior to coming out she worried about being seen as “gay by association” if she supported the gay/straight alliance (GSA) at her school. Since starting to come out, Faye felt more comfortable in supporting LGBTQQA youth and in volunteering to advise her school’s GSA. In this instance, Faye’s coming out not only helped her feel more integrated: she also contributes her experience to the next generation who otherwise would lack the support of one of the few staff who have personal experience with the issues they are
facing. Faye’s willingness to take the personal risk to become more visible at work increased not only her sense of belonging but that of her students and colleagues.

In contrast, Michael, who works in an environment that relies on the funds she raises from a wide variety of donors, is not out at work:

If [a donor] thinks that I’m a queer, and they think that is sick and perverted and they are not going to give me $100 anymore or $5, I am hurting the agency by me coming out. I hurt myself every day that I’m not, but that translates professionally. It’s not like I just have to do a good job at my work.

The last line of this remark has an eerie ring to Laura’s earlier comment that being a good daughter is not enough. Michael points to an added burden felt by LGBTQQA people who recognize that being true to ourselves is sometimes the last thing others want us to be. Michael’s decision not to come out at work clearly rested on what she saw as being in the best interest of her organization. Michael believed, I think correctly, that there are people who will be less likely to contribute money to entities they know to be administered by someone who is gay. She said she was waiting for our society to overcome all the legal and political barriers to security before she could envision integrating the various aspects of her life and coming out at work.

Before we can worry about anything else, we have to be safe in our homes, and we have to be safe in our work place. After that we can start getting into our interest, you know, music and art and science and whatever those things are, all the other issues.

Participants felt very strongly that legal and political solutions are needed to eliminate inequities based on adherence to compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality norms. They told me they wished to be judged on the merits of individual skills and talents, not only by our employers, but also by society at
large. Identifying as LGBTQQA in and of itself ought not instill confidence or distrust in my ability to manage money, care for children, or write computer software.

**Coming Out in a Non-Urban Environment**

You can talk about coming out, but how is that significant if you live in the west village in Manhattan, what difference does it make if you are out or not? You are in the west village.... But if you live in Deerfield NH, now let’s talk about the significance of coming out. (Ben)

Research focused on LGBTQQA people’s experiences generally takes place in urban settings. Yet, as far back as the ‘Kinsey Report’ (1948), there was information indicating that rural settings were less supportive of an identity based on homosexual behavior than were urban settings. In the Seacoast area, community networks are small, and the same people tend to be interconnected in many different settings making it very difficult to separate out various aspects of one’s life. Paul Cody and Peter Welch (1997) recently studied gay men in the Seacoast region and surrounding areas and found both positive and negative aspects to being a gay man in a rural community. Eighty percent of Cody and Welch’s participants discussed their enjoyment of the simplicity and comfort of living in a small, quiet town or community. They described that living in a rural community supported reliance on other gay men in a way that might not be possible in an urban setting.

Conversely, however, 80% of their respondents also described negative aspects to rural living. Their findings show that the lack of a visible gay community and the limited opportunities to meet people with similar experiences were described as negatives to rural living. Both of these issues enforced a sense of difference and isolation. Cody and Welch also found non-urban communities had more traditional, restrictive attitudes regarding gender roles than urban settings. The rural gay men in their study described being
oppressed by the gender roles they had been taught, due in part to the assumption of heterosexuality that is implicit in conservative definitions of roles for men and women.

Participants discussed the difficulty of keeping various aspects of one's being separated when living in small communities. In the following vignette, Ben describes a scene at a support group he had run where one can see the challenge posed by this environment if one is trying to come out in a selective way.

"Hi, I'm Jimmy, I'm a 25 year old single gay man, out to my friends, but not to my family." Next person, "I'm a 40 year old lesbian, I've been out since 1974." And as people went around the room it was all coming out stories. Every single person talked about who they were out to, or when they came out, or both... 16 people in the circle. [Another person arrives who says] "I went into the church office, and I wanted to ask the secretary where your course was meeting Ben, but all of a sudden there was the mother of one of my daughter's school mates, and I didn't know how to ask where Positively Gay was meeting, and so what I finally did was say where is Ben's class meeting and they told me and I came over here." And I thought there is our last coming out story, only it is about coming out 5 minutes ago.

As Ben's recollection indicates, besides weighing up the risks of coming out to family, or in the workplace, LGBTQQA people are constantly making decisions about where and when to come out in community settings. In the previous scenario, the participant in Ben's course had a split second to determine the best course of action upon discovering another parent standing in the church office. Simply asking about a gay related course, in a public setting, can be a significant undertaking. One could in effect be outing oneself in the process. In New Hampshire, where it is illegal for non-heterosexual people to foster or adopt children, publicly outing oneself to another parent may be a very significant decision.

Participants' experiences indicate their recognition that not all community settings are safe places for people to come out. Churches, traditionally a safehaven, may not be...
safe places. Sully said she would not go into a church and yell, “Hey, I’m gay! Everybody accept me and love me.” The concept of church being an unsafe place might strike readers as unusual, but Sully’s remarks reflect a level of distrust with organized religions felt by many within LGBTQQA communities. Yet again, those traditional sources to which people go for support, family, church, community, often fail to hold the same promise for LGBTQQA people.

**Economic Stability, Class and Gender as Factors in Coming Out**

According to participants, there are other contextual factors that influence the level of risk involved for people as they think about or start to come out. Gender, educational background, race, and immigration status, among other factors, impact people’s coming out experience. In part these risks are promoted by federal and state regulations that support compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality, making deviation from those norms costly. According to Mary Bonauto, Civil Rights Project Director with the Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), the General Accounting Office of the federal government began to examine governmental regulations which gave preferential treatment to married couples and stopped counting when they got to 1047. Many participants described basing major life decisions on the discrepancies between the level of support one receives for heterosexual unions compared to non-heterosexual ones. Zeke explained he had lived a heterosexual life in a heterosexual world for many years, in part to gain access to the privileges afforded those who present themselves in this way:

> I think I consciously wanted what I imagined [were] benefits that were only available to heterosexual couples, you know kids, and good relationships with families, and good jobs, and I succeeded in achieving all of those things.
Laura, whose personal coming-out process began at the age of 19 when she acknowledged to herself that she was bisexual, explained how she thought she could maintain the life she envisioned before she came out by choosing to pass, by focusing on making herself attractive to men:

If I'm bisexual I might as well go with a man cause I wanted a family, and I worked at that so hard that it was detrimental in the long run.

Participants indicated that the economic stability afforded by one’s socioeconomic background was apt to influence one’s decision making process because increasing one’s visibility can increase one’s risk of loss of employment, loss of income, and/or separation from one’s family of origin. According to Mary Catherine, “Coming out is a luxury. It’s a luxury that’s more possible for people who are better educated and won’t lose their livelihoods or could afford to be kicked out on the street by their families.” In addition to the love and support of his family, Terrence told me he saw his privileged background, his education and his access to resources, as supports that allowed him to live as an openly gay man. Terrence also shared how he adjusted his sense of group identification as part of his coming out process:

I was raised to be an upper-middle class white heterosexual male.... raised to have my house in Westport, to have my wife [to] take care of the background stuff while I am off earning a lot of money and she’ll take care of the house and the social life. Then when I came out as a gay male, I am saying a lot of that stuff won’t be for me. I won’t be part of that power structure I grew up looking at....Now I see that as a liberating thing.

He was conscious other LGBT people might have more to lose by coming out.

What I gave up when I became myself was a sense of privilege.... But that is not that much to lose. I didn’t lose my family, I didn’t lose my home.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of participant diversity, this study can only raise awareness about the need for us to understand better the role socioeconomic stability and
class play in the coming out process for LGBTQQA. Ensuring that the event was free (although hourly workers with weekend hours would have lost income to attend the event) and on a public transport route did not seem to increase the diversity in the participant pool. The majority of the participants were in, or working towards, professional careers and referred to themselves as middle class, even if their family of origin was working class. Mary Catherine suggested that people who attend events like the conference are those who "have free time and resources to devote to this problem.... We go to these conferences because all of our other needs are met."

To be clear, I do not want to imply, (and I doubt Mary Catherine would either,) that only middle class people are engaged in social change work. However, as readers may have surmised already, the "Create Our Destiny" conference required sustained concentration over a period of time, quick synthesis of a great deal of information, a significant level of oral and written communication skills and comfort working as a part of a group. Comfort levels with these components are likely to be contingent on educational level, and access to education is affected by one's socioeconomic status or that of one's family of origin. Therefore, it is reasonable to report that the outcome of the "Create Our Destiny" conference is oriented towards a middle class vision.

Participants also linked gender to class and socioeconomic stability as a factor in how one experiences coming out. From the vantage point of his training to be in the premier power position (white, heterosexual, Christian, upper middle class male), Terrence thinks

One of the things that really divides white gay men from white lesbians is that the men were raised to be patriarchs, and the women were not raised with the expectation. And so for a woman to come out as a lesbian is not as daring it feels
like as for a man to come out as a gay man, because a gay man has more to lose in the power structure.

The idea that it is easier, or less risky, for women to come out than for men was supported by the composition of the Out lens group, which formed during the conference: "We looked around our group and we were all white, women, educated — quite a few master’s degrees and those who didn’t have master’s degrees were too young to have them" (Xena). These insights about the ways in which some (particularly white) gay men are socialized in a patriarchal system and the potential for greater visibility of lesbians due to lower perceived risk opens up an area for further inquiry, particularly if framed as part of a broader discussion about gender, class and race.

**Coming Out Publicly / for Political Reasons**

If you’re out, I think it’s a decision that you make, and it’s a philosophical, moral, ethical, political decision that you can’t go back on. Maybe you can, but if you’ve made the decision on a philosophical, moral, and ethical basis, it’s pretty difficult to live with yourself if you go back on it....I see it as a decision, to be out and to not succumb to what society is telling you to do. (Xena)

Michael Warner, a social, political, and queer theorist, agrees, calling lesbian and gay identity “Ambiguously given and chosen, in some ways ascribed and in other ways the product of the performative act of coming out - itself a political strategy without precedent or parallel” (1993, xxv)." As a result, I, and others, see coming out, whether to non-gays or to other LGBTQQA people, as an inherently political act (Blasius, 1994).

Several participants described their consciousness of the political implications of their coming out, or as Ben called it: “coming out for social change, as opposed to coming out for personal fulfillment.” Ben captured beautifully the enhanced level of complexity brought about by his political sensibility: “now, suddenly, I have to decide do I wear the
rainbow lapel button in the supermarket. And part of that choice isn’t just do I want to, would that give me pleasure, but does that serve a purpose.” The purpose is that I, as a gay person, am out, because that means the issue of the fact that gay people exist is in the face of everyone who doesn’t know that. That it is in the face of the presumption of heterosexuality, which is the most oppressive thing I think we live with.

Several participants described how they used visibility to illustrate the existence of LGBTQQA people, in large part to educate those who are unaware of our existence. For example, Faye described the sense of personal affirmation and sense of belonging that comes from giving and receiving support by displaying a rainbow flag on her car, a symbol that has become an increasingly widespread sign of pride and visibility.

When you are driving on the highway, when you see someone else with a rainbow sticker on their car and you go up and you wave and they wave back and you smile, and it’s a little symbol, but it is such an amazing feeling, which happened to me the other day as I was driving out of Boston.

For Zachary, the political implications of being out are an integral part of his identity everyday. At the “Create Our Destiny” conference, he shared his political purposes with the other participants:

I laid out the hope that somebody in the group who had never seen themselves as an activist might by the end of the weekend see themselves as an activist....Because I am gay, by definition, I therefore am an activist. Actually I should say because I am out as a gay man, therefore I am an activist. Because I let people know who I am, I am an activist... Early on in my experience of coming out and becoming a leader, that was a really powerful statement for me to hear, and if it worked for me, chances are it is going to work for somebody else....So it is kind of like passing on the torch.

However, while I agree with the assessment that coming out is a political act, it became clear to me, based on discussions that took place during the “Create Our Destiny” conference, that some people had not recognized coming out as a political act prior to the event. Participants appeared to draw a distinction between being out in their day-to-day
lives, out to friends, family, even being out at work, and being out in politically active ways. To many, political activism appeared to denote taking a more active role in community leadership, being constantly involved in reacting to the pervasive presence of homophobia. For example, Sully recalled that Zachary's comments were a pivotal point for her.

It was absolutely transforming because I had always wanted to be a little more political than I was, but not as political as the most political person that I know, and I didn’t know where I fit. And I felt almost guilty because I wasn’t political enough until Zachary said that by being, just by being gay I’m an activist.

During our follow up meeting, Bud recalled the position taken by some participants who did not see themselves as activists as a conscious decision not to get involved.

I was amazed by the people saying I was never willing to be an activist before, what? How could you help but be? I can understand people who are afraid of getting hit in the face with a brick, I mean I am afraid of that too, but how can you help but be an activist?

Despite being able to empathize with Bud’s position, I recognize quickly that it did not reflect the beliefs of the participants who saw themselves as apolitical. For example, for Sully, who has been out in most facets of her life for the past 20 years, the idea of being an activist was not something she rejected; it was simply a new way of conceiving of herself as a gay person.

I had never, never thought of it that way, that by being gay I was, just by being gay I was an activist, a rebel, or whatever you want to call it, and it was incredible for me because that gave me my starting point. I was like wow! I don’t have to feel guilty that I am not doing enough ’cause already by me being out as much as I can be I have already started.

Regardless of whether one accepts the position that one can be out without being political, the point to recognize here is that it is not reasonable to assume that all
LGBTQQA people see themselves as politically involved in larger social change. Even people out enough to attend events such as the “Create Our Destiny” conference, which could easily be described as a political event, did not necessarily see themselves as politically active.

Personal Losses and Gains after Coming Out

One’s identification as LGBTQQA is not always self initiated. Sometimes people are marked as LGBTQQA (regardless of their own identification), e.g., walking down the street and having someone shout freak/faggot/dyke out of a car window. While we might be able to recognize threats of physical harm to those perceived to be LGBTQQA as examples of how normative standards are maintained, recognition of what prompts such threats does not necessarily make them any easier to resist. For example, Terrence pondered what response he might give if he was heckled from a car, “I might just say ‘That’s right honey!’” But after thinking a little more about the situation, he shared some of the factors he would have to consider if he were to show that kind of honesty,

I think right now I can’t afford to get beat up because I don’t have [health] insurance. You know that sort of thing crossed my mind, but if I had insurance, maybe, I might say you know I can afford to get beat up.

Terrence’s remarks here illustrate the complexity of circumstances in which gay men and other LGBTQQA people find themselves. Our ability to respond to situations intended to diminish our integrity requires pragmatic considerations, such as lack of health insurance, when determining whether engagement with an harasser is worth the risks involved.

Participants described how they, through local folklore, determined what kinds of responses to expect if and when they come out. In describing her experience being out, Faye remarked, “I’ve been fairly lucky, I only have had two really horrific encounters.”
Hopefully readers will find it striking that Faye described having two really horrific encounters as fairly lucky! When I asked what I ought to take from that remark, Faye told me, “I’ve heard stories that are much worse,” implying she was aware of the potential for negative consequences she risked, and that comparatively, the reactions she faced were not the worst. Xena discussed how stories are passed around within the LGBTQQA communities as myths and odyssey tales:

The women who had to leave to adopt a child in North Carolina, or Penny Culliton who was a straight ally and lost her job just for teaching books written by queer authors. So there’s that kind of romanticized vision of how horrible the world is for us as far as the legal system, workplace, home and school. And that’s talked about all the time; those stories are passed around in a bardlike way.

Coming out is also an incredibly exhilarating and affirming process. While there are risks to coming out, participants also described the relief that accompanied the process. Gabrielle offered the following example of the personal toll hiding his sexuality and gender identity had exacted on him, and the change coming out effected.

Through high school I’d always ... have intense headaches 24 hours a day. They went on for months without going away. I was on muscle relaxants. I [went to] all kinds of bone therapists to try and align my back, to correct me. They stuck me on [medication] all this stuff to relax my muscles, because my muscles were so tense. But as soon as I was able to be out, everything went away. I was relaxed, and now I’m fine. My headaches have mysteriously disappeared. It’s just all that tension from holding everything inside that I guess was actually degrading my health.

Laura, now clear in her own mind about who she is, recognizes the importance of being upfront and honest with her students for her own sense of integrity because the consequences of continuing her facade were grave: “It can lead to either getting hard, or unaccepting of people, or it can lead in weak moments to feeling really shitty about yourself.” When Laura finally did come out to her students,

It was this really emotional stressful event. I just had this out of body experience where I looked and I saw myself, and I was like do I really like have weird things
growing out of my head? Am I really strange looking? How they were responding to me was like “Oh, my god gay people are so weird!” But, I know inside I’m not weird.

Laura also discovered the ongoing and contingent nature of the coming out process, agreeing with a friend who described the feeling: “When I’m feeling good about myself, I’m out at school. If I’m not feeling that good about myself, I’m in the closet” (Laura).

Having come out at school, Laura expected her students to be “freaked out”; yet she found them to be “supportive and warm.” She articulated her lesson as follows: “If I just open up, there are a lot of people out there who are going to appreciate it.”

As we live our daily lives amidst the tensions and constraints described, it is also possible to lose sight of the level of self awareness that can be nurtured when one decides to become conscious of one’s own decisions. Again, Joe’s sentiments seemed to be apt for several participants:

The things that I have seen, and the sensitivity that I have had to individuals would not have been possible, I do not believe, if I was walking down on the wide path which has been trodden down by so many millions that I could not go wrong. And there would be prodding all along the way. This is what I need to do now, this is when I should be buying a house, have the kids...and it would seem very natural...This is very different, it is a very unique attribute just like other minorities have something very unique to offer and it — I don’t view that anymore as a negative thing, but that is the very thing that has facilitated a greater degree of happiness in my life, and a greater degree of understanding more of what life really is.

I hope readers are gaining an appreciation of the personal relief involved in being able to engage with others in an open and honest way. While some participants had negative coming out experiences, many participants who are out have found their fears were not realized. While some participants discussed not receiving the positive reaction they hoped for when they came out, no one indicated they were sorry about the degree to which they were out. In fact, during the Prouds and Sorries, an exercise carried out in self-selected
lens groups, participants were almost unanimous in their pride at the degree to which they were out, and their sadness at not being out more. None of the participants discussed coming out in a casual way or as a directive for others. But there were several that held a similar position to that articulated by Xena: "The more you come out, the less power people hold over you."

Resonances

Coming out calls normative standards into question, reduces invisibility and allows for the creation of a sense of belonging. By coming out, one also illuminates that there are other ways of expressing sexuality and gender identity, that there are other ways of being. The vast variety and complexity among LGBTQQA people is only beginning to be acknowledged, in part due to an increase in the number of people who choose to be out. However, in the process, many of the messengers pay a very high personal price. For example, when Ellen DeGeneres decided she wanted her TV character to reflect her own lived experience, she was accused of being "too gay." The season before the TV character Ellen came out, there were plenty of veiled references to her sexuality that were apparent to many LGBTQQA people. Yet, because the character was not explicitly gay, the show remained palatable to the general public.

There is a huge amount of variety among and between LGBTQQA people, which due to our invisibility from each other is often not apparent to people within the various LGBTQQA communities. The creation of opportunities to meet and dialogue with a wide variety of LGBTQQA people is one approach to changing this situation and assisting with the creation of a sense of belonging, as Zeke discovered after meeting the variety
(appreciating the relative nature of the term) of people who attended the “Create Our Destiny” conference:

I can be part of this kind of deprived minority, whatever you want to call it, and now it seems like we are less deprived. The community was a good cross section of talent and idiosyncrasies and craziness, so it was, it didn’t feel like it was so deprived, as my fears.

Before I move on to my discussion of what participants told me about the role of labels in their lives, I want readers to be aware of the tension emerging here between the integrity of the individuals and their wish to belong. At the start of the “Create Our Destiny” conference, participants introduced themselves. Anne took this opportunity to come out about her gender identity:

I said now here I am. I’m here, and I can make a difference, and I said I can really. I felt the need to really, really, put in a good plug for the post operative transsexual. That’s why I came out to be myself. That’s why I did that. I at least wanted to get it on paper so people could see it, and I knew if I, I kind of suspected that if I did this that it would be where it is now [I ask - part of the record?] part of the record.

Anne’s need to represent her affinity group in a positive light can be set in contrast to the other side of the spectrum represented by a remark made by Faye that

I only represent one individual, that everyone’s experience is different and that I would want to be judged on the person I am not by my gender, sexuality, class, educational background, just who I am. I think that is all we are. Right now we are talking about the whole uproar about rights and you know why do you want these things, and dadada, I don’t think we are asking for any more. I think we are just asking to be finally considered equal, and I don’t think that is too much to ask for.

While these comments represent positions at opposite ends of a continuum, individual vs. group identification, they are by no means mutually exclusive. By that I mean Anne, Faye and other participants want simultaneously to be seen for who they are as individuals, while recognizing that they are also connected to larger affinity groups.
The notion of a gay lifestyle as a monolithic experience is not only false, but also a dangerous mirage against which LGBTQQA people feel they will be judged. We must also be very conscious of how little protection LGBTQQA people have from the specters that are created when compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality remain unchallenged. Such concerns can lead to the paradoxical situation where we have to reveal ourselves to help counter negative stereotypes about our affinity group; yet in many cases our own sense of our affinity group is extremely lacking.

The connection with others of similar affinity is both a curse and a comfort. People fear that their individuality, and in turn their integrity, will be minimized if they are seen as nothing more than a member of a group. This concern is all the more worrisome to people who have little personal experience with their affinity group because they frequently base their views on their own stereotypes about their affinity group(s). For participants, developing a sense of belonging not only provides insight into which of their personal attributes can be attributed to their various affinities, but also which attributes are unique to them. However, for participants, wanting to belong can also provide challenges about how much to identify with an overall group identity, and in the case of sexuality and gender identity, what group would that be anyway. I address these issues in more detail in chapter six, where I present participants’ experiences with categories and labels.

I use the term universal here to imply that coming out is not limited to the Seacoast region, but is in fact a much broader concept. However, I also wish to acknowledge the emergence of LGBTQQA people who come out in order to publicly acknowledge their sexuality and gender identity in a variety of situations is a major change in the Western European and North American cultural landscape, which has only occurred toward the end of the twentieth century.

Obviously this experience is not unique to LGBTQQA people, e.g. some ethnic and religious minorities are also stigmatized for their differences.

The paradox articulated here is an alteration of a paradox presented in Stein, A. (1993) *Sisters, sexperts and queers: Beyond the lesbian nation*, p. 3. New York, NY: Penguin Group. The term the Alphabet was coined at the “Create Our Destiny” conference due to the list of letters used to describe the participants, LGBTQQA. I use it here to identify the particular paradox under review. Within the paradox, the need for visibility, which has led to an ever increasing list of groups, is explained.

Prior to the planning process for the conference, the categories queer and questioning tended not to be listed.

Despite our short visible history, the Holocaust stands as a stark reminder of what can happen if political figures, or others in power, choose to act on widely held negative beliefs about LGBTQQA people. Just how many gay and lesbian people were killed during the holocaust is not clear, but we know there was a concerted effort by the Nazis to imprison homosexuals. According to Adam (1995), the holocaust “effectively wiped away most of the early gay culture ... through systematic extermination and ideological control” (p. 59).

Hans Christen Anderson wrote the original Ugly Duckling story. The text presented here is my adaptation of the version posted at web site <http://www.kho.edu.tr/english/ugly.duckling.txt>. There was no author listed for the site.

Pope (1995) cited several studies that indicate a developmental pattern takes place when people first realize their sexuality and/or gender identity may set them apart from their peers (Pope, 1992, Pope, 1995). Coming out, is presented as a rite of passage for gay males and lesbians (Pope and Jelly, 1991). Some studies have identified levels or phases that members of marginalized groups must accomplish on their path to a positive self-identity (Cass, 1979; Myers et al., 1991).

I have participated in a speaker’s bureau at the University of New Hampshire for several years. During that time I, like Ben, have heard countless speakers describe knowing they were different at an early age, but not having any language to describe the experience.

Some participants described first finding a group with whom they found commonality that in turn prompted them to come to realize they were gay. So the order here is not the important point, rather the connection between integrity, being true to oneself, and belonging.

There were two highly publicized cases that involved issues of teachers deviating from the normative standard in NH schools the year prior to this study. In Mascenic High School, Penny Culliton, a heterosexual teacher, was suspended and later reinstated without back pay for allowing students to read texts which contained gay supportive themes. The books included Maurice by E. M. Forster and *The Education of Harriet Hatfield* by May Sarton. The school board in Merrimack N.H. passed a resolution that barred teachers and administrators from discussing sexuality at school. The school board members who supported the resolution were voted out of office at the next election.

For people who identify as gay, perhaps rephrasing the question to be transgender might be helpful. Transgender people can perhaps think of another group that might be helpful to ponder or just enjoy the novelty of the moment.

P-Flag is a national organization for parents, friends and families of lesbian and gay people. Bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning people are welcome. Generally P-Flag chapters consist of a majority of allies, but the local Seacoast area chapter is approximately 50% allies and 50% LGBT.

I have struggled with whether to include allies (LGBTQQA or LGBTQQ) in some of my discussion of coming out. I chose to leave allies in because I understand that many allies face daily decision about whether to be out about their relatives and friends, or to confront homophobia and heterosexism when they encounter them. That is not to say that allies, as the term is currently constructed, have the same deep personal concerns about coming out as those faced by many LGBTQQ identified people.

Later in this work I return to the difficulty in keeping one’s worlds separated as an advantage for many more out and visible LGBTQQQ people.

This study did not focus on organized religion and the role it plays in the lives of participants. However, there were several references to unpleasant religious experiences and to the importance of support from the communities of faith. For example, the conference was concluded a half an hour early so members of a local church would have time to attend a congregational meeting. The church in question has played an important role in creating a safe space for LGBTQQQ people, and the planning team wished to ensure the voices of LGBTQQQ people were heard from when the congregation gathered.

Ms. Bonauto made these claims during a presentation at the University of New Hampshire during the Pancake Breakfast, April 1998.

The factors that I highlighted here are clearly influenced by the demographics of the participant pool in my study and ought not be taken to imply that other factors such as race and ethnicity are any less significant than those previously detailed.

It is important to understand that participants discussing their views on coming out as a political tool do so in a local and in a national context. The use of coming out as a political strategy grew out of the civil rights and feminist movements of the late 1960s.

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CHAPTER SIX

LABELS

I think it is important to have labels.... People in general want to have some kind of specific identification. (Howard)

The label doesn’t do anything. It is just a label, but it gives me a group to identify with. It gives me a community.... How else would we find each other? (Faye)

Maybe I am hyper aware of the weight of the labels.... I guess I just see how much follows, from being thought of as, or thinking of yourself as, purely a member of this category or another. (Morgan)

The importance of labels to people in the Seacoast caught my attention during the planning process when we discussed changing the conference model to support participant self-selection into affinity groups. During the conference I paid close attention to the self-selection process, which continued to interest me into the follow-up interviews.

In this chapter I present description and analyses of the complex and sometimes inconsistent ways participants use labels to describe their sexuality and gender identity. My examination of participants’ experiences with labels begins with several short compilations of selected participants’ use of identity labels (e.g., lesbian, gay). Gay, lesbian and bisexual, the most commonly heard sexual orientation signifiers, provided the most familiarity for participants, whereas several of the other terms in the Alphabet were very unfamiliar (transgender, queer, questioning and ally). Participants expressed great interest in better understanding what various terms meant to each other. It was this
interest on the part of participants that prompted me to foreground some individual
accounts of label usage. Readers will recognize quickly that participants do not identify
with labels in a vacuum. In this section, I show how participants’ understanding or
assumptions of external views of those labels heavily influence their label usage.

Many of the participants in this study were painfully aware that people interact
with them in ways which are heavily influenced by the sociopolitical context. Therefore,
an assumption I made as I constructed this chapter was that readers with limited
experience thinking about sexuality and gender duality would read this with a
conventional definition of homosexuality in mind. Such a definition presents
homosexuality as oppositional to heterosexuality and leaves intact the presumption of
gender duality:

A homosexual is anyone who engages in sexual acts with another of his or her sex
(homosexual is a generic term, including both men and women). If he or she has
sex with both men and women, then he or she is bisexual. What could be simpler? (Altman, 1996, p. 117)

I raise this point here for two reasons. First, I want to help readers increase their level of
self awareness by comparing their understanding to a conventional definition of
homosexuality. Second, I want to inform readers that many participants assume that the
way people see them fits this conventional understanding of homosexuality.

Compilation of Participants’ Use of Labels

Participants’ use of labels to communicate messages about themselves proved to
be far more complex and nuanced than the conventional definition of homosexuality
would indicate. Among other things, in the following compilation of narratives I
introduce readers to a “gay” “man” married to a “woman”; two “women” who have not
had any intimate relationships with other “women,” yet they identify as “lesbian” and
“bisexual”; people who have had relationships with “men” and “women” who do not identify as “bisexual,” and a “woman” in a “heterosexual” relationship who identifies as “queer.” None of this is simple!

Initially, when people first start to think about sexuality, there is a tendency for people to equate a gay person and sexual being as synonymous, which is obviously an inaccurate portrayal of LGBTQA people. Nevertheless, being sexual is one area of people’s experience where labels have an important role to play.

**Zachary**

Participants used labels to indicate their sexual or relational preference. For Zachary the term gay man denoted his potential and/or desire to engage in sexual behavior and/or conduct relationships with other gay men.

[I] use the term “gay male” whenever I want to talk about myself as a sexual being...because queer is a much more mellow term. I am not looking for a long term partner who is a lesbian [pause] at this point in my life [laughs].

In this quote Zachary showed his personal comfort with the term queer. However, the term queer offered no assistance to Zachary’s potential dates to help them determine whether he was interested in dating men or women, or if he had a gender or sex preference.

**Bud, Laura and Mikki**

Depending on how they are used, labels may or may not indicate to others whether one is likely to engage in intimate relationships with people of the same or different genders. All three of these participants, Bud, Laura, and Mikki, are now in long term same-sex partnerships, having been in intimate relationships with people of different genders earlier in their lives. Based on the conventional definition offered earlier, all three
of these people could be referred to as bisexual, yet only one of them identifies as such. Therefore, labels used to indicate one’s sexual or relational preference do not necessarily give a complete picture of an individual’s lived experience.

When we met, Bud was living with a male partner, and although he was separated, he remained legally married to his wife. He expressed his difficulty and disagreement with external perceptions of his sexuality. “Too many people have tried to identify me as bisexual because I am married, because I have children. I think I am basically gay.” Laura, a teacher in a New Hampshire high school, was in a committed relationship with a woman when we met. Laura’s description of coming to terms with her sexuality spanned 20 years. Laura recalled the first lesbians she ever knew, remembering how fascinated she was with their lives “and everything was sexualized cause it was so new to me.” Considering her experience, she understands:

People who don’t ever think about being gay because they have never had those feelings themselves...that’s all that they think....I am sure they are like looking at me wondering what I do at night.

Over time, with the “grace of many good friends,” Laura believed she had come to understand who she was and what she was attracted to in life in terms of sex and relationships, and unlike Bud she did identify with the term bisexual.

I know inside this is what I am. I know that I have these attractions for men and these attractions for women. I know I want to sleep with both sexes. I know that, and that’s fine. I guess intellectually I know that, but emotionally there is a lot of catching up to do with it....I’ve had a really long time to figure it out, and going from being completely frozen about it and numb to where I am now.

At the time of our meeting Mikki, who had been involved in heterosexual relationships until her early thirties, was in a long-term relationship with a woman, but she was very hesitant about using labels.
I don’t call myself anything except when I am with other lesbians I call myself a lesbian, “Here we are a bunch of lesbians!” In terms of introducing myself, speaking on a panel in a Women’s Studies class, or something, I refer to myself as being in a relationship with another woman. Or I refer to my relationship as being in a same sex relationship for the past fifteen years. Or that I live an alternative lifestyle. Sometimes that’s where I start. But I don’t say “I’m a lesbian!”

In her comment, Mikki describes the impact different situations had on her label usage. She felt comfortable referring to herself as a lesbian within lesbian circles because of her belief that other lesbians have a broader perspective than the community at large. As a result, she felt other lesbians would not limit their view of her as a result of her use of the term lesbian: “We know that our lives are not just about sex.” However, in other settings she preferred to simply describe her relationship and not affiliate herself with the label lesbian.

Bud described his fairly conventional approach to the use of labels:

We are homosexual, that defines who we are and what we are doing. You might want to come up with another name for it because it’s too long or too many letters, queer is fine with me too…. If you are talking about whether an individual is or has been able to function with either sex, then my contention is at least 85 or 95% of gays and lesbians I know are bisexual, if that is the definition.

We are already starting to see how participants’ interpretations of meanings vary depending on what we are “talking about” as Bud put it. According to Bud, some people might use a term to indicate their ability to function in a sexual way, as opposed to one’s potential for deeper, more intimate physical, emotional and spiritual connections, with people of different genders. Bud himself did not subscribe to the original position about identity describing one’s ability to merely function in a particular context, seeing it as too broad.
Participants also described label choice as a method to communicate a fundamental shift in how they wished to present themselves to the world. Zeke, who had also been in a long-term heterosexual marriage, described himself as a gay man, which to him meant he could now accept and publicly acknowledge his attraction to other men. Zeke told me that before he came out he had avoided even talking about his attractions for other men because he feared that

even talking about [my attractions] would have been behaving in a way, I didn’t talk about them. I suppressed even the conversation about it, so now it feels good even to talk about it, and to behave.

He claimed that even during his marriage he was

a gay man who did not act on his attractions to men, kind of suppressed them, and I feel like I am better off for accepting them now and for acting on them. I feel like I am better for having my behavior consistent with my sort of desires or attractions.

Whether or not she could call herself a lesbian was a very real dilemma for Faye when we met in June 1997. She told me that had our meeting been just one year earlier, she would have referred to herself as bisexual. However, during that past year Faye recognized that she no longer visualized herself as having the potential to be in a long-term relationship with a man. While she was not prepared to say she would never meet a man and fall in love with him, Faye thought it was not very likely. By identifying herself as bisexual, she felt she was “still holding on to that possibility, [the] idea that I can do what my parents and society” expected her to do. For Faye then, the shift in identifier from bisexual to lesbian represented her public recognition that she had let go of the likelihood of staying within the narrow confines presented by compulsory heterosexuality.
During our meeting, Faye became very conscious, almost apologetic, about identifying with the label lesbian despite “never actually sexually being with a woman.” She explained that she did not share her lack of experience with a lot of people because she did not want to risk rejection by lesbians, the group with which she finally felt an affinity. Faye’s definition of what it means to be a lesbian is someone who is “emotionally and physically attracted to women.” She showed sensitivity to the broader group who uses lesbian as a signifier and felt that her use of the term was in keeping with the spirit intended. In part, Faye’s concern grew from knowing that in some settings it is chic to call yourself a lesbian. “In my generation it is kind of hip in some ways.” But she told me she knew she was a lesbian and was not connecting with the label in any frivolous way.

Helen C.

Participants appeared to me to be very conscious about whether their choice of signifier accurately conveyed their meaning to other people, or conversely which label they could use so that those receiving the message would interpret their meaning accurately. When I met with Helen C. she was in the process of “Creating a new space for myself,” having recently left her heterosexual marriage. Helen C. told me she regarded herself as a bisexual individual, but she had “never had the good fortune of expressing that with a woman who is interested in helping me explore that, so I have no intimate sexual experience with women.” At the “Create Our Destiny” conference, she had an opportunity to talk with others about the challenges of choosing a label, such as bisexual, when the term represented their potential as opposed to their actual practical experience.

[We] talked about how scary it is to identify one’s self as a bisexual but never having experienced anything other than a heterosexual relationship, and so that
somehow feels less than a valid label like how can you really know? Well I can’t really know, but since I was six I’ve had this unspoken knowing.

Helen recognized that her identification as bisexual might be called into question on the basis of her lack of experience, a concern she did not take lightly, but she, like Faye, was clear that her claim was not frivolous but deeply personal.

Adding to the complications Helen faced as she started her new life as a single person was the reality that there were other single lesbians in the Seacoast area who perceived her to be a lesbian and welcomed her as such into the lesbian community. This experience led Helen to acknowledge the relational aspect of labels and the role they play in allowing us to communicate with others, which can in turn support our sense of belonging:

If I am coming into a new community or a new circle of friends and it is obvious that all the other single women in the group are assuming that I am also a single and available lesbian, that could be a potential problem for them or for me, or for both....I realize that I was inadvertently perhaps misrepresenting myself, or, and coming across, I was being less than genuine by allowing someone to continue to assume that I was lesbian.

While Helen certainly appreciated the support and the sense of inclusion, she also worried about how she could maintain her own integrity if she continued to allow people to misperceive her as a lesbian. Underlying Helen’s discomfort was her belief that “some lesbians are not interested in being with a woman who is a bisexual, so I need to let them know that up front.” So as she entered the world of potential dates, Helen saw some implicit assumptions being made about her based on people’s determination that she is a lesbian and affixing that term to her. When I asked about the implications of the discrepancy between her own identification as a bisexual and the external perception of her as a lesbian, Helen C. described the level of surveillance she felt within the lesbian

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community:

It leaves me hesitant to walk in downtown Portsmouth holding a man’s hand, because Portsmouth is my safety net. It’s the only place in NH that I have ever felt safe and comfortable.... I am afraid that one of my lesbian friends is going to see me and then they are not going to like me any more.

When Helen and other LGBTQQA people make decisions, like not holding hands in Portsmouth, we invariably sacrifice some of our integrity in favor of maintaining our sense of belonging.

Pat

Taking something as dynamic as sexuality and putting a label on it worried some participants. Pat questioned the appropriateness of naming sexuality in ways that try to put “A discrete box around something that is a continuum.” “There is this whole mythology about coming out within our community, that first you’re bisexual and then you graduate to being either gay or lesbian.” Pat’s experience ran in line with the myth. He initially came out as a bisexual person, but at the time of the conference he was referring to himself as a gay man. This shift occurred in conjunction with his becoming more politically out: “I felt like my evolution kind of moved me towards using the label gay.” At the “Create Our Destiny” conference, Pat gained new insights into his understanding about how various components of the Alphabet interconnect.

Two to three years ago I would say bisexuals, and I would mean them....It was an interesting transformation for me to really feel like I am back, and this is me. This isn’t a them any more... I see me in the gay box. I see me in the bisexual box, and you know it seems like there is a lot of perception that those two boxes are mutually exclusive.

Pat described his sexuality as a continuum and recognized that he used language differently in different contexts, e.g., in a more political setting he uses the term gay to send a particular message, whereas in another setting or context he can still identify as
bisexual. Because Pat did not see these two categories as mutually exclusive, identifying differently in different context did not present a conflict for him.

Ruby

So far in this section, I have shared how participants selected from various socially constructed categories to communicate certain information. Regardless of whether they loved or hated labels, conference attendees who identified as LGBTQQ were very used to negotiating their daily lives conscious of the existence of labels. That was not the case for all of the participants. Ruby, who identified as a woman, had experience being marked in terms of her gender identity, but her position as a heterosexual allowed her sexual orientation to go unmarked, at least in comparison to other participants. Her story raises interesting issues about the appropriate usage of terms by those who, because of their previously unmarked status, were unfamiliar with the level of significance of identity labels for people who identify as LGBTQQA.

As Ruby arrived at the “Create Our Destiny” conference, she was mistaken for “one of those lesbians that wear lipstick” by another participant. This experience, which she found amusing, indicated that she “passed”; yet Ruby, a mother in a long-term heterosexual marriage, described her conference experience as being “very much about feeling like ‘the other.’”

And it was profound throughout the time. Not because I was treated in any way disrespectfully, or in any way made to feel intimidated because of my lack of experience or lack of knowledge. But I did feel out of place.

Ruby attended the conference without a clear sense of the category of ally to which she found she had been assigned.

I did not even know that there was such a category as Ally. That was a term people use. I did not know that. I hadn’t even read it, had not even heard my gay
and lesbian friends use the term. I found myself coming face to face with this word. And what does this word mean?

While she found it somewhat disconcerting, Ruby quickly recognized that some of the participants at the “Create Our Destiny” conference had a clear sense of how much more power allies have in the effort to create social change. Ruby made it clear to me that she did not want to perpetuate this imbalance of power; yet, she also acknowledged that in this historical moment her heterosexual viewpoint was likely to carry more credibility in certain situations, i.e., educational settings, than someone who was identified as LGBTQ.

Interestingly, Ruby was one of only a handful of participants who identified as queer. She used this signifier to indicate her philosophical preference for moving from the convention of using symbols such as ally. My sense is that Ruby found her categorization discomforting, perhaps even antithetical to her own perspective, which supported a queer approach to inverting the current terminology rather than reifying it:

I feel queer. I am not straight. I don’t teach straight. I don’t read straight. I don’t think straight ... I don’t even do straight research. What I mean by that is [that] I engage in symbolic inversion. The work that I do is about symbolic inversion and what do I mean by that? I mean, let’s look at this conventional symbol and look at the significance of it and what is carried with it and so forth, and look at the damage it may be doing.

Ruby was one of only a handful of participants who had this understanding of queer as a means of symbolic inversion. Unlike many of the participants, Ruby also had a familiarity with queer and postmodern theory. Therefore, her theoretical understanding of the power of symbolic inversion was not widely held.

Throughout my study, I grew increasingly aware of how widely participants differed in their use of labels. The “Create Our Destiny” conference also provided
participants with an opportunity to see that even among the relatively small group that attended the conference there was considerable confusion, along with a genuine interest in gaining a better understanding about what various terms meant to other participants. The following quote by Penny is representative of the sentiments of many of the participants:

That's what I kind of wanted, a discussion. I would just like to have people's feedback. What does it mean to you? I can tell you what it means to me to be a lesbian. Maybe we could add this transgender stuff too. I don't know what it is. I am not experienced in it. I have been out for twenty odd years, and I feel like I have had a pretty narrow experience.... Especially bisexual, transgender and queer, those sort of things.... I had a lot of questions about that. I didn't really know what that was! (Penny)

What is the Question?

While I was grappling with how to conceive of the role sexuality and gender identity labels play in the lives of LGBTQQA people, I went for my annual physical where I faced the prerequisite medical paperwork. One section of the medical questionnaire asked me to circle one of the following: homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. What was my doctor's intention here? I wondered. What information did she wish to obtain? “Who are you sleeping with?” “What is the gender of the person(s) with whom you are sexually active?” “Do you need information about contraception/sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s)?” “Are you monogamous?” I also wondered what a circle around one of those categories meant to her and therefore what assumptions might accompany my answer. When I asked about the question, my doctor' response was something like “Oh, don’t tell me there is a problem! We just redid all of our forms.” While, the decision to change the forms had been thoughtful, “we even put homosexual first because that is generally left out,” and acknowledged that all patients are not
heterosexual (clearly a step in the right direction.) However, as my discussions with participants revealed, placing a circle around one of those words would not add provide much pertinent information to my doctor.

This experience encouraged me to ask what questions people intend to answer through the use of certain labels and what assumptions I could uncover if I developed a better understanding of the questions being answered. While I present these underlying questions individually, they ought not be thought of as mutually exclusive because labels used to answer particular questions are both contextual and contingent.

"With Whom are You Sleeping?"

Someone who uses a label(s) simply to describe his/her current sexual circumstances maybe answering the question “with whom are you sleeping?” For example, person X may call himself gay because he is male and has sex with a man. If we interpret labels as answers to this question, then one’s signifier is likely to change, and only give part of the picture. In the equation, person X is acting in a certain way, but no pattern has been established.

In April 1998, JoAnn Loulan, a well known lesbian author and activist, appeared on the TV magazine show 20/20 to discuss the hostility she was experiencing from some people within LGBTQQA communities. Loulan who had a long career as an activist for equality, as an author on lesbian issues, and as a woman who had previously been in lesbian relationships, was currently in a long-term relationship with a man. The precipitating factor for the discussion was Loulan’s use of the term lesbian as a signifier which caused concern for some lesbians on the show, who appeared to see sexuality signifiers as an answer to the question “with whom are you sleeping?” Under those
conditions Loulan could be considered a heterosexual or bisexual. Obviously such an interpretation only tells part of the story and is subject to change if one’s partner changes. This interpretation also raises a question about whether one chooses a label based only on current activity.

During our follow-up discussion, Sophia, taking the perspective that labels denote actual behavioral circumstances, pondered the use of the term bisexual by people who are in long term committed relationships: “At what point do they drop the bisexual and go heterosexual or lesbian or gay?” Someone who sees labels as an answer to another question might find this remark biphobic. Yet, understandably, if one perceives labels to be directly connected to sexual activity, then it follows that people in long-term relationships would use a label that represented their actual situation based on both their gender and the gender of their partner.

“What Role does Gender Play in Whom you find Sexually Attractive?”

When answering this question, “what role does gender play in whom you find sexually attractive?” participants’ label selection described both their actual experiences and their potential for intimate involvement with others. Used to answer this questions, the label does not necessarily imply that sexual activity has taken place or is even likely to occur. Returning to the JoAnn Loulan example, she is in a long-term monogamous relationship with a man, and some people in such relationships might identify as heterosexual. We know the potential exists for Ms. Loulan to consider having a lesbian relationship(s) in the future. Some people in this situation might choose the signifier bisexual to acknowledge that, regardless of their actual experience or current activity, their sexual attractions are not limited by sex. Earlier we saw Faye identifying with the
term lesbian, and Helen C. identifying with the term bisexual, based on the potential for future involvement with women, even though neither of them had actually experienced intimate relationships with women at that time.

People use sexuality and gender identity labels to answer these two questions, often without conscious knowledge of either question. Therefore, it quickly becomes apparent that the potential for confusion is great if person A hearing a label interprets it to infer some form of action, while person B’s is using the term to denote potential.

“What Term Communicates the Message I am Trying to Send?”

As my compilation of participants’ narratives indicate, many chose labels based on their assumptions about how those terms are likely to be interpreted by others. Participants worried and second-guessed themselves about the likelihood of confusion or misunderstanding possible when they tried to articulate their identity to others. Recognizing this, I reviewed my material to explore what participants told me regarding how they use labels to send certain messages.

At times participants used labels to let people know they are single, interested in dating, and to whom they were attracted. Zachary explained that he utilized the term gay man to indicate that he was a man who wanted to date other men with similar inclinations. He believed that using a term like queer might project ambiguity about his attraction to men who want to have sex with other men, a risk he was not prepared to take. My sense was Zachary’s concern was founded on the assumption that some gay men do not want to have sex with men they perceive to be bisexual, and calling oneself queer might send a message that one’s sexual preference is not limited by the gender of one’s partner.
Other participants in committed relationships had difficulty with terminology because they feared the message conveyed by certain terms could be misleading to the receiver. Mikki felt comfortable referring to herself as a lesbian within lesbian circles because of her belief that other lesbians have a broader perspective than the community at large. She thought that other lesbians would not be limited in their view of her based on her use of the term lesbian: “We know that our lives are not just about sex.” While Mikki had been involved with men in the past, and if she were single again she did not preclude the possibility of dating a man, she did not resonate with the term bisexual to describe herself because of how she believed the term could be interpreted:

If I said I’m bisexual, that to me would imply that I had an active life, because that is referring to my sex life I think. And that would imply to me that I have an active sex life outside of my monogamous relationship; so I don’t use that term either. Maybe I read too much into the terms.

While Laura did claim bisexual as a signifier of choice, she also had reservations about using the term due to her assumptions about its meaning to the general public:

I always feel like saying I’m bisexual is like exposing my sex life...I told my [students] I’m living with a woman, and that’s easy. That’s simple. They can comprehend that. But if I go and say I am bisexual it’s like opening up my sex life.

The complications Laura described about her identification with the term bisexual come from inside as well as outside LGBTQQA communities. She went on to say,

I guess I am probably carrying the weight of gay men who have said to me, you just want to be part of the gay crowd, and straight people have said to me you just don’t really want to be gay. Yeah, I guess I am still influenced by those prejudices that people have about it.

Being clear about one’s dating potential, or one’s current relationship status, was far from being the participants’ only concern. For example, when he engaged in
educational programming, Zachary also referred to himself as gay because he perceived that term as “a take off point” which allowed workshop participants access to his message:

My identity is a much grayer event than most people in the world might want it to be....So in an education context when I start off with queer I might lose some of the exact people who need to be there to hear my message, so I start off with gay man....So I think I am using the terms to keep my most inclusive audience with me.

Several other participants chose labels to help communicate a political message. From Pat’s perspective, using gay as a signifier sounded more political than using bisexual, but on a personal level he did not see the terms as mutually exclusive.

Throughout his adult life, Ben had experienced intimate relationships with women and had previously referred to himself as bisexual. However, as he became more politically out, he made a conscious decision:

I thought if I am going to accomplish some degree of social change I need to get out there and call myself a gay man. To help dissolve the institutions or break them down, the ones that don’t allow certain kinds of behavior.

Like Pat, Ben felt that referring to himself as a gay man indicated that he was “further out on the fringe” and would provide him with the ability to become more militant than would be possible if he referred to himself as bisexual. In part, Ben’s perception was influenced by the fact he “didn’t hear about bisexual people going out and protesting. I heard about gay men doing that.” Unlike Faye, however, Ben’s shift in label appeared to be politically motivated and not the result of a fundamental change in his ability to have intimate relationships with people of different genders. Edina’s decision to label as transgender created a political message, but also sent a message about her understanding of gender as a construct and provided her with a place from which to act.
Obviously I identify as transgender and I have for about five years now. It’s a very important category for me. It’s not just a label, it’s really a whole mode of being in the world and my politics have really come out of that identification. (Edina)

While some LGBTQQA people used labels to make a political point (Pat, Ben, Edina), others chose their labels so as to minimize the likelihood of political ramifications. For example, Patrick believed if he ever did come out to his school board as a gay man he would have to retain that identity in their minds over time or he would risk losing his credibility:

I had better stick to that label. I mean if the week after I come out and said I am bisexual and then a day later I say that I am straight because I am allowed to do that in my gay community, yeah they are going to look at me even stranger.

From my perspective, JoAnn Loulan uses the label “lesbian” to send a message that she is still most at home in the company of other lesbians. By referring to herself as a lesbian, Loulan identifies with what she sees as lesbian culture and indicated that she is still committed to the same principles of equality for LGBTQQA people. This leads me to a final question, “who am I?”

“Who am I?”

Labels provide a way for people to communicate who they are, what they believe to be true about themselves. Therefore, labels can be a powerful tool to support integrity. Like many of the “Create Our Destiny” participants, Daphne described herself as “not a labels person.” She told me,

I’m bisexual. If I needed to label my sexual orientation as far as who I have had sex with and who I would partner with. So, I am a woman who has sex with, and partners with, men and women. That would be my own way of labeling who I have sex with basically. As far as affiliation groups and intimacy, I do that with men and women too, although I am more lesbian identified, but I love men too so. The word gay, I don’t really resonate with, but I use it as a community word.
Some participants expressed an interest in pointing out the fluid nature of labels, which, like people, change over time. When asked about which, if any, of the labels resonated with him, Ben replied “I’m a gay man.” To explain what he meant by that, Ben said:

If I move inward to me as opposed to move outward to the society or culture one of the things I’ve discovered is that if I wanted to find utopia perfection, for me companionship, romance, love for me at this stage would mean I am going to be with another man. Right now that is what that means. That may change....If the best way to convey that to you is to use a word like gay, then I will use that today. It may not be the appropriate word 10 minutes from now, or tomorrow, or next month.

Ben was very clear to point out that a label, which was useful today to convey information, might not serve the same purpose tomorrow. For Ben the:

Only meaning that is significant is the living breathing manifestation of the label. Meaning that everyone who is willing to write that label down and put that on their own chest and stand up. They are the definition.

Where do I Belong?

In the previous section “who am I,” Daphne claimed the bisexual label fit more accurately with her own sense of the world. She also described to me her experience of being perceived as a lesbian, particularly by other lesbians, and that she herself felt very “lesbian-identified.” So what did Daphne mean by claiming to be “lesbian identified?” She explained, as did other participants, that the term was not connected with what she is “doing behaviorally.” For Daphne, the term was more of an indictor of belonging. In her case, being lesbian identified acknowledged Daphne’s attraction to feminist culture, which provided her with a place where “I feel like I could be myself....There is a group of women who are lesbians who have certain characteristics who I identify with.” This remark highlights the importance of seeing the connection between the “who am I”
question and the “where do I belong” question,- because as Daphne points out here they inform each other.

This point leads me back to the “Create Our Destiny” conference to examine participants’ insights about what we can learn about labels when our attention is focused on creating an environment (a sense of belonging) where we can be wholly and fully ourselves. Two aspects of the conference provided a focus for my exploration. First, what happened when we reinforced the traditional gender and sexuality categories through the use of the Alphabet. Then secondly, what can we learn from the self-selection lens group process?

Who Decides?

Participants expressed differences of opinion about whether claiming a signifier ought to be seen as a purely individual responsibility or whether those who already identified with particular terms ought to have any gate-keeping role in how the terms are used. As I indicated earlier, JoAnn Loulan says she chooses to identify as a lesbian to describe who she is and where she feels she belongs, i.e., in the lesbian community. Her label choice was in keeping with some participants, who like Sophia, believed that we “Should have the freedom to call yourself whatever it is that you want. That’s my belief, and I think it’s important for people to do whatever they wish with their own sexuality.”

However, there are those who believe that Loulan can no longer call herself a lesbian: “Shit no!!! There is no way she is still a lesbian.” (Xena) In the following explanation of her position, Xena pointed out that while JoAnn Loulan no longer met Xena’s definition of a lesbian, she believed Loulan ought to still receive some of the benefits of having a lesbian past.
There are very few things that we require to be lesbians, and one of them is not being in a monogamous, committed, long-term relationship and having sex with a man...That is so bizarre that she would even consider herself a lesbian at this point. She could consider herself to have a lesbian past. And I ..know that there are lesbians who have slept with men, not a biggy, I don’t care about that, you can still have your stripe ...you don’t have to go before the jury, but when you get involved only with a man, and it’s the same man for a real long time, at some point or an other you’ve gotta turn in your ID card!.....I would still give her the lesbian discount if I worked at Women Craft.”

Still other participants could see merits on both sides of the discussion:

God, I hope we are past the point where being a lesbian is about only who you are sleeping with. I really think it is more than that, but how much more than that I don’t know (laughter). That’s hard. Because what happens if you are a lesbian sleeping with a man and you get partner benefits. (Morgan)

Here Morgan’s response shows a pull she experiences in wanting to support people’s freedom to choose whatever label seemed truest for them. Yet she also acknowledged that certain inequitable realities exist, e.g., some long-term relationships are sanctioned while others are not. Morgan’s position here, one which is not uncommon, asks whether can one identify with a marginalized group if one is not adversely impacted by one’s group membership. Daphne, whose preference was also to support people’s choice of a label, argued for people to exhibit a degree of sensitivity for others for whom the label resonates. Daphne also pointed out potential ramifications of a completely relativist approach to labels when she explained that “it could be abused.” Daphne, who is white, acknowledged:

If I wanted to call myself African American, I think there would be a lot of African American people who would take offense at that....And I don’t think someone can just walk up and say OK I am Jewish now; so I could also understand somebody saying no you can’t just call yourself lesbian if you have never been one, actively.

The participants’ views throughout this chapter support both Morgan and Daphne’s call for thoughtful consideration of the current reality that, as a result of externally
constructed biases, people are treated differently on the basis of often externally imposed categories, regardless of whether we choose to associate with certain terminology or not.

In turn, while Xena and I happen to disagree on whether JoAnn Loulan is a lesbian, as I fully support Loulan's claim that she is engaging in deviant lesbian behavior by falling in love with a man. However, we agree on the premise that one's reasons for claiming a label matters.

As I mentioned earlier, there were participants, including Ben, who believed that one cannot make assumptions about what people mean by their choice of certain affinity labels without having a dialogue with them. However, something interesting happened when I shared with Ben the sentiments of some of the "allies," who indicated how much they had learned by virtue of being in the minority status at the conference. Ben's response was quick and passionate and indicated the difficulty in practicing his own dictate:

Oh yeah, SURE YOU DID...can they come into your home and take your children away? Could they arrest you for having sex with your husband? NO — you don't know what it is like at all.

Despite his strong belief in the need to look at each person's experiences individually, and despite personal relationships with some of the allies at the conference, Ben appeared to lump all allies together, creating an "us" and "them" situation. Ben's reaction surprised even himself and later in our meeting he laughed, questioning:

Where did... that crank, that curmudgeon that lives back there between my ears... come from or what purpose does he serve, and I think that there probably are some pretty healthy purposes, but it was really amusing to hear him.

In response to Ben's query about the purpose of the curmudgeon, I believe s/he prevents social change agents from losing sight of the current inequities, applied on the
basis of categorical fit, such as the limited legal protections available to many LGBTQ people in the workplace. Ben and I agree: people ought not be limited by their categorization; peoples' affinities and affiliations are fluid. Yet we also recognize that at this particular historical moment certain terms in certain situations carry more weight (gay versus bisexual) and certain groups are treated differently based on their categorization (heterosexuals versus people who identify as LGBTQ).

**Participants' Experience with the Alphabet (LGBTQQA)**

[The “Create Our Destiny” conference] was the first time I have ever been involved in something like that where it tried to be inclusive of every label that you can think of. (Sully)

As mentioned in chapter two, at this point in our history, when exclusion and/or discrimination is the expectation of LGBTQQA people, it is not enough to be implicitly inclusive. The planning team for the “Create Our Destiny” conference used a list of sexuality and gender identity categories, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied people, which later became know as the Alphabet, to ensure the event was perceived as open. However, the Alphabet also illustrates another struggle, that of wanting to develop or maintain a sense of belonging while retaining one’s own sense of individuality.

A lot of people had problems with the series of letters and its awkwardness. There were a lot of snickers and giggles as people said the entire LGBTQQA series of letters. There were jokes about us being the Alphabet community and things like that. (Xena)

**The Alphabet as an Acid Test of Inclusively**

The participants’ focus on the Alphabet during our follow-up meetings was prompted by an announcement on the Saturday morning of the conference. My understanding of this person’s position was that s/he saw a direct connection between
verbalization of particular signifiers and the inclusion of all those who identify with the
signifier. I now explore participants' responses to that mandate, as well as their thoughts
about the underlying question of what role language plays in giving the impression of
inclusivity.' Edina, a transgender person, agreed that people ought to have used inclusive
language and not stopped after lesbian and gay:

Wait a minute, it’s your responsibility to remember the rest, and your
responsibility to learn about my issues, your responsibility to have more
sensitivity than to say I can’t remember the rest. Especially since it had been used
throughout the whole conference. (Edina)

Silencing Effect of the Alphabet

Participants described one side effect of their lack of familiarity with the
terminology was that some felt deterred from full participation in the event. The hesitancy
came about because some people felt they were being excluded (when people omitted
their signifier of choice), while others feared that their inability to say the Alphabet might
be considered offensive by other participants. The cumbersome nature of the language
itself created a sense of separateness due to the varying degree of participant familiarity
with the terms. “I guess I experienced a little bit sort of ‘in group, out group’ thing”
(Julie). Julie sensed people who were younger, more actively involved in LGBTQQA
civil rights work, and/or had educational experience, were simply more accustomed to
getting their mouth around that mouthful....To using all these different words and
there were those of us there for whom that is not a customary part of our
conversation.

Several participants expressed real concerns about the impact their lack of
familiarity with terminology might have on those participants who were emotionally
invested in hearing their signifier of choice listed. Rather that risk omitting people,
several participants chose not to use the terminology at all. Sophia described the silencing
effect of her discomfort:

I felt such a sense of hypervigilence in the room that I became nervous to even
start to say [the Alphabet] because I wanted to make sure that it was in the right
order, that I wasn’t offending somebody. (Sophia)

The following remark by Julie captured the sentiments of several participants who wished
to be inclusive of all participants, but who had difficulty with the Alphabet:

I understand the necessity of naming. I understand that it keeps groups from being
invisible. I also think that when there is a lot of focus on language….It shuts
people down….Folks who are sensitive, who want to be approved of, who are
sensitive to inclusion and who also care about other people’s feelings, may be less
likely to speak up. (Julie)

One group who had particular difficulty with the language was people who
identified as or were identified as allies, especially those new to social change work
pertaining to sexuality and gender identity. Mary Catherine empathized with a participant
who was the mother of a youth who had recently come out but was also sensitive to
participants for whom explicit inclusion was important:

It is all so new to her, and she is certainly gutsy, and has a sense of humor, and
just plunges right in. But she was definitely among the people who periodically in
the conference would say, “LG you know all those letters I can’t quite remember”
and I was kind of wincing for the people who had said at the outset. “I wish you
wouldn’t skip over the letters because I am in that.” (Mary Catherine)

Please note, those who felt silenced did not imply that there was any intent to
silence people, a point acknowledged by Edina and others:

I don’t think it was an intentional plot necessarily to hurt me or anything like that.
I think that it was a general lack of comfort with the language that we currently
have. (Edina)

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Uncovering Underlying Assumptions

The planning team conceived of the Alphabet as a device to denote inclusivity. However, in this section I will describe how some participants got distracted by the goal of saying the Alphabet, rather than understanding more fully the interconnections between the various affinities described by the terminology. Wishing to avoid alienating others, some participants felt silenced by the increased attention around language. Now, I wish to revisit the participant’s mandate that everyone use the Alphabet every time. I believe that request was based on certain assumptions:

1. The Alphabet represented an inclusive list.
2. The ability to articulate the terms meant people had an understanding of the issues particular to the various sub-groups.
3. Failure to verbalize the entire list meant you excluded people.

My findings indicate that the following faulty premises supported these assumptions.

(1) The presumption that saying the Alphabet represented an inclusive list that included everyone and honored participants’ affinities was never established. Michael found that somewhat ironic:

The listing was not all inclusive in the first place, maybe everybody in that group didn’t identify with the categories that were identified....I would have liked to have just made sure that everybody identified in some way there so that nobody felt sort of silently left out.

Michael shared how her own sense of inclusion, or exclusion, in the Alphabet depended on how gay was defined:

Do you then say gay men, lesbian women, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allies? If that’s what it meant, then I don’t feel like I fit in there. If it was gay people, lesbians, queer, and questioning, allies, I could fit into the gay people. I consider myself a dyke. I’m comfortable with the label dyke, and gay. I’m not comfortable with the label lesbian.
But Michael also acknowledged that due to the fluidity of the terminology, the idea of having a complete list that could include everyone was impossible.

We could add all the names we want, but we’re still going to be leaving someone out. So we got so hung up on making sure that we got through the whole Alphabet. And joking about it. It’s really transitional. It’s really individualized. It’s evolving. It’s empowering. It’s exciting.

Therefore, there was no consensus among the participants for the idea that the list included everyone or that adding or taking away certain terms leads directly to inclusion or exclusion.

(2) My findings reveal that participants' ability to say the mantra did not imply any level of understanding of the issues facing particular sub-groups. While someone hearing the term “transgender” in the Alphabet might be left with the false impression that people using the term knew at least something about transgender people’s particular concerns and issues, that was simply not the case. In fact, people’s ability to articulate the mantra might ultimately create a sense of exclusion for the very marginalized people it was intended to welcome. For example, during the prouds and sorries, “Gender Benders and Big Queens” expressed pride because “We are here, and we’re alive, despite being at high risk for suicide, and higher risk for hate crimes, and having higher risks of chemical dependency, and HIV transmission” (Edina). Edina told me they selected that particular ‘proud’ because members of the group perceived participants lacked understanding about the elevated risks faced by transgender people. She also shared how discomforting she found the response from other participants: “[They were] not really snickering, but seemed kind of surprised by that. And for me it’s just so basic” (Edina). Edina saw this reaction as evidence that conference participants who were closer to the mainstream

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lacked awareness about the heightened sense of isolation, risk for personal harm, and fear of violence experienced by transgender people who experience life on the margins of gender identity and sexuality. Edina's recognition of the lack of understanding of everyday reality for transgender people also reinforced her sense of separation from the larger group.

(3) Participants gave several reasons for offering resistance to the Alphabet that did not have any connection with wanting to exclude anyone. Penny, a mid life lesbian, believed that part of the difficulty participants had with the Alphabet was caused by their personal resistance to labels, not by any rejection of particular people or groups. "I felt that there were some other issues. People who don’t want to be labeled" (Penny).

Therefore, for some people the requirement to articulate the Alphabet actually conflicted with their sense of integrity. Ruby, an ally who chose "Closeted and Non-Closeted Gay Teacher/Professional," had a similar position. "Eventually it was easy for me to recite those categories," but she went on to point out that her ability to articulate the terms did not eliminate a more fundamental concern:

I resent those categories, and at the same time I recognize the necessity for those categories....What does that mean [using the Alphabet efficiently] — Does that put me in a position of potentially committing acts of false generosity where I am sort of still the more powerful other?

As both Penny and Ruby indicate, due to the nature of language it is inadequate to assume we understand the intent behind someone's use of a particular term without engaging with them in dialogue.

In addition to their own personal opinions about labels, participants also had opinions about the wisdom of equating the omissions of a label or a letter with personal exclusion: "Allowing a letter to stand for you is ridiculous" (Mary Catherine). Mary
Catherine also expressed strong concerns that people ought to be more circumspect than to make a blanket statement like the one made about the need to say the Alphabet:

A statement like that deserves an immediate disclaimer that says we are all on our own journeys and if you want to use a similar word that says it all for you, you will not be judged. Didn’t we say this is a safe space?

Participants’ Perspectives on ‘Queer’. The term queer is included in the Alphabet, and is perceived by some to be an overarching umbrella term inclusive of a variety of people. Queer is at least equivalent to “lesbian, gay and bisexual people” and to the term “gay” (Rhoads, 1993, p. 40). However, the meaning of the term caused considerable confusion among participants. Without wishing to imply these responses are oppositional, I found people’s reactions to queer ranged from fear and loathing to a sense of freedom.

For Laura, the terms gay and queer were synonymous, but she believed queer was more offensive to people:

Older gay people, like the woman I work with really hates it, my mother HATES it. That was the start of our worst fight. When I called myself a queer woman, that was just way over the top for her.

Howard agreed and focused on the negative connotations the term held for him:

I don’t like using queer. I am 43, and queer 20 years ago or 25 years ago was a very hateful word that was used about someone who was homosexual, or perceived to be homosexual, or if you wanted to play jump rope with the girls on the playground at school you were called a queer. I really take [it] personally. I take offense....Now how other people identify as queer and what their definition of queer is really I don’t have a clue except that it is homosexual, and that it might be kind of like an umbrella term to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered.

For Daphne, the use of the term queer opened many possibilities previously shut down by more restrictive terminology:

I can have sex with whoever I want, and be whoever I want, and do whatever I want. I can dress as a man or dress as a woman and whatever and I can call myself queer. It leaves all the whole thing of trying to figure out which box, you know, and I don’t care who calls themselves queer either.
Mary Catherine also saw the term queer as having a positive role to play, allowing a broad range of possibilities by virtue of its lack of definition:

That's why I like the word queer because it is so all encompassing and it acknowledges that the labels spring from the rest of society's misunderstanding of what we are. I mean queer is just a word that other people use to describe anything that they don't understand. I think it is a great word.

While some participants favored using one term to represent inclusion of all LGBTQQA people, others feared the loss of specificity that would accompany such a shift. The way an umbrella term works creates concern for those who identify with the more marginalized subgroups. Umbrella terms can simplify our vocabulary. But we must recognize their ability to increase visibility is limited by audience familiarity. People hearing the term need to recognize the various subgroups under the umbrella to connect the singular term with those particular subsets. For example, people who hear transgender may not recognize it as an umbrella term for numerous “gender outlaws” such as drag kings and queens, pre and post operative transsexuals, and androgynous people (Bornstein, 1994). Anne shared mixed feelings about the usefulness of umbrella terms because “It makes it very difficult within [LGBTQQA] community to find the support and stuff that individual classes of people need.” Pat acknowledged this concern, recalling a discussion he had with a transgender friend.

Queer for her is negative because it's a blanket and see [her] issues are kind of different from mine in that [she] is battling invisibility and so for her having a blanket name that doesn’t specifically recognize who she is is akin to exclusion.

There is potential for an inclusive term to be set in opposition to honoring people’s various selves (through the use of specific terms clearly identify various groups), but the
two positions are not mutually exclusive, i.e., people can see the value in both at different
times depending on the context. As Pat reminded, contextual sensitivity is important:

If you are describing the sense of togetherness, then maybe it’s appropriate to use
the word queer, but if you are talking about civil rights, then maybe it is not
appropriate to use the word queer. Maybe we are talking about things that we
need that are desperately lacking. Maybe it is important to say gay, lesbian,
bisexual, transgender, drag or whatever. So I don’t know that either queer is better
than GLBT.... I think we have to understand really what those things mean and
use them in appropriate contexts.

Ruby, who self identified with the term queer, saw the value of the term in its ability to
be “inclusive, but it doesn’t require that we basically homogenize the population. It’s
being respectful of difference.” As queer theory and queer studies gain momentum,
educators and queer theorists are well advised not lose sight of these differences in
perception about the term queer. While fully defining the term would be antithetical, I
suggest a more concerted effort to develop community-based awareness of the underlying
principles which support the movement towards queer theory.

Insights from the Self-Selection Process

If we think about putting the power into the hands of individual people good
things simply happen. Better than we could have ever designed as an outcome.
(Ben)

One of principles inherent in queer theory about which I believe there would be
little disagreement is its ability to offer “a theoretical sensibility that pivots on
transgression or permanent rebellion” (Seidman, 1996, p. 11). The point in the conference
which came closest to supporting this type of queer sensibility was the lens-group
selection process. The opportunity to self-select into affinity groups is rare, particularly
for LGBTQQA people who tend to be adversely impacted by being named and associated
with sexuality and gender identity categories by others. As detailed in chapter two, the
planning team rejected the predetermined categories required in the Future Search model’s design in favor of self-selected lens groups, thereby providing the participants with more flexibility in how they wanted to present themselves and with whom they wished to associate. While participants offered different rationales for choosing particular lens groups, the process was, for most, an opportunity to “see who I am, and who I am not” (Helen C.).

Having read the list of options on the conference invitation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, youth, HIV, service provider, and ally), Xena was nervous about which aspect of herself she would have to ignore in order to join a group. The change in the model created an opportunity for her to join a group which did not require her to limit herself.

I did not think I would be able to come up with a lens group that I really identified with. I thought that I represent so many different groups, or that I feel like I’m represented in so many groups, that I didn’t know how I was going to come up with just one that I would fit in. I wound up in the group “out” which was the coolest thing.

Ben believed that the lens groups brainstormed at the conference went “far beyond what we could have ever imagined.” For participants, the opportunity to construct a lens/affinity group was an empowering experience. Martha, a member of the planning team, described the prescribed categories the planning team had suggested as “boxes that people would fit in.” I had not recognized until that moment as I sat with Martha the degree to which the self-selection process put life back into people’s signifier(s) of choice. Martha agreed and pointed out that the participants’ lens groups connected their gender identity and sexual orientation with other aspects of their lives:
[In terms of] work, in terms of parenting, in terms of emotional relationships, in terms of their health, what their HIV status is, in terms of spirituality, [and] sobriety.

During our follow-up meetings, I asked participants how the diversity represented by the affinity groups might differ from mainstream perceptions of LGBTQQA people. Several participants discussed the degree of specificity that emerged in the lens group brainstormed list. While Laura described her personal inclination toward one umbrella term, she described seeing all of the lenses listed up on the walls as amazing. It’s wonderful. It says that you probably can’t use one word.... I think that it’s the truest thing that gay people represent every aspect of society. You know of all the minority groups, we cover so many bases. We cover religious and not religious. We cover those interested in change and those who are not interested in change....I just love how big it is. It’s a very big community. (Laura)

For many, the diversity represented a shift from the monolithic presentation of gay culture with which we are familiar, which pleased many participants. Helen B., an ‘Ally’, found herself fascinated that [there were] so many [lenses] - I thought there would be more people who would think the same way about themselves, but they didn’t. Everyone had an almost completely, very individual view.

Similarly, Faye a “Closeted and Non Closeted Gay Teacher/ Professional,” was struck by the diversity. “I think that up until [“Create Our Destiny”], I didn’t realize how many categories there were....I am still learning about the diversity in our community.”

Helen C. also mentioned that misperceptions about the lives of LGBTQQA people were not limited to non-LGBTQQA people. From her perspective the people who chose “Switch hitters” picked the name for their group to send a message to these who lacked trust in bisexual people, due to their perception that bisexual people were more
likely to leave their partners for someone of another gender. Helen C. shared with me that she was surprised that she saw

a lot of other prejudices carried into the room that I expected to be left out side the room and part of our name selection was to address that. We are the “Switch hitters.” You can’t trust us is what the message was.”

Like Helen, other participants shared how gratifying it was to engage in a self-selection process that allowed them to create more complex affinity groups that would be possible with traditional categories. Jasmine, also “Switch Hitter and Our Supporter,” described himself as someone who doesn’t fit in with the dominant view within gay culture, such as

bars, dancing, skinny, muscular, you know, the gay culture that usually is pushed at you through ads and so on and so forth....I like so many things that when I look at this list I think labels are very important because when you don’t see your label you feel left out.

Therefore, Jasmine found the self-selection process supported him in presenting himself in a more accurate way.

Participants found affinity group discussions a pleasant change from their daily experience, where many people serve as the representative or token “gay” expert. As a transgender person, Edina is apt to be seen as a resource person on transgender issues in mixed groups. She found the “Gender Benders and Big Queens” group provided a refreshing opportunity to engage with others that had a similar level of concern and, perhaps more important, a similar understanding around gender identity issues:

My experiences with the self selected groups were fabulous....I felt comfortable speaking more than I did in my required [randomly assigned] group. And I just felt like the dialogue was really substantive. We were getting issues out on the floor, we were emoting. There was a place for me to feel my emotions in those groups that I didn’t feel in the required group.
For Helen C., from “Switch Hitters and our Supporter,” the intensity of feeling she found she developed for her lens group, where she felt a high degree of commonality, was “really powerful.” Having a lens allowed her to connect with people on a level from which she felt she could develop friendships that went beyond frivolous connections and allowed for the creation of much deeper human bonds. Xena, who was very out in her day-to-day experience, found that her experience as part of the “Out” group exposed that she rarely had other opportunities to sit with other out people discussing common experiences. When I asked her what impact this lack of contact had on her, Xena replied:

Now that I think about it, I am totally limiting myself in not having discussions surrounding outness or deliberate discussions about outness with other out people, and being able to compare notes and find out what’s worked for people in their quest to be out.

The self-selection process provided participants with an opportunity to create affinity groups that provided support for areas in people’s lives where they were experiencing anxiety. Patrick, who also chose “Closeted and Non-Closeted Gay Teachers/Professionals,” was surprised that he saw a fit in more categories than he had expected.

It’s funny because I think a year ago I would definitely have said gay men, or coming out, and now I am saying gay teachers because I think that is the source of my greatest anguish. It’s almost like that’s what I need to pay attention to most in my life.

Patrick’s recognition that his energy was focused on an aspect of his life that caused him anxiety is very significant as it provides us with a rational for some of the fluidity and contingency of our affinities. For Marie, the anxiety she was interested in exploring as a “Mid-Life Lesbian” had as much to do with being a woman at mid life — thinking about childbearing and rearing within a biologically imposed time frame — as they did about being a lesbian. As an example, she believed, “If I was straight, I would
say women at mid life, the issue is being mid life, not being a lesbian.” Therefore, while as individuals we have a wide variety of attributes, our attention to various aspects of our being is often focused in disproportionate ways. Patrick’s level of self-awareness shows he is able to acknowledge a shift that has recently taken place for him, whereas Marie, who has been out for a long time, is focused on a combination of her attributes, the connectedness between her sexuality and her gender identity.

Some of the participants were intrigued by how quickly the self-selection process created a shift in language, freeing people up to conceive of themselves in ways not locked into externally imposed categories. Ben noted, “You take 15 years of reinforcing these separate labels and in 2 1/2 days you can blow that out of the water. That’s a miracle; I don’t think there are many other terms for it you know.” Ben did not conceal his enthusiasm for what he saw at the conference as evidence of shifts in how labels are being used, particularly by younger people:

I take a look at this young man and think he is a gay man, and he announces who he is, and he is queer, or he announces who he is, and he calls himself transgender. And what he is doing is, he is muddying all of those. He is saying we all have something in common, and that is more important than what makes us separate.

From Ben’s perspective, younger people are driving the more flexible approach to labels, “that younger sexual minority person for lack of a better term might adopt a whole new label because it helps give him [her] a sense of belonging.”

Resonances

In our sameness we are different, and in our difference we are all the same. (Sully)

I think we have a soul, but the expression of that [soul], it’s infinite how many ways you can express that, and I think we do a lot more harm in our fear of that infinity, than we do in exploring it. (Morgan)
I am different from you, but I am still here, and I am one of us. I am still one of us. I am still one of the in people. I want to be one of the in people. (Pat)

Labels play an important role in helping us find others with whom we can find affiliations. Labels also provide us with language to discuss, and alter, the power inequities experienced by people on the basis of particular aspects of their being. However, as we educate ourselves and others about such oppressions, and as we design and implement social change efforts, we remain cognizant that just because LGBTQQ people know what it feels like to experience rejection because of our violation of societal norms, we are not immune from perpetuating the same rejection on others, using labels as one vehicle to do so. Helen C. made the following observation

People who have experienced or borne the brunt of prejudicial behavior, actions, judgments, etc. are not by definition free of [negative traits] in themselves. (Helen C.)

Return with me for a moment to the 20/20 show where people who described themselves as lesbians were acting as gate-keepers for that signifier. Their concerns appeared to center on issues external to Loulan’s personal situation, focusing on how JoAnn Loulan’s story might be used to discredit legitimate LGBTQQA claims for civil rights, i.e., people might argue, if JoAnn Loulan can go settle down with a man, so can you. Therefore the argument that JoAnn Loulan ought not call herself a lesbian appears to be based less on the integrity with which she made her decision than on certain people’s personal need to present sexual orientation as a fixed construct. In turn, this type of activity reinforces the socially constructed in/out groups and in the process fails to support individuals’ personal agency.

If we want to create an environment where people are free to be wholly and fully themselves, then we must create environments that support such expression. Therefore,
the strategy of perpetuating clear boundaries around signifiers is problematic because instead of exposing the fallacy of compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality in these cases, we see examples of LGBTQQA people closing ranks, metaphorically sticking our finger in the dike, in this case JoAnn Loulan, to stop the leak. When we use labels in flexible ways such as we did by adjusting the self-selection process at the “Create Our Destiny” conference, they can accommodate shifts in people’s lives. Ben and I agree about the paradox that emerged here.

It’s inverting the paradigm. The paradigm says we achieve common ground by prohibiting labels and insisting that we focus on the common ground. As opposed to we celebrate our differentiations. We provoke labels. We promote labels as many as you want. (Ben)

Opportunities such as the “Create Our Destiny” conference and the self-selection process help us to recognize the socially constructed nature of labels in our everyday lives. Our experience at the “Create Our Destiny” conference indicates that when given the opportunity to name themselves, participants quickly saw how to create affinity groups that allowed them to pursue issues of personal interest while simultaneously creating a sense of belonging.

\* Some questions, which guided my thinking during follow-up meetings, are included as Appendix D.

\* Dennis Altman used this conventional definition of homosexuality and bisexuality to point out the inaccuracy of this view of sexuality.

\* Before continuing on readers may wish to revisit their answers to the questions I posed at the outset of this chapter.

\* Women Crafts is a store in Provincetown where lesbians receive a 10% discount.

\* One could argue that by listed the Alphabet throughout the conference workbook the planning team modeled the idea that saying all of the letters in the Alphabet was necessary to indicate support for people who identified with the various subgroupings within. While the planning team recognized the importance of visually acknowledging the diversity amongst participants we had not foreseen the response of participants to the imposition of the Alphabet that occurred during the event.
An umbrella term is a term used to represent a collection of smaller groups e.g. the National Football League (NFL), which represents a collection of individual football teams.

Helen C.’s remark is a response to her sense of a lack of trust. I also see it as connected to the privileging of lesbian and gay experiences at the expense of bisexual and transgender experiences that I discuss in later chapters.
CHAPTER SEVEN

GENDER IDENTITY

In this chapter, I look at participants' reactions to the inclusion of transgender people and the implications those reactions held for participants from both personal and conceptual perspectives, as this aspect of the "Create Our Destiny" conference was not equally fruitful for all parties. To capture some of the differences I found, I present four different personal perspectives: the perspective (1) of those who were unsure about what the connections were between LGB and T people, (2) of those who felt that inclusion was better than exclusion, but who had little depth to their understanding of what the connections are between LGB and T people, (3) of those who made connections through their personal interaction at the "Create Our Destiny" conference and (4) of transgender people themselves. Then I present some of the participants' discussions of their understanding of gender identity as a concept. My choice of layout for this chapter, starting with the personal then moving to the conceptual, is deliberate and mirrors the actual experience of many of the participants. Many participants cited an initial personal interaction as the motivating factor that prompted them to want to grapple with issues such as what are the commonalties between lesbian, gay and bisexually identified people and people who identify under the label transgender.

Before I continue, I want to remind readers that the participants who identified as lesbian, gay and even bisexual had an opportunity to see themselves as the majority for
the weekend. Conversely, allies who attended the conference found themselves in the minority, at least in terms of sexual orientation. In both cases, this experience was unlike participants' day-to-day lives. However, for transgender people and gender benders, the conference experience mirrored more closely their everyday lives where the majority of people with whom they interact do not understand their issues. I highlight this point that the conference provided many participants' with a different experience than their everyday routine because of the number of times the participants mentioned how influential the shift of perspective was in helping them to think about sexuality and gender identity in new ways. This shift in perspective also contributed to LGB participants' ability to draw parallels between their conference experience as a majority learning about a minority and their everyday experiences as a minority trying to interact with majority (heterosexual) perspectives.

Therefore, the "Create Our Destiny" conference provided a rare opportunity to access the complexities that arise for primarily lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people as they consider the implications of welcoming transgender people into areas that had previously been limited by sexual orientation.

We've got our own stuff around [transgender] issues....It's almost like the oppressed within the oppressed. All the minorities within the minorities. And we recognize we want the greater community to understand, well jeez we've got to understand ourselves first. (Michael)

It's the transgendered community that I think is the group of people that raises the most questions... because there seems to be some lack of understanding or connection. I'm going to back up a little and sorta rephrase that. Who do I identify with and why do I feel that we are a community at all? What is our sense of community? (Mikki)

In these remarks, Michael and Mikki raise a very fundamental concern, one which echoes a similar issue raised in the previous chapter: who do we envision as our community and
who decides how wide a net to use? While members of the planning team and other parties determined the event would be inclusive through numerous discussions prior to the conference, for the most part those discussions were not shared with the conference participants in any substantive way. My motivation to write a chapter dedicated to gender identity was prompted by participants’ lack of familiarity with the concept of gender identity, which was troubling to them and to me. After the conference, many participants were confused about gender identity and transgender issues, yet they wondered as Michael does here, “What’s the springboard to understand all the transgender stuff that came up?” My hope is that the following chapter will provide readers with such a springboard.

Clarification of Terms

At this time, I wish to take a moment to briefly discuss the difference between the terms transgender and transsexual. This move on my part allows readers access to some information not available to the conference participants. However, I decided to provide readers with a general sense of how these terms are understood so they could focus on the arguments rather than on determining what the terms mean. Transgender is a term:

used to designate the lives and experiences of a diverse group of people who live outside normative sex/gender relations (i.e., where the biology of one’s body is taken to determine how one will live and interact in the social world). The transgender community is made up of transsexuals (pre-, post-, and non-operative), transvestites, drag queens, passing women, hermaphrodites, stone butches, and gender outlaws who defy regulatory sex/gender taxonomies. (Namaste, K. 1996, p. 208)

Transsexuals are people who believe that their biological sex is incongruent with their gender identity and have decided to alter their bodies through hormones and surgery. The process is physically and psychologically taxing and takes a considerable amount of time
and expense. Pre-operative transsexuals are required by their doctors to live as they plan to after surgery for at least one year prior to their reassignment. Someone who was born biologically male, who gender identifies as a woman, and feels as though her biological body is totally incongruent with her sense of herself as a woman, might decide to go through the sex reassignment process. Once through the reassignment, this person might refer to themselves as a male to female (m-f) transsexual. At this level, we still know nothing about the person's sexual orientation. As it is currently constructed, sexual orientation refers to whom one finds emotion, physical, and/or sexual attraction.

**Personal Perspectives**

Participants' reactions to the inclusion of transgender people and their understandings of the connectedness between gender identity and sexual orientation differed widely. In the following section, I present composites of four different personal perspectives I found among participants: people who were unsure about what the connections were between LGB and T people, people who favor inclusion with little concern for conceptual reasons, people whose understanding about the connections came from personal interaction, and people who identify as transgender. I saw participants grappling with questions about the parameters of community and how much information the more powerful party needs to know about the more marginalized party before a decision about can be made.

(1) Connections: What Connections?

This first group of participants, whose numbers were small, believed that inclusion of transgender people required some clear understanding about what commonalities existed between LGB and T prior to the creation of inclusive events such
as the “Create Our Destiny” conference. Even prior to the conference, there were questions about the connectedness between the issues facing transgender people and issues of interest to LGB people. For example, Bud, who spoke to several people prior to the conference, shared his belief that people were afraid to even raise questions in an effort to better understand what issues connected LGB and T people because they did not want to appear offensive. During follow-up interviews, it became clear to me that part of the reason for the lack of dialogue about connections was due to the format of the conference, but it was also due to participants’ hesitation to appear unsupportive or prejudiced by even raising these questions.

Determining where the responsibility ought to lie for recognizing what commonalities, if any, exist between groups, is one of the areas of contention here. For example, one participant claimed that the responsibility for making a case for inclusion must be borne by the group seeking the inclusion:

If you can’t tell us what [the connection] is, then I don’t understand your role here any more than I understand an American Indian here because they don’t feel like they have their full panoply of civil rights. I mean I can agree with them, they don’t have their full panoply, but it’s a different affinity grouping....The straight world would not even be thinking about [gender reassignment]. They think that there are five people in the world who want to have surgery, and it’s not a question for them and for some reason, gays and lesbians feel that it is incumbent on us to accept and rally round these people. I just don’t get the connection. (Bud)

In addition to placing the onus on the minority group seeking inclusion, Bud equates support for transgender inclusion with sex reassignment surgery. Bud was not alone in making this presumption, one I discuss in greater detail in the conceptual section of this chapter, but as I described in the clarification of terms, transgender and transsexual mean two different things. Nevertheless, there were several participants who felt they were not in a position to wholeheartedly embrace transgender inclusion or to participate fully
without a clearer understanding of the implications involved, and they looked to transgender people to outline the case of them.

(2) Connections: Who Needs Them?

On the other hand, other participants took a very different approach, welcoming interaction with a variety of others despite their lack of any reflective review about what commonalities might exist between LGB and T people. As a result, they welcomed the inclusion of transgender people in a relatively unexamined way. Several people described inclusion as the “right” thing to do, pointing to local and national trends as evidence. Joe discussed how other communities are involved in the same debate:

I even saw it down in Boston yesterday [at the Pride Parade] so everyone had their posters or whatever at their table and there was one, I will never forget it - they had hand lettered in Transgender because they had Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and they - “Oops got to add that in now.” You know? Because that’s the right thing to do right now. It might be different a couple of years from now. But right now that’s the right thing to do. (Joe)

For some, just having an opportunity to prevent the perpetuation of exclusion was reason enough to welcome transgender people. For example, Faye appeared eager to accept the addition of transgender people to the work of LGB activists, but when I asked if she could explain the connection to me, she replied:

Maybe I am just accepting that it fits in because everyone else is telling me it’s supposed to fit in...But who am I to then turn to [a transgender person] and say you don’t fit in our group; we are not going to play with you any more.

So far I have introduced two ends of a spectrum, running from the need for a more developed rationale for coming together with transgender people to welcoming all comers on the premise that inclusion is inherently better than exclusion without a clear sense of connection. In general, while this continuum existed, there also appeared to be common sentiment amongst the LGB participants that they had a limited understanding of gender
identity and its implications for themselves and others. Morgan summed the participants’ sentiment as follows: “I want to do the right thing, but I don’t know what the right thing is, and I’m afraid to ask because I don’t want to sound stupid.”

(3) Connections Fostered by the Personal Interaction at the “Create Our Destiny” Conference

Marie told me that the “Create Our Destiny” conference put her in touch with my own phobia about [gender identity]. Maybe that is too strong a word, but misunderstanding or I don’t know what words to use.... It’s an ignorance and a lack of understanding.

This response was far from unique. The presence of a group of “Gender Benders and Big Queens” and of other people who identified as either transgender or as one of the subgroups under that umbrella prompted discussion on several issues, both at the conference and during the follow-up interviews. Sully described her personal contact with one of the participants who identified as transgender as a key factor in her becoming more open to the issues:

I went up to her afterwards and thanked her for giving me that opportunity to know her and to be open to something in my life that I never had before and have it personal and actually have to really think about it.

As Sophia described her experience with personal contact,

It transcended the label is what it did.... There is a transgender person, she is sitting next to you at the table saying can you pass me the ...sugar or whatever.... It becomes a person issue. (Sophia)

Participants explained that the opportunity to meet and dialogue with a person who identifies with a label unfamiliar to them provided an opportunity to recognize that any given label only represents one aspect of that person, not their whole being. In other words, personal connectedness with people previously seen as “other” allows us to start
to see each other in less one dimensional ways. For at least one participant, Melody, the point at which she connected with another person “because of all the other things that they are” was crucial. In her case, caring about a real, complicated human being prompted her to pay more attention to people’s issues and concerns.

The opportunity to interact in ways that raised gendered consciousness prompted some participants to see connections between the current discussions within LGBTQQA communities and those from other political movements. Julie drew parallels between her lack of familiarity with current LGBTQQA issues, such as transgender inclusion, and experiences some of her friends had during the civil rights movement:

All these new words and initials feel similar to what black people have said to me or African American people have said to me, which is in the 50’s I was colored, in the 60’s I was a Negro, in the 70’s I was Black and now in the 80’s I got to be African American, who knows what the 90’s will bring? Who decided? .... We were talking about sexual orientation for so many years, and all of a sudden the gender identity issues have been included in the conversation which is quite interesting, and it is fine, but it is like nobody told anyone, and now we are expected to be able to keep up with the conversation after we have been going along-doing our best for a long time.

Additionally, participants during our follow-up meetings seemed to find it relatively easy to draw parallels between their current confusion about transgender issues and the level of confusion their coming out prompted in family and friends.

I am glad that [transgender people] were there, that they were included. I really am. It really forced me to look at that issue which I have...thought about, talked about, but never been kind of face-to-face with, as I was at the conference, which may be similar if straight folks come to a conference about gay and lesbian issues....What I ask from folks who are having that struggle, I ask simply for acceptance. You don’t have to understand me, just accept that there are different ways of being in the world, so I would like to get to that place [with transgender people]. (Julie)

Julie’s remarks also indicate how she connected the experience she was having learning about transgender people to how allies might experience learning about LGB issues.
Michael noted the similarity between her questions about gender identity and those asked of her by allies when she came out to them.

Pull this back one generation or one group and think this is what my mother’s asking me, this is what my neighbors or my coworkers or whoever it is. It’s the exact same questions, it’s just to the next group, whoever they are, and it was kind of entertaining in that way. And comforting because it also helped you understand the questions asked of us when we then wanted to ask the questions of the next group that we didn’t understand.

Many participants like Julie and Michael felt they had been doing their best under the circumstances. In fact, as Morgan described it earlier, many participants felt a degree of frustration for any number of reasons including that they knew they were not familiar enough with the specific transgender issues, or if they were transgender that their issues were not better understood.

Some participants who did not identify as transgender found that the opportunity to make a personal connection between the experience of transgender people and their own experience provided a way for them to build a bridge. Jasmine described how one local support group for LGBTQQA people to which he was affiliated discussed and agreed upon the importance of transgender inclusion. According to Jasmine, the group’s rationale was based on their sense of the clear similarities between people’s lived experience as sexual minorities and/or gender outlaws:

Transgender people go through the same discrimination because [being transgender] challenges all of the gender roles that are in our society. It challenges women’s roles, it challenges men’s roles, homosexuality does that, transgenderism does that, queer does that. It challenges the little boxes that we are supposed to stay in as men and women....It also challenges the myth that feminine characteristics are weak and less than and male characteristics as better and superior .... and homosexuality does the same things. It’s anything, a man taking on a woman’s role is probably the worst thing a man can do in a patriarchal society. And that is sleeping with a man or dressing like a woman.
(4) Transgender Perspectives

So far my focus has been on the perspective of LGB people, relatively new to transgender issues, who have a lot to learn from their contact with transgender people. But what about the transgender person’s perspective? For some, there was a degree of frustration.

I heard some people [who had more familiarity with gender identity issues] who are at that stage, that anger stage, like “Catch up, God damn it, where have you been, living under a rock?” (Morgan)

As I pointed out in the introduction, transgender people, whether at the “Create Our Destiny” conference or in their day-to-day lives, are surrounded by people who lack understanding about who they are, which in turn has a profound influence on where they belong. Due to the lack of alternative sources of information about gender identity, transgender people described being left with a dilemma. Do they take responsibility for educating people or do they put up with the current lack of understanding, which in turn can leave them in a situation where they are very susceptible to experiences of self-alienation?

Edina, a transgender person, described some very positive aspects of her experience as a social change agent. The following statement highlights the extent to which Edina sees her role as an educator strengthening her moral agency:

I guess for me I feel like my purpose for being put [on earth] really was to effect change. And looking at that really has given me a lot of hope and inspiration. Because it gives me a reason to get up everyday to keep living. To not end my life because even if [deconstructing the current dualistic gender system] is not something I fulfill in my lifetime, the daily things I see happening are so gratifying. And it sometimes is very personal encounters, for example, just with another person. To see them become enlightened [where] previously [there were] very dark convoluted ideas - is very inspiring to keep doing and pushing for radical change.

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In the following comment, Anne, a m-f transsexual, also highlights the centrality of her gender identity to her overall sense of self:

I think my little worldly quest is just to educate people, [and] I think I brought that out at the conference. I think I just said that I am here so that people here can meet a post operative transsexual....And find out that Anne is a real nice person, you know and I think that is what I am trying to do in society and I can’t do that by hiding. (Anne)

As Edina and Anne point out, transgender people and other marginalized people can take great pride from the role they play as educators. Anyone who has ever seen a glimmer of understanding appear in the eyes of someone attending an educational workshop knows that such moments can help to make lot of negative experiences more bearable.

However, the personal cost paid by transgender people is very high. In chapter five (coming out), I explored how the current sociopolitical context of compulsory heterosexuality places constant pressure on LGBTQQA people. In a similar way, transgender people face the constant pressure that accompanies the deeply embedded assumption that gender is a duality. This assumption is so deep rooted that “gendered self-consciousness has, mercifully, a fleeting nature” (Denise Riley as cited in Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 648). My contention is that while Riley’s statement holds true for those who tend to be in synchronicity with the gender norms demanded by gender duality, for people who identify under the umbrella “transgender,” gendered self-consciousness is ever present. Gabrielle, a gender bender and big queen, talked about the difficulty involved in struggling to gain self awareness (personal) while simultaneously trying to educate others on the realities of violating the normative standard of compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality (political).
I would just bawl the whole night and cry because I am just so burned out and so confused myself that how can I help somebody else when I am still so confused? How can I really make a difference when I still need help myself?

Similarly, Edina also discussed the personal cost of constantly finding herself in situations where she is in a position to educate others:

In terms of burnout, I get frustrated, I get angry, I wonder sometimes if there is any home for me in terms of the political movement. Sometimes I feel like an island of one. You know because I really feel different from everyone sometimes - I feel really isolated.

Edina suggested that one way her frustration could be reduced would be if people got together in their specific affinity groups to engage in work around gender issues prior to entering into a dialogue with transgender people, because sometimes for me the emotional price is just too high - I come away feeling really upset and down. And I don’t want to do that as much any more. (Edina)

Insights from Personal Perspectives

In reviewing the first two sets of personal perspectives I found a “chicken and egg” scenario emerging. By that I mean, there are differences of opinion about which ought to come first before people agreed to support transgender inclusion, an understanding of connection between parties that prompts dialogue (chicken) or dialogue that raises awareness of interpersonal connections (egg). Some participants expressed a need to better understand the connections between transgender and LGB people prior to declaring their support. There were others whose focus was on their actual experience, who indicated that personal interaction with people from diverse backgrounds played a vital role in helping them gain access to their own underlying assumptions. Whereas we also heard from transgender people who acknowledged that there is a sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing their interactions make an impact on others, but there is also a
risk for burnout and exhaustion. Those negative outcomes are all the more likely if people come to a dialogue so locked into their paradigm that they are unable to open their mind to other possibilities.

Gender Identity: Conceptual Perspectives

I guess I am confused with gender anyway, like gender bender was thrown out, and I am like what exactly is gender bender? (Sully)

We are so acculturated to what gender means. If you are a boy, gender means you play baseball; if you are a girl, gender means you play softball, and we are kind of acculturated to it, and I think that gender identity and sexuality unfortunately are paired. I don’t know if they need to be (laughs) because they are different things. My gender identity could be I’m a woman. My sexuality could mean many things....Like what is normative sexuality? (Sophia)

My findings show that people in Seacoast LGBTQQA communities are using competing paradigms with regard to their understanding of gender identity. Most of these participants understand gender identity in the traditional dualistic sense, as fixed biological categories. The following definition of gender by Harold Garfinkel describes what I mean by a dualistic perspective:

There are two and only two genders; gender is invariant; genitals are the essential signs of gender; the male/female dichotomy is natural; being masculine or feminine is natural and not a matter of choice; all individuals can (and must) be classified as masculine or feminine - any deviation from such classification being either a joke or a pathology. (as cited in Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 649)

Melody, an ally, described her understanding of the dualistic nature of gender as follows:

The first thing you do when you meet somebody is [determine whether] they are either male or female — it’s kind of the normal thing. [Then] almost simultaneously straight or gay comes in, but the transgender doesn’t. It just doesn’t!

In the following remark Bud described an interaction he had with someone who was trying to categorize a transgender person in dualistic terms. His description of the discussion shows how difficult it is to transcend one’s dualistic perspective:
[Someone asked] about whether [transgender person] was male wanting to be female, female wanting to be male, male having had surgery to become female, etc.

Bud went on to describe the reaction of the transgender person who frustrated by the attempt to categorize him/her** as either male or female, claimed that being transgender was not about sex at all! Bud told me his reaction was “I’m sorry, you’ve got a problem, you go handle your problem.” This example shows the difficulty for those in the majority position, represented by Bud (there are boys and girls) to even recognize that there is a competing paradigm to the one they understand because they don’t even see their understanding as founded on a construct in the first place.

The following juxtaposition of the discussions I had with Marie, Julie and Edina highlights some of the difficulties inherent in trying to communicate with people whose world view is very different from our own. Expressing her difficulty with “wrapping my head around” some examples of transgender ways of being and identifying, Marie recalled the resentment she felt as a member of a lesbian support group where a transsexual male to female lesbian came for support, thinking to herself:

What do you know about what it’s like to grow up and come out as a lesbian? You are a man who had a sex change.....So now you can identify as a lesbian when I have struggled for all these years with what it means to be attracted to the same sex, to be attracted to women, and now you identify as a lesbian. I mean internally that person to me is still male, is still a man.

She also pointed out that what she referred to as the person’s “sexual identity” had not changed (when he was a man, he was attracted to women). Marie was very aware of the impact her concerns might have on a transgender person, and she acknowledged as a result, “It would have been hard to speak in an honest way in front of transgender folk; it wouldn’t feel safe to do that.” My sense is that part of Marie’s difficulty in wrapping her
head around the issues raised by her contact with transgender people came from the
dualistic model through which she was trying to view her experience. Yet one of the
challenges here is that given the invisible nature of many normative standards, it is
unlikely that someone in Marie’s position would be able to articulate, let alone recognize,
that she might be locked into a particular paradigm.

Given my access to people through the interview process, I took the opportunity
to share Marie’s concerns about “men” attending lesbian support groups with Edina, a
transgender activist, who was very sympathetic. Citing the importance of not
misappropriating each other’s experiences, Edina offered the following reasons why she
chooses not to identify as either a man or a woman:

Because my experience really falls outside of both of those experiences....And in
the same way, I really don’t identify anymore with a sexual label because if
you’re another gender and you don’t have a name how can you identify with those
labels because they are based on man and woman....I can understand where
women and lesbians say that you haven’t grown up with what I have grown up
with, you don’t have the same experiences. But by the same token, you know, that
genetic lesbian woman doesn’t know what it’s like to be transgender. It cuts both
ways — and the question is how do we meet and dialogue constructively around
that stuff?

Some participants and planning team members recognized gender as a social
construct which is seen as static but offers much more potential for a broad range of self-
expression. Seeing gender identity in a broader way as Edina explained it allows people
more options, whether one identifies as a man, a woman, or something else entirely, “a
horse of a different color” (Edina). Understood in this way, gender identity has little or
nothing to do with a person’s physical sex or with their biology (Burke, 1996, p. xviii).
However, not all transgender people want to move away from a dualistic conception of
gender. For example, when I asked Anne, a m-f transsexual, what she saw as the
connection between sexual orientation and gender identity, her answer reflects a dualistic approach to gender:

I have trouble making the connection. I can make sense of the connection with me and with people like me. The connection there would be I was born with male genitals.... but I had the brain of a female and I was confused [about] my identity. I had that corrected so now I am a woman, but I am a lesbian, that makes my connection.

For some participants, particularly lesbian feminists, their hesitancy around embracing transgender inclusion had roots in their concern about the dualistic way in which some m-f transsexuals present themselves, i.e., the ways that some forms of drag take aspects of femininity and exaggerate them in very dramatic ways. Edina agreed that some transgender people, far from bucking with gender, reinforce it. Whether it be transsexuals, drag queens, drag kings, I mean any group under the transgender umbrella can reinforce gender - really. (Edina)

While she did not frame her remarks as such, I believe Julie raised concerns about the extent to which sex-reassignment surgery perpetuates rather than challenges gender duality. Julie, who identified as a “Mid-Life Lesbian,” expressed strong feelings about how her sense of the need for dialogue, particularly “between lesbians and male to female transsexuals” was prompted by her lack of understanding as to why someone might want to go through such a traumatic physical and psychological change. To explain her hesitation about fully supporting sex reassignment surgery, she recalled how she had journeyed alongside a m-f transsexual as s/he went through the entire process. Julie said,

I saw him throughout the full transition through all the hormone treatment and the electrolysis....I genuinely felt that I was respectful of the fact that [the group of transsexual people with whom this individual was affiliated] were struggling that they were making some choices, although at the same time I would think [hushed] that is so drastic. I mean to deal with psychologically what is going on is it really necessary to change yourself physically so drastically....I have qualms about the whole process, the surgery and hormone treatments, I think it is a whole medical
ethical issue too. So I went into the conference having had that experience but not being all that far along in terms of my genuine actually true comfort level.

I felt that Julie was genuinely torn about the experience she had had as part of the support system for someone as they underwent sex reassignment surgery. She worried about the very extreme nature of the procedure, but it was not clear to me what other alternatives she would suggest.

**Implications for LGBTQQA People of Competing Paradigms of Gender Identity**

The material I collected during my follow-up meetings supports the position that people are less likely to be conscious of the socially constructed nature of those aspects of their being that most closely align with normative standards. In turn, people are more conscious of those aspects of their being that causes some resistance or friction. Differences in people’s perceptions of gender identity cause difficulty in communication, particularly given its ubiquitous nature in our culture, which precludes many people from seeing gender as anything but a dualistic construct. If I get the sense based on remarks you make that your world view does not allow for my existence, our likelihood for having a successful dialogue is diminished well before we ever get to the point where we might disagree on the details. That is the case for transgender people in dialogue with others who fail to recognize the possibility of a non-dualistic approach to gender. In fact, a very rigid dualistic view of gender actually precludes the very existence of transgender people.

The participants’ lack of understanding about transgender people’s concerns and the interconnection between sexual orientation and gender identity also emerged during the Mind-Map counts (see Appendix I). The priority was weighted on legal protection in the workplace, home and school (86); reducing the sense of fragmentation and increasing
collaboration (41); and increasing visibility (31). While our struggle with labels and words did appear on the list, it did so with only one dot. Edina and I discussed the outcome of this exercise, focusing on what might be learned from the participants’ emphasis about their priorities:

While some people were talking about partner benefits and retirement packages, and all of these things seemed to me so remote. My sisters on the street who are being murdered who are prostituting themselves to survive. [They] are being ejected from their houses on a daily basis, and are just really [in a] base line struggle to survive. As opposed [to] getting some of the patriarchal goodies. And so the struggle that you bring up is an important one", because you know I certainly am interested in the legal system and in changing things, but it’s not at the top of my list of priorities....—what are the priorities for me versus the middle class white gay man. You know they can be really different things. (Edina)

In the labels chapter, I shared Pat’s sense of the whole mythology about coming out within our community “that first you’re bisexual and then you graduate to being either gay or lesbian.” This attitude is prompted by dualistic thinking which requires that bisexual women (or men) ought to locate themselves in one category or the other (Ault, 1996, p. 315). Amber Ault (as cited in Ault, 1996) positions bisexuality as a potential challenge to the dichotomous presentation of heterosexuality and homosexuality as oppositional concepts. While Ault’s attention is focused on the impact that dualistic gender thinking has for bisexual people, the same concerns are certainly true for transgender people. As Edina pointed out earlier in this chapter, she does not identify as either a man or a woman. Therefore sexual orientation categories that have up to now been defined in terms of dualistic thinking about gender (e.g., lesbians are women who love women) do not offer any way for her, as someone who identifies as transgender, to express her sexuality.
As I became more convinced of the importance of visions of bisexuality and gender identity opening up our understanding of these concepts in ways that align them with our lived experiences, I began to wonder why so many participants seemed resistant to recognizing the connection between gender identity and sexual orientation as a positive move. I was not alone. Daphne found the degree of difficulty people had with transgender as a concept ironic. She imagined many of the “dykes, if I can use that word” at the conference grew up with a sense of being out of sync with the gender norms for girls. “That is what transgender is getting at.”

Participants also recognized that many LGB people spend years struggling to overcome the mistaken notion that their attractions to people of the same sex implies that they want to be of another sex. Such an argument, thinking that because lesbians are attracted to women they want to be men, is an example of dualistic thinking. But the connection here creates a problematic situation for some LGB people who may have resisted the charge that they are transsexuals, and now found themselves being asked to reconfigure their sense of community(ies) to include transgender people. Edina acknowledged that “LGB people are always told that they don’t fit the gender roles and that’s why they were queer.” Therefore, it is understandable that if one group of people (e.g., who identify as LGB) are trying to downplay the degree to which they violate normative gender roles, while another group (e.g., transgender people) proclaim pride in the same violation, there is likelihood for tension.

Another potential basis for people’s resistance to imagining expressions of gender or sexuality different from our own comes from fear of being asked to leave the security we find in believing in gender and sexuality as unambiguous. As I discussed in the
previous chapter, there is a tendency for people to seek out security and stability, which can be reflected in our sense that the categories themselves are static. Many of the participants’ stories shared throughout my work indicate the degree to which LGBTQQA people are enmeshed, often unconsciously, in supporting and maintaining the norms of gender duality required by compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, it ought not be surprising that bisexual and transgender people who call the duality of gender into question described challenges arising not only from the non-LG communities but also from within. Pat offered another example by recalling a discussion with another participant at the “Create Our Destiny” conference about whether someone was “family.” The reply Pat received was “I think they are bisexual.” Pat questioned the underlying premise that “family” did not include people who identify as bisexual and relayed this story to me as an example of how language can be used to demarcate “who’s the in’s and who’s the outs?”

Pat’s example shows the impact of limiting understanding of “community” to lesbian and gay identified people. Lesbian and gay people, who themselves have only recently begun to create safe spaces end up excluding and alienating others. As the transgender movement grows and the numbers increase, it is likely that transgender activists will become more active in work outside the current “gay” rights movement. According to Edina, the promise some see in putting their energy in a more independent direction comes from not having “to go through the identity politics that goes along with identifying with the les/bi/gay movement or the feminist movement — because there’s a lot of tension when we attempt to enter those two communities.”

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Although Edina can sense these shifts taking place, she is not supportive of the underlying premise, which implies that aspects of oppression can be worked on independently. From Edina’s position:

> Oppression, while it’s different for each person, has so many commonalities in regards to power, and I think that many of the issues that les/bi/gay people face and that transgender people face are certainly identical in regards to employment discrimination, legal issues, and a whole spectrum of other issues that we really can work together on. But we really do need to identify as our transgender selves. Yes, transgender people have a sexual orientation, but very often it is the gender identity that is causing us the most distress.... And it’s really not our sexual orientation usually that’s causing it; it’s our non-conformity with traditional gender roles that is causing us discrimination.

**Resonances**

The violence, discrimination, and hatred heaped upon differently gendered people is an enormous wrong. This bigotry will stop only when the rest of “us” are able to accept our own gender conflicts and pinpoint our own prejudices about biological sex and social sex-roles. (Califia, 1997, p. 10)

Transgender people in the Seacoast want to be able to be freely and wholly themselves, where they are welcomed simultaneously as part of the whole and a unique piece, of their local communit(ies). “We want to be in, but we don’t want to be invisible” (Edina). Rather than fearing such exploration,’ and rejecting the transgender people who support this perspective, we ought to embrace the message. Edina and I share a hope that transgender people will be recognized for the degree to which they have opened up space for further exploration.

Adding such a richness, such a deep other level to the dialogue and to the complexity, and far from being scared of that complexity, we need to wholeheartedly embrace it. (Edina)

However, my findings indicate that a hierarchy exists in the Seacoast area within the various LGBTQQA communities, with gay men and lesbians in the more powerful positions, followed by bisexual people and transgender people. My explanation for the
pecking order here is that the closer one's presentation comes to the normative standard, the more power one retains within the various communities. This hierarchy, albeit unconscious, has a profound impact on LGBTQQA people's lives with the burden being carried disproportionately by bisexual and transgender people.

In a previous chapter, I shared how Helen C. was hesitant to walk holding hands with a man for fear of the reaction she might garner. Mary Catherine who identified as a gay male also told me that he was not willing to risk the potential political ramifications he felt would take place if he pursued an attraction to a heterosexual woman. “That’s a societal risk I am not prepared to take because I would be so visible if I did that.” These remarks show the significance of belonging for those who have faced and feared rejection throughout their lives, as participants are not prepared to lose a sense of belonging when they find one. Anne, a m-f transsexual and new woman lesbian, shared how much rejection she was prepared to endure in order to feel a sense of belonging within lesbian communities:

Out of ten times that I get involved with something to do with the lesbian community, I probably get nine times when I get almost ignored, but I get the one time, and it is worth that one time. (Anne)

These stories, particularly those from bisexual and transgender people, described participants' levels of self censorship out of fear of negative reactions from members of the lesbian and gay communities, and were very heartfelt and painful. The intensity of these stories was supported by a general lack of understanding about gender identity. My work clearly shows that if transgender people are to have an opportunity to “be in” then we must do so much more than simply add a “T” to our Alphabet or a book to our curriculum; we must truly mean to alter our way of thinking in order to include those who
push us beyond gender duality. Therefore, in chapter eight I explore how might gender identity be reconceptualized.

Another question that emerged again in this chapter is the extent to which education of the majority is the responsibility of the minority. While I applaud the idea of placing the burden for education on those who need it, suggestions such as Edina’s that non-marginalized people meet in affinity groups to discuss issues prior to engaging with marginalized people are not realistic. To begin with, people’s privileged positions present obstacles to (their/our) ability to engage in fruitful dialogue in the presence of more marginalized people. This same difficulty makes people’s ability to engage in such discussion all the more difficult in the absence of people or other stimuli that can throw light on the areas of our lives which are not visible to (them/us). To support my skepticism, I offer the lack of discussion about race and class at the conference. I am not prepared to accept that the lack of discussion was due to a lack of connection between race, class, gender identity and sexuality. My interpretation is that the lack of discussion in these areas was prompted by the lack of certain perspectives about race, class, etc. at the “Create Our Destiny” conference.

Based on my findings, most people will not have the tools, the capacity, or the inclination to engage in fruitful dialogue within their own affinity groups on issues such as gender identity for which they are totally underprepared without some provocation. The presence and perspectives of marginalized people, in this case transgender people, can have a profound impact in encouraging people to (re)visit their assumptions, particularly those for whom adherence to the normative standard provides an obstructed view.
Lest there be any confusion here, I want to be clear: it is not the responsibility of marginalized people to educate those with more privilege. While it is true that transgender people and others adversely impacted by normative systems have a particular epistemological perspective, the accompanying educational burden is unreasonably heavy. My findings indicate that there is tension between the effectiveness of personal contact as an awareness enhancing tool and the cost of such contact on more marginalized persons. As an educator, I find myself in strong agreement with Edina’s position.

It’s more important really to have knowledge, information, understanding of what these identities are and the implications of identifying as bi/ trans/ queer/ questioning/ allied, than to get the mantra correct.

Therefore, there is clearly a role for educators to determine pedagogical approaches to help move people beyond the mantra towards a more genuine understanding of the implications of self identifying as LGBTQQA. This goal will entail the development of programs, curricula, and experiences that can recreate the impact of personal contact but do so in ways that reduce the personal toll exacted on the most marginalized individuals. I present suggestions in the final chapter where I articulate ways that educators, social change agents, and institutions can alleviate some of the current pressure currently felt by minorities such as LGBTQQA people to educate the majority.

‘Seen as a sexuality which is not limited on the basis of gender identity, bisexuality can provide a bridge between certain presentations of lesbian and gay lived experiences which can be described as perpetuating dualistic gender categories and transgender people who can be seen to be broadening our thinking about gender. It is important to mention, I am in no way implying any essentialist connection here. In fact, some lesbian and gay people are very comfortable with deconstructing gender categories, while I imagine certain transsexual people who have spent years perfecting a very feminized or masculanized persona, in an effort to pass, may not be as comfortable. For a more in-depth look at the complexity and political implications of
* "It is difficult for me to even describe this encounter without applying a gender to the person with whom Bud had the difficulty.

* "The issue was dealing with priorities and how to ensure that transgender issues were seen in the same light as other issues which had significance to a larger group of people. The facilitators did point out that the dot counts we merely to give people a sense of where the energy of the group was in relation to these issues.

* "“Are they family” is a euphemism for “are they gay?”
SECTION THREE

CHAPTER EIGHT

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

What Do We Want - To Belong With Integrity, When Do We Want It - Now

Prompted by theorists who have asked “What do lesbians want?” (Phelan, 1994) or “What do queers want?” (Erni, 1996), my study has led me to the answer that what “Create Our Destiny” conference participants want is to be “fully and wholly themselves,” and to belong with integrity. This conclusion is based on my observation of the centrality of issues such as coming out, the use of identity labels and categories, and concerns about gender identity and its connection to sexuality. However, as my findings indicate, participants regularly sacrifice their integrity to avoid the risk of not belonging.

Throughout this dissertation I have shared the stories of people who chose to withhold aspects of themselves from people by not coming out; in one case choosing not to hold hands with a man in Portsmouth rather than be perceived as bisexual; and in others choosing not to attend events like the “Create Our Destiny” because they feared that transgender people might not be welcome. The risk of losing one’s sense of belonging weighs heavily on people who have had a difficult time finding support. As Faye put it, describing why she kept her lack of sexual experience a secret: “I finally found my place.
In this the third, and final, section of my dissertation, I present theoretical (chapter eight) and practical (chapter nine) implications about how LGBTQQA people in the Seacoast area might enhance our ability to belong with integrity. My presentation of the more practical suggestions in chapter nine after the more theoretical work was very deliberate. My goal was for readers to leave my dissertation as the participants left the “Create Our Destiny” conference, with some concrete suggestions about how one might implement some of the ideas that I have developed.

Throughout this chapter, I outline the need for a reconceptualization of both integrity and belonging. I first offer a reconceptualization of integrity based on my review of the participants’ experiences with the coming out process based on material presented in chapter five. Then, I propose that we reframe our understanding of belonging from an all encompassing type of belonging that implies that our identities can be dominated by any one aspect of our being, to an affiliative type of belonging, which reflects people’s actual experience and/or desire to develop many aspects of their being in an effort to become themselves. To do so, I revisit participants’ discussions about their use of identity labels based on the material from chapter six.

Having reconceptualized the concepts of integrity and belonging, I propose my own understanding of the concept of singularity, taken from Elsbeth Probyn (1996), as one that combines integrity and belonging. My support of moving toward singularity reflects the need for a shift away from a more static understanding of identity to one that reflects the participants’ interest in having affiliative and flexible ways to nurture all
aspects of their being. In addition, my work calls for clearer understandings of the social constructedness of gender identity and the connectedness of gender identity and sexual orientation. In the current sociopolitical context, compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality exemplify the normative standards for sexuality and gender identity. This normative standard implies that there are two sexes (male and female) and that all individuals ought to identify happily with one or the other category. In addition, sexual activity ought to occur between two people, one from each category, preferably limited to committed monogamous/married partnerships.

Reconceptualizing Integrity

Because it is about truth, coming out is an act of goodness, integrity, and a precondition for any gay person wishing to live a moral life. (Vaid, 1995, p. 380)

"Integrity," as defined by Webster's dictionary, is described as "the quality or state of being of sound moral principle." To take this definition further, traditional understandings of integrity require individuals to have some unconditional commitments, some core principles that form a consistent value system from which one's actions are motivated (Davion, 1991). Being out of step with the conventional normative standard for sexuality and/or gender identity automatically represents a violation of core societal principles. Therefore, this definition of integrity does not support the types of day-to-day struggles shared with me by LGBTQQA participants as they struggled to feel freely and wholly themselves in spite of the current sociopolitical context. Therefore, I support the call by Sarah Hoagland (1988) and Victoria Davion (1991), feminist philosophers, who call for a reconceptualization of our understanding of integrity.

Focusing on integrity means acknowledging ourselves, which in no way is equivalent to regarding ourselves as fixed or unchanging. It means proceeding from self-understanding through attending [to] how we are reflected in the
perspectives of other [people]. It means becoming aware of what parts of ourselves we want to change, what parts go on hold for now, what parts center us, and what parts we want to develop at any given point. It means periodically assessing ourselves in terms of our values and in relation to others and their values. (Davion, 1991, p. 184)

Coming out emerged as a central concern for LGBTQQA identified people in the Seacoast area. Some participants described how they first realized that they were “different” from their peers, others described falling in love with someone of the same sex later in their lives, and several discussed the challenge and joy of reevaluating one’s sexuality and/or gender identity at any time in one’s life. Participants differed in their opinions about being out. Coming out, and by default violating normative standards, held negative consequences for some participants, e.g., negative reactions from loved ones and/or losses of other forms of privilege directed toward heterosexual couples such as partner benefits. Some participants described the amount of energy they expended determining, when, where, and with whom they would be safe divulging what they saw as personal information concerning their gender identity and sexual orientation. For others, increased visibility as LGBTQ identified people was a more politically orientated act.

By coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and allies, participants violated the core principles dictated by conventional normative standards for sexuality and gender identity, principles that ought to be upheld under traditional definitions of integrity. Perhaps ironically, participants were very clear that their decisions about coming out were motivated by their interest in supporting their own integrity, in wanting to be “true to (them)selves” (Davion, 1991, p. 183). Therefore, participants’ need to act in ways that support their own integrity places them in conflict with traditional
understandings of integrity. My suggestion here is not to deny the importance of knowing what one's beliefs are and what principles underlie those beliefs. Rather, I wish to argue that our understanding of integrity must allow for the types of changes one goes through over the course of our life, i.e., coming out, and not be bound to the requirement of having a set of unchanging fundamental beliefs. An understanding of integrity that can sustain people who are invested in social change implies the need for a careful commitment to "paying attention to who one is and who one is becoming" (Davion, 1991, p. 185).

By paying more attention to how life's transformations impact our decisions about who we date, how we dress, where we work, with whom we will affiliate and so on, we enhance our capacity to live with integrity. It is important to note that an unconditional commitment to pay attention to life transformations does not commit us to any particular action in any particular situation. For example, while participants saw coming out and being out as important to their sense of integrity, paying attention implies that individual agency is integral to decision making about whether to be out and to whom.

**Reconceptualizing Belonging**

Identity politics has proven to be a powerful tool for marginalized people. Using identity politics groups including, workers, women, African Americans, and Hispanics, and gays and lesbians have begun to address "historic disempowerment and cultural marginalization" (Carlson, 1998, p. 109). However, politically organizing around identity categories in this manner has been problematic as it privileges the hegemonic referent by asking people to organize around aspects of themselves in ways that do not mirror their reality (Whisman, 1996). The creation of oppositional categories (black, white) can create
false dichotomies and can be experienced as restrictive of people's ability to interact as         
their full and whole selves. My work calls for a reconceptualization of belonging that will    
support people's integrity by taking multiple identities into account, reflecting the           
complexities and contradictions in the daily lives of people who identify as LGBTQQA. 

There are good reasons for the success of identity politics. The ambiguity that           
accompanies one's first realizations and initial coming out process can be very            
disconcerting. Identity categories or labels help provide what Sophia, one of the         
participants, referred to as "a grounding place," particularly at such times of change in      
people's lives. 

When you are younger and you are trying to figure out your sexuality and        
somebody says "Oh, you're a woman, and you sleep with women. You like       
women. You are attracted to women. You are a lesbian." And you go, "That's      
what I am. Somebody just told me. That's what I am. I thought I was crazy. I      
thought I was nuts." (Sophia)    

Therefore, for some, claiming a "gay" identity symbolizes an achievement in a long   
process. As participants described their experiences, particularly during their initial    
coming out process, clearly defined labels provided the most stability for people by       
cutting down on the amount of work required to get a point across, or by providing a       
place from which to start dialogue. Understood in this way, creating a sense of belonging   
on the basis of one's claim to a particular or confined identity can also be experienced as    
emancipatory. 

Political organizing is easier to do when we can clearly identify our              
constituencies. As Bud pointed out, 

It is always more difficult to confront a monolithic block than one that is totally     
splintered. The more visible we become, the more we will be courted by rainbow       
alliance or one of the political parties.

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Given that people experience systematic oppression on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, organizing around identity categories has been used as a strategy to correct such inequities. Identity categories have also been instrumental in allowing researchers to gather material to provide support for the claim that all gender identity and sexuality categories are not constructed, or treated, equally. Without the ability to categorize people by particular aspects of their being, e.g. race, ethnicity, etc., we are deprived of a vehicle by which to collect the necessary information to support such claims. For example, making a case that racial discrimination exists in a corporation would be virtually impossible if one could not present material on the racial demographics at different levels of the workforce. Theoretical understandings of belonging must take into account the need to be able to organize politically to change the sociopolitical climate which treats people differently on the basis of their perceived affiliation with a particular group(s).

However, to take this point back to the struggle to belong with integrity, when one aspect of identity such as race or sexuality is consistently given higher significance than the rest of our being, our ability to live with integrity suffers. The conventions of language do create restrictions, i.e., that “language is essentially a differentiating medium” dictates that words separate that “which is named or indicated from that which is not” (Gergen, McNamee and Barrett, in press). Therefore, part of communicating who we are with integrity also involves describing with whom we find belonging or affiliation. During the “Create Our Destiny” conference participants were asked to organize into interest groups. The following groups were created: Allies, Bridge Builders and Service Providers, Gay Men, Gay Parents, Gay Teachers and Closeted and
Uncloseted Professionals, Gender Benders and Big Queens, Lesbians, Lesbians in Mid-Life, Out people and Switch Hitters and our supporters. In constructing these groups, participants indicated their interest in being able to affiliate with others in nontotalizing and non oppositional ways, in some cases inviting people to draw from multiple aspects of their being.

Like many participants, Mary Catherine shared concern about the limiting nature of labels in his day to day life. Yet he also recognized the importance of using language/labels to illuminate compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality, particularly for youth.

"I'm Mary Catherine, I'm gay and I live in Portsmouth," well there are a million other people who answer to that description. [But] I know... it is important for the youth to see somebody say the word gay and not blink.

Mary Catherine's point here is an example of how participants appeared to be able to acknowledge several realities at once. In this quote, Mary Catherine showed his personal interest in moving beyond what to him is a very confining definition. He wished to acknowledge other aspects of his beings, such as birth sign, Myers Briggs type, taste in food, movies, and church affiliation, "All that fun stuff. That is what life is really about."

Yet he simultaneously acknowledged the liberation often felt by youth and other LGBTQQA people when they finally make contact with others who are prepared publicly to self-identify as LGBTQQA. As we look to reconceptualize our understanding of belonging, it is important to recognize the need participants have for both confinement and liberation, highlighting the extent to which Linda Nicholson, a postmodern feminist scholar, was right when pointing out that the "same category [can be] both dangerous and liberating" (1990, p. 16).
To support people’s ability to be fully and wholly themselves, my reconceptualization of belonging recognizes that identity categories only represent one aspect of our being at one point in time. For example, Eva, Mikki’s partner, described her interest in not being “cataclumped,” not wanting her individuality to be lost as a result of a connection to any affinity group.

Just because we are all homosexual doesn’t mean that we are identical to one another....To the extent that there may be some people who think [LGBTQQA people are] a monolithic block, then these kinds of statements [like the Alphabet] may indeed help understanding that we are a pretty diverse group, a motley crew. (Bud)

Participants indicated that they did not want to live in communities where there was an expectation that if one identified as gay one was required to live in a particular part of town, wear particular types of polo shirts and jeans, and to drive a certain make of car. This type of self-imposed confinement, which occurs in many urban centers, reminded some participants of the type of mentality that led so many to seek a sense of belonging outside of their families and childhood social environments:

If you don’t behave in that way, you don’t belong. Well that’s exactly what our families said to us you see. If we weren’t heterosexual, we didn’t belong. Isn’t that funny that the very people who have been adversely affected take the uniform even more seriously. (Ben)

Mary Catherine described such monolithic gay culture as “Affirming when you first come out, but then after a while it is so confining.” I want readers to note the fallacy in reading homophobic descriptions/prescriptions as dangerous and oppressive and homosexuality-affirming ones as good and liberatory. As Mary Catherine, Bud and Ben have indicated, both affirming and oppressive scripts can regulate and limit our “possibility of existence” (Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1990).
I would feel very, very isolated living in the South End. I would feel isolated from the world, and at that same time kind of over exposed, because mm I’d feel very watched, very visible, like “Look what he’s wearing, can you believe he left the house like that!” I would feel as though I could never shed the gay label and be appreciated for who I am. (Mary Catherine)

Here Mary Catherine specifically points to some of the many ways in which LGBTQQA people can perpetuate, perhaps even exaggerate societal norms, which in turn serves to make belonging with integrity more difficult.

Susan Bordo, a feminist theorist concerned about the potential for postmodernism to lead to an abandonment of generalizations, noted that real human beings possess bodies that are not experienced as endlessly mobile and flexible: “Reality itself may be relentlessly plural and heterogeneous, but human understanding and interest cannot be” (emphasis in original, cited in Nicholson, 1990, pg. 9). Here Bordo acknowledges that multiple realities are possible, indicating that while postmodern theorists might agree that individuals’ locations are constantly moving, it is reasonable that people’s perceptions, at least at times, are that they are static. For example, I imagine that most people do not see a conflict between their understanding that they are located on the earth which is constantly spinning and their feeling of stability.

Postmodern and queer positions argue for very broad flexibility in defining terms, if definitions are used at all. However, my findings show that as queer theorists open up gender identity and sexual orientation categories we must remain cognizant of people’s inclination to want to, at least at certain times, limit ambiguity. Presenting a picture of sexuality and gender identity that is totally chaotic is not a true reflection of LGBTQQA people’s lived experience, which not only appears to change and evolve throughout one’s life time, but also reaches plateaus where a person can regain his/her/hir strength. There is

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no contradiction in recognizing the socially constructed nature of identities and also acknowledging the need people have to reduce ambiguity and instability in our day-to-day lives. Calling for broader understanding of the socially constructed nature of identity categories may very well engender the most hostile reaction from lesbian and gay people. Having often spent a considerable amount of time finding a place to belong, many lesbian and gay people may see the call to reconceptualize categories as a threat. Having described the need to reconceptualize both integrity and belonging separately, I now argue for a reconceptualization of belonging with integrity, which I see as striving toward singularity.

Towards Singularity

I used to think people were checking up on me, and they were concerned about what I was doing. Boy was I surprised to learn that other people were more interested in their own [lives] than they were in mine....I finally realized I am just an extra in everybody else's life and they [are] just an extra in my life! I could write people in if they were positive, encouraging and lovely and I wanted to be with them. It was so much fun. And if they were negative and abusive and on a course that I thought was destructive, I could write them out of the next scene. And that for me was a part of the personal responsibility. (Joe)

The bottom line is when you are true to yourself, the quality of life explodes, you know, it goes way up. (Zeke)

So what are the implications of these reconceptualizations of integrity and belonging for people’s ability to become fully and wholly ourselves? Participants like Joe and Zeke told me of the importance to them of identifying specificities and of connecting with people who shared common experiences based on those specificities. Here I am borrowing Elsbeth Probyn’s (1996) use of the term specificity to mean zone of difference, whether the focus is on race, class, sexuality, or gender identity. In addition, participants said they do not want to be cataclumped, that belonging with integrity requires living us
to live our lives in ways that are not dictated by our affiliation with any particular specificity and in ways that prevent our specificities overshadowing each other. This shift away from the type of limiting identification with particular specificities that prompted criticism of identity politics acknowledges that particular specificities tell only part of our individual story.

Belonging with integrity requires movement from specificity to singularity. My use of the term singularity is an adaptation of the work of Elsbeth Probyn (1996). The ongoing individual negotiation between integrity and belonging incorporates the range of one's specificities to create one's singularity. While we are made up of numerous specificities, and while we may have individual specificities in common with others, no one specificity dictates who we are. The term she uses to describe our entire being is “singularity” (1996, p. 9) which “is what emerges after we have enumerated our differences — movement and movements that establish contact across a geography of division” (1996, p. 13). While it sounds paradoxical, participants believe, and I now agree, that having places to turn that nurture people's various specificities supports singularity. The concept of singularity then allows for movement, for increased self-awareness, for on-going change based on social interactions. Based on discussions throughout the duration of the study upon which this article is based, I wish to echo Probyn's interest in conceiving of living difference and specificity in positive terms, as it is through the negotiations between our various specificities that we are propelled towards singularity.
Learning to Pay Attention

The challenge to strive toward singularity requires that one learn to pay attention to who one is becoming, to what parts of ourselves we want to change, to what parts we wish to retain at least for the moment. Based on my experience conducting this research along with my own personal experiences, I propose that learning to pay attention can happen on at least two levels, on an instinctual level, i.e., feeling one is different, and on a more theoretical level when we can articulate our understanding in a more conscious and theoretical way. These two levels do not necessarily occur simultaneously. For example, I have vivid childhood recollections of being mistaken for a boy, particularly in the women’s bathroom. One woman shrieked when she saw me, “This is the ladies’ lav; the men’s is next door.” Various ‘tomboy’ experiences growing up gave me an inkling of life as a gender bender. At an early age, I recognized there were advantages for me by being perceived as a tomboy as opposed to being seen as a more “traditional,” “feminine” girl. In hindsight, I had a very gut level understanding that because I was a tomboy my abilities were taken more seriously than they might had I been a “girl”; my ability to articulate that all girls are not socially constructed in the same way came later. As we strive to periodically assess ourselves in terms of our values and in relation to others and their values we must not overlook those “gut” feelings that we as yet can not fully articulate.

The people who attended the “Create Our Destiny” conference for the most part described themselves as people who want to fit in, to be seen as productive community members, not as political people or trouble makers. My sense is that several other participants would support Anne’s comment that
we are good people....We do take an active interest in the rest of society, ...we are [not a] vigilantly radical group .... We are a normal group of people. We are humans, a normal group of humans.

As Penny described her desire to belong, she indicated that she wanted to “be comfortable in my own skin to live my life with my partner the way that my next door neighbor does.” Thinking about my reaction to participants’ interest in living like their heterosexual neighbors took me back to my first weeks of college in Belfast where I learned that adapting to one’s surroundings and changing them were two very different things.” Early on, I learned how to use the language of symbols to help me “pass,” vii as either Protestant or Catholic, as the circumstances dictated. For example, I learned that when I saw IRA (Irish Republican Army) graffiti on the walls and Smithwicks beer taps in the pubs I was in a Catholic area, whereas, UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) graffiti and Bass beer taps meant I was in a Protestant neighbourhood. Survival instinct motivated me to pay attention, but my efforts did not support my ability to strive towards singularity.

Neither passing nor being tolerated are acceptable solutions to me as they fail to question the privileging of some identity categories over others. Living one’s life in ways that unquestioningly support inequities in power may seem less risky in the short term. In fact, in certain situations, it might well be life saving to choose not to point out one’s disagreement with another person’s understanding about constructs such as gender identity or religion. However, while I acknowledge the attractiveness of wanting to live like our non-LGBTQQA neighbors, to do so at this historical juncture without any further attempt to seek equality is tantamount to passing, and passing in my view is not a reasonable goal for LGBTQQA people striving toward singularity. viii
Reconceptualizing Gender Identity

For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them. (Hahn, 1987, p. 42)

Conducting this project has confirmed my belief that LGBTQQA people will be unable to strive toward singularity unless there is a shift from the current prevalent dualistic understanding of gender identity. Whether one recognizes gender identity as a social construction or not, in a patriarchal culture where compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality are entrenched, as here in North American, culture, sex, sexuality and gender have become understood as congruent phenomena. As Edina noted:

In our society, for a woman to love a woman is stepping outside of her prescribed gender role which says that women are suppose to love men, and get married, and have children. And that’s a radical step outside of patriarchal prescribed gender roles. And so that in itself is a form of trans-gender behavior; it’s transgressing the gender roles. And so it’s interesting for me to look at it from that perspective. Because it shows that transgender is such a rich category in a sense, because it envelopes all of these myriad different types of behavior — sexual behavior, as well as personal appearance, ways of conducting oneself, different goals that you set for yourself.

Daphne agreed, pointing out that from her perspective the connection is not visible to many people. “I think unbeknownst to many people who have chosen to have, you know, same sex relationships or be part of the gay community or whatever, they also have broken out of traditional gender roles and that is all it really is about.” Lee added yet another point that perhaps the most basic connection between sexuality and gender identity is simply that many in the general public see them as connected “There are many people in the world who think that [a straight acting gay man] is no different, no more or less perverted than....somebody who is having reassignment surgery.”
It important to understand that gender identity is only one of a host of fluid categories that make up our selves. Prior to continuing with my reconceptualization of gender identity, I wish to acknowledge the work of Mary Hawkesworth (1997) who has written about confounding gender. Gender identity, like all aspects of our identity, is mediated by other factors such as race, class, and ethnicity. Hawkesworth directs us toward the work of Susan Bordo (1993) who raised issues about the unity of gender as an analytic category. Concerns about a unified approach to gender grew from two sources:

- The developing understanding of the degree to which gender is mediated by race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and to which any sense of unity in terms of gender can privilege a white, heterosexual, middle class" perspective.
- The development of postmodern criticism which questions the natural position or dualistic position by calling into question the sex/gender connection.

The current sociopolitical context dictates a dualistic view of gender identity which many LGBTQQA people violate. Judith Halberstam claims that those “in various stages of gender transition” expose us to the extent to which “lesbians and gay men are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to identifying sexualities” that are not consistent with the traditional heterosexual model (1994, p. 226). The concept of sexual orientation itself is based upon the false assumption of gender duality. When this fallacy goes unrecognized, dualistic views of gender identity serve a regulatory function that fundamentally supports the norm of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990).

Shifting one's thinking from a dualistic and essentialist view of gender identity is not a simple task. Feminist theorists have struggled for some time with the tension of, on the one hand, claiming biology is not destiny, acknowledging the degree to which gender is socially constructed, and on the other hand, wishing to maintain clear borders around who is considered to be a woman. The apparent inconsistency of holding both of these
positions simultaneously has been referred to by Pat Califia, who has written about the politics of transgenderism, as "an ideological double bind" (1997, pg. 229). However, as Califia well knows, this ideological debate takes on very practical implications. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF), where festival organizers went as far as restricting admission to "womyn-born-womyn," offers both a real life example of how hotly contested these theoretical debates can become and provides a practical example of shifting paradigms prior to the achievement of consensus. Depending on one’s perspective, womyn only spaces, like the Michigan festival, provide some womyn respite from their day-to-day experience in male dominated patriarchal environments, provide reinforcement for essentialist and dualistic thinking about gender, or both.

Another implication of shifting one’s understanding of gender identity away from the current dualistic or essentialist model is the need to pull the two concepts, sex and gender, apart. My call for such a move places me in disagreement with the organizers of the MWMF, and in agreement with Kate Bornstein, a transgendered writer and performer who describes gender as about categorization, whether it is "appearance or mannerisms, biology or psychology, hormones, roles, genitals, whatever" (Bornstein, 1998, p. 26). Bornstein describes sex as fucking. "Any way, shape, or form, alone or with another or others" (Bornstein, 1998, p. 26). When one takes this theoretical shift and applies it to an everyday circumstance, one soon sees how difficult this transition will be. For example, one of the socially acceptable ways to communicate with others about sexual interests is to refer to the gender identity of the person to whom we are attracted, i.e. men, women, or both. Clearly, then, the act (sex) in this context becomes linked to the category (gender). Sexual attraction is also linked to the gender we have attributed to another person, e.g.,
“Is that person the right gender for me, sexually and romantically?” (Bornstein, 1998, p. 29). In addition, the act of sex itself obviously involves specific types of activity involving genital play, and as genitals have been gendered in our culture, it follows that sex has been too.

Focusing attention on sexual orientation may in fact draw attention away from “the very political and disciplinary processes which produce the ostensible coherence of gender identity” (Nicholson, 1990, p. 16). In opposition to a dualistic approach, Judith Butler (1993, p. 315) argues that “There is no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy, and sexuality.” I agree. Butler supports the view that gender is performative and can be experienced in ways which are much more broadly conceived than is possible with a dualistic approach. Earlier in this piece I argued the need for a move away from a restrictive form of identity politics toward a recognition of multiple aspects to each individual’s identity, and I wish to reiterate that call in connection with gender identity. Halberstam suggests that breaking our genders and sexualities into identities such as men, lesbians, or bisexuals might be an endless project and that a preferable suggestion would be “to acknowledge that gender is defined by its transitivity, that sexuality manifests itself as multiple sexualities” (1994, p. 226). When we start to see gender in this way, when we can acknowledge the strangeness of all gendered bodies, it becomes possible to recognize that “we are all transsexuals. There are no transsexuals” (1994, p. 226).
The Possibilities and Dangers of Reconceptualizing Everyone as Transgender.

So, is reconceptualizing everyone as transgender the suggestion I have been looking for, one which offers a solution to the ideological double bind, fits with my findings, and provides support for people to move towards singularity? Not many participants offered me assistance in answering this question, but both Mary Catherine and Edina independently recalled a performance by Kate Bornstein that we had all attended at the University of New Hampshire where Bornstein asked the audience to ponder the question “Who are the transgender people really?” Directed by Bornstein, the audience searched for the essential qualities of gender until we were left with little option but to acknowledge that, because we have all violated the very rigid conventional normative standard of masculinized men and feminized women, in some ways, we are all transgender.

Discussing how his view of gender was altered by Bornstein’s performance, Mary Catherine said the performance opened his eyes to the connection between dualistic thinking about gender and homophobia.

I want to say gender is not bipolar, it’s a pyramid. At the top is an impossible ideal that no one meets, and we are all viewed as having fallen short of that. But at the same time we are all scrabbling over each other to get to the top and it is a whole game of who’s the most masculine, who’s the most feminine...anybody who is gay, any man who’s gay [has] automatically fallen short, and there is nothing he can do to get back to the top. (Mary Catherine)

Mary Catherine proceeded to describe the “Diet Coke man” as an attempt at creating the perfectly gendered being against whom all others will be judged. As we all fall short of gender perfection, we are by default transgender.

We are all transgender. I can’t believe that there are any perfectly gendered people out there. (Mary Catherine)
However, shifting our thinking in this way, from a dualistic perspective to one which acknowledges that we are all transgender by virtue of the socially constructed nature of the category, left Edina, a transgender activist, and me with some cause for concern.

That is a double edged sword for me — everyone is transgender. Because it’s exciting because it helps people to see the transgendered experience. But it can also be scary for me, because some people may be going — oh, I’m transgender, but they really don’t know the realities of everyday living as a gender bender. And so I get worried when transgender almost becomes chic and people want to appropriate the label but they don’t really understand the horrific pain and the hardships that people out there are going through. It’s not just a chic thing — you know the way lesbian chic was a few years ago. That repulsed me — I was just knocked down with that whole thing, because it sugar coats so many of the substantive issues that underlie the whole thing. (Edina)

Edina’s very valid concerns highlight the importance of taking people’s lived experience into account as we engage in the construction of theory. There is a theoretical claim to be made that because we all fall short of the traditional definition of gender, we are all transgender by default. However, there is also a need for people to engage in serious reflection about the degree to which gendered experiences vary dramatically. As postmodern feminist theorists continue to illuminate the socially constructed nature of concepts like gender identity, which are experienced in very personal of ways, we must also be able to observe the current socioeconomic realities that clearly privilege some gendered presentations over others.

Towards Singularity — Role of Educators and Social Change Agents

I want to connect with people on that deeper level ... I have wasted so much time and bullshit around creating this persona that fits in, and my experience is that it is easier for me to find people [with] whom I can connect on that level who have undergone similar sorts of stripping away of bullshit and personas, and alternate/alternative sexual populations [who] have already done their own work around that. That is a sweeping statement but you are already in a similar place. (Helen C.)
The current sociopolitical context privileges those whose experiences most closely align with the conventional normative standard. Many LGBTQQA people have a head start on refusing to act on unexamined principles regarding our sexuality and gender identity. The coming out process helps develop levels of self-awareness and reflexivity required to strive toward singularity. As a result, I believe that one’s ability to pay attention to who one is becoming, and in turn one’s ability to strive towards singularity, is more difficult the closer a person is to the normative standard. However, as my findings indicate, the allure of maintaining normative standards is very hard to resist, and despite having the desire to move towards singularity, participants described their difficulty with paying attention on an ongoing basis.

There was a widespread lack of understanding or exposure amongst participants to the lived experiences of the more marginalized people in attendance at the “Create Our Destiny” conference, especially those who identified as bisexual and/ or transgender.

Because we’re all the same and as long as we keep doing this [being so specific about labels but explicitly adding bisexual and transgender] we will not be the same. We will be more and more fraction groups getting smaller and smaller and how are we ever going to work together? (Joe)

Participants’ stories indicated to me that even personal experience with alienation and isolation and a strong interest in the prevention of the further marginalization of others provide no guarantee that people will become more self-aware of their own privilege. It is possible to understand the realities of people who come from perspectives different than one’s own. However, the development of such understanding is difficult, and takes time, effort, and communication. To achieve this goal we must all be prepared to face our own buried assumptions. The lack of opportunities available for genuine
dialogue on issues, such as how to create healthy communities for LGBTQQA people, is clearly problematic.

Our ability to successfully strive towards singularity depends on our ability to pay attention using increased self-awareness and reflexivity and on our ability to act on examined principles. Therefore, it is vital that our expanding theoretical understanding of the socially constructed nature of categories of identity be disseminated widely so as to have a direct impact on people's everyday lives. Educators, social change agents, and queer theorists can facilitate people's movement toward singularity by highlighting and raising awareness of the socially constructed nature of identity categories and conventional normative standards. Increasing the number of opportunities for interaction and dialogue between people who have different experiences with the conventional normative standards is also important.

In addition, there is a need for a more widespread recognition of the implications of placing the burden for education about aspects of identity, such as race, class, or gender identity disproportionately on those who experience marginalization based on their being identified with a particular category. Again I see a role for any number of interested parties, such as educators, social change agents, and queer theorists, to take some responsibility for creating the conditions necessary for people to start to pay attention to who they are becoming, simultaneously lifting the burden off more marginalized people. One way educators and social change agents could try to reduce the current inequities is to create opportunities for dialogue that allow reciprocity between people holding a variety of perspectives, some of whom will have greater difficulty in
overcoming the invisibility of privilege surrounding them. To that end, in chapter nine I present some suggestions for workshops based on material collected for this study.

Educators and social change agents ought to pay attention to teach ALL youngsters to strive toward singularity. All too often, I fear, diversity training is something that is mandated upon people in education or employment settings. In order to support people’s ability to strive towards singularity, diversity education ought to encourage people to grapple with their own unexamined codes and principles. When such programs fail to initiate opportunities for self-awareness or reflexivity and support people’s ability to strive toward singularity, not only has an opportunity been lost, but the actual purpose may have been defeated.

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1 From grant application sent to the National Lesbian & Gay Community Funding Partnership asking for the funds needed to plan and implement the “Create Our Destiny” Conference.

2 For example, if I were to be propositioned by a man, telling him “I am a lesbian” would (generally) communicate to him that I was not interested without the need for a protracted discussion.

3 Eva coined the phrase cataclumped, a combination of categorized and lumped,

4 When choosing a pseudonym participants did not limit themselves by traditional gender norms.

5 Elsbeth Probyn acknowledges the influence of several theorists including Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Grosz and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

6 My rationale for turning briefly to my personal history is to remind readers that gender and sexuality are only two of many personal attributes that make up our identities, and depending on the sociopolitical context, certain attributes cause us more anxiety than others.

7 Passing: The ability to present “socially acceptable heterosexuality while maintaining the secrecy of their inner homoerotic life” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 184.)

8 That is not to imply that I see any of the “Create Our Destiny” participants passing. By virtue of their involvement in the “Create Our Destiny” and subsequent action teams, they are actively involved in social change efforts.

9 My approach to reconceptualization of gender identity based on my empirically grounded work on integrity and belonging grounding is in keeping with Linda Alcoff’s (1988) and Barbara Houston’s (1996) criterion that adequate theory of gender identity ought to take individual agency into account and be connected to a politics of identity.
However, I should note that the majority of participants were operating out of an understanding of gender as binary and were very unclear about the connection between gender identity and sexual orientation.

"I wish to acknowledge the work of women of color and other white lesbians for raising the issue."

"Mary Hawkesworth (1997, p. 650) provides an overview of works in the field.

"Pat Califia (1997, p. 227-9) describes in greater detail some of the history behind the MWMF where in 1991, Nancy Jean Burkholder, an electrical engineer from New Hampshire, was ejected from the festival for acknowledging she was a postoperative transsexual. The festival had a policy of admitting only "womyn-born-womyn."

"Some transgender activists have been prompted to describe womyn only spaces as examples of "virulent transphobia that has inhabited lesbian culture" (Nangeroni, 1998, p. 49).

"The Diet Coke man is a character in an advertising campaign. In the ad, a group of (presumably) heterosexual women rush to admire the physique of a (presumably) heterosexual man. The man is seen taking off his shirt and then drinking a Diet Coke."
CHAPTER NINE

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Research is not undertaken simply to advance knowledge, as if knowledge is an abstract concept, but, rather researchers engage in research to change the world. (Tierney and Rhoads, as cited in Rhoads, 1993, p. 96)

In my introduction to this dissertation, I claimed that my use of a grounded theory approach allowed me to join those bridging the gap between community based social change work, particularly with marginalized people and groups, and those engaged in theoretical work being conducted within the academy. In the previous chapter, I presented theoretical suggestions that emerged from my study. My purpose in this, the final chapter of my dissertation, is to give some examples of how the theory outlined in chapter eight is "useful." I want to remind readers that I do not see theory and practices as oppositional, far from it. Our day-to-day actions are based on theories whether or not we are conscious of them. Therefore, part of my focus in this chapter is on the theoretical underpinnings of the practical examples offered herein.

Following Derrida's advice that "we must begin wherever we are" (as cited in McCoy, 1997) the examples I present in this chapter have either been developed in the Seacoast area, e.g., the "Create Our Destiny" conference, the Safe Zones program, in school (gay/straight alliances) and community based educational and support groups (Seacoast Outright), social activities (Movie Nights) and annual recognition ceremonies (the Pancake Breakfast), or grow out of material collected for this research project, e.g.,
vignettes.’ My goal in this chapter is to articulate how these examples nourish people’s specificity in ways that in turn support singularity by facilitating people’s self-awareness, reflexivity and ability to pay attention to who they are becoming.

Readers ought to be aware that certain parts of this work might resonate with you more or less depending on your positioning, e.g., someone who has never before seriously thought about their sexuality or gender identity will likely make connections with different parts of the work than someone who has been out for thirty years. Nonetheless, I believe there are lessons in here for anyone interested developing strategies to make our personal journeys, and our social change efforts, more supportive of our ability to strive toward singularity. My presentation begins by revisiting the “Create Our Destiny” conference. My purpose here is to offer suggestions about which decisions supported people’s singularity and how we might have made some decisions differently if we had had the support of singularity in mind. This is not a critique of the event itself. I refer readers interested in more specific suggestions about planning a community development conference to Appendix R.

The “Create Our Destiny” Conference

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (Frost, 1992, p. 163)

This quote from New Hampshire poet Robert Frost reminds us that the path we take on our journey through life matters. In hindsight, it appears so straightforward: in order to create situations where people can strive toward singularity, the programs, curricula, and activities, and their components parts must also support that goal. The two
most significant decisions made during the planning process for the “Create Our Destiny” conference were

1) to ensure the conference was inclusive of LGBTQQA people
2) to alter the Future Search model to allow for self selection into affiliation groups.

The “Create Our Destiny” conference supported people’s singularity in several ways. Most notably, first, because it was inclusive, the “Create Our Destiny” conference created an opportunity for people to gain self-awareness through personal interactions with people who self-defined differently than they did, and second because the self selection process did not limit how people wished to present themselves. In addition, aspects of this research project, my follow-up discussion with participants, my requests for feedback on drafts of my dissertation, and my public presentation on the material had added additional opportunities for participant reflection and self-awareness.

In hindsight, I can recognize the theoretical underpinnings of the planning team’s decisions to encourage attendance by people who identified with a broad range of identity categories while simultaneously altering the conference model to allow for fluidity in self-identification. However, at the time we made those decisions we had little more than “gut feelings” that we were doing “the right thing.” In chapter eight, I cautioned theorists to be conscious of the significance of identity in people’s daily lives when theorizing about identity categories. Albeit subconsciously, the planning team did just that. In an effort to respond to the needs of our community, we simultaneously engaged in targeted outreach to people who identified with predetermined identity categories (people of color, transgender people, youth and HIV+ people) while supporting fluidity of
affiliation groups at the conference. In so doing, we acknowledged that there is no contradiction in recognizing people's need to reduce ambiguity in our daily lives through the used of predetermined identity categories and the recognition that those identity categories are socially constructed.

Upon review, I believe our lack of awareness and reflexivity about the conceptual underpinnings of our decisions was a mistake. Had we taken time to articulate what we believed to be the conceptual argument underlying the importance of inclusivity and self-affiliation we could have prevented some confusion at the "Create Our Destiny" conference. In turn, such work might have enhanced participants' understanding of not only the Alphabet, but the connection between sexuality and gender identity. While the planning team's decisions turned out to be very wise, support for singularity requires that we examine the principles upon which our actions are based. There is an important lesson here: there can be great value in uncovering the conceptual foundation of areas where there is agreement. Yet it is tempting during any planning process or educational endeavor to overlook areas of agreement to attend to areas where there is disagreement.

Paying attention to how our daily decisions help or hinder our ability to strive towards singularity is very difficult, particularly when one is in the thick of a conference planning process or engaged in the daily grind of teaching and/or administration in an educational setting. As an example, I turn your attention back to the planning team's decision against allowing the recording of individual contributions during "Create Our Destiny" conference, either by members of the planning team, myself included, or by members of the press. While the decision was made with the best of intentions, to ensure participants' safety, whether inadvertently or not we continued the erasure of the lives
and efforts of LGBTQQA people. If supporting singularity had been our goal, we might have thought to enhance participants’ level of self-awareness and reflexivity by asked them in advance whether they were willing to be publicly connected with the event rather than making that decision for them."

Real Dialogue/ Unspecified Outcomes"

Opportunities for dialogue others whose perspectives differ from our own as made possible by the “Create Our Destiny” conference can support our ability to make connections between our own unexamined assumptions and the alienation and rejection of people impacted by those assumptions. When these connections are made, profound social change is possible. By bringing together people with different perspectives, the “Create Our Destiny” conference allowed participants, particularly those in the majority that weekend, to hear others’ stories and to relate them to their own lived experiences. This experience greatly enhanced their own sense of self awareness and reflexivity.

However, as seen in the following quote, dialogue between parties is difficult when some parties do not recognize how their personal perspectives are influenced by particular paradigms such as a dualistic view of gender.

I felt like I was the only one in our group who was speaking up for gender issues and that was hard ... there are a whole bunch of people in this room who probably don’t even know what transgender really is, or what the difference is between that and transsexual or cross dresser, and that was when I started to feel some sadness .... I realized how much I was yearning to let people dialogue about what do these [Alphabet] letters mean. (Daphne)

Therefore, as I argued in chapter eight, there is a need for educators, social change agents, and others designing opportunities for dialogue to be conscious not to magnify some of the inequities that exist between possible dialogue participants.
In this section, I offer some conditions that I believe ought to be present in the
design of any dialogue in order to maximize the likelihood that people’s singularity will
be supported. In order to support the singularity of participants, dialogues ought to
increase participants’ level of self-awareness about whatever specificities were under
review, in turn supporting their ability to become more fully and wholly themselves.
However, personal self-awareness can not be the only goal of such dialogues. We must
also learn to be open to interconnectedness of our individual struggles for singularity and
the struggle of others. Inherent in this condition is my concern that my ability to become
more fully and wholly myself can not come at the expense of diminishing the ability of
others to do the same.

As I examine the idea of reciprocal dialogue beyond the “Create Our Destiny”
conference, I envision these dialogues taking place in a wide variety of educational
situations: for example, in classrooms and diversity workshops, and in community
settings, in the form of workshops for LGBTQQA groups, and in workshops of church
and other community groups seeking deeper understanding about difference. Based on
my research experience, I offer the following components for creating dialogues that can
support the singularity of all of the participants, showing sensitivity about location,
developing trust, and focusing on reciprocity between people:

Location

Institutions can perpetuate historical inequities that put some people in more
powerful positions than others. When choosing a location for a dialogue, I suggest
choosing a venue known to be accessible to a wide variety of people. Such a decision is
one indication that organizers are genuinely interested in inclusion. For example, if there
was a homophobic incident on a college campus involving fraternity brothers, choosing to host a dialogue on homophobia in one of the fraternity houses maintains a level of support for the dominant perspective. In this case, my suggestion would be to hold the discussion in a “neutral” setting such as the students’ union building.

Trust

As mentioned earlier, trust, defined as the ability to make oneself vulnerable to harm from others while displaying confidence that harm will not occur, is a condition for dialogue that in turn fosters integrity (Baier, 1986). Trust cannot be developed when people believe that the paradigm from which others with whom they are attempting to have a dialogue are operating precludes their existence as singular people. Throughout my work I have offered examples of how this situation is manifested, e.g., as I described the experience of bisexual and transgender people at the “Create Our Destiny” conference in chapter seven. Based on our experience with the “Create Our Destiny” conference, I contend that the ability to create trust in a dialogue is influenced by all of its components, beginning with the planning process. Therefore, if one’s goal is to hold a representative dialogue, every effort ought to be made to have a representative planning team. It is also important for participants to feel some ownership over the parameters of the dialogue, i.e., how long the discussion will take, what sorts of assurances they have in terms of confidentiality, how many people will participate, and what common ground or affinity exists among and between the participants.

Reciprocity: Getting Ready for Deeper Dialogue

To be successful, dialogues require that participants come prepared to listen, to share, to suspend judgment, to better understand what each other’s “queeries” are, and to
be prepared to unearth some of our own buried assumptions in the process. Edina, one of the transgender people at the “Create Our Destiny” conference, acknowledged the value of gaining access to the perspectives of those with very different lived experiences than hers:

We have to be educated about each other’s struggles and each other’s plights. And I don’t think that some of the people at that table had that education ... And I don’t think I had my education in check about some issues either....I have never really sat down with an ally and talked that much specifically about what their issues are when they are trying to join together in a group of people that are mostly queer identified themselves....Did that make them feel like the oppressor, and therefore feel like the other within that very queer context? Is it sort of just a reversal of what goes on in the dominant culture? (Edina)

As Edina acknowledges here, identifying as LGBTQQA does not preclude us from needing to be open to increase our own level of self-awareness and reciprocity through such educational experiences. My position here signals a shift in attention away from an individual position, i.e., unless you have walked in my shoes you can’t understand my experience, towards a focus on the system of oppression, i.e., normative standards dictate how our various specificities are valued, which in turn impacts our lives as individuals.

By acknowledging the importance of reciprocal dialogue for LGBTQQA people, I do not intend to lessen the significance of the epistemological and ontological perspectives gained through lived experience; rather I intend to provide a bridge between people whose experiences differ. While LGBTQQA people may have an ontological edge due to our personal experiences, we also need to do our own work around the issues of how compulsory heterosexuality and presumption of gender duality impact our lives.

Programs that Encourage Reciprocity in Dialogue: Safe Zones and Vignettes

Prompted by the emergence of queer theory, there is currently a theoretical shift away from the individual and towards examining the systems of power which influence
the environments in which individuals exist. Focusing on the individual as the site of resistance, the “personal is political” approach has a tendency to treat the symptom while not creating a cure. Steven Seidman, a scholar of social theory, of cultural sociology, and of sexual politics, suggests the focus of queer theorists has changed from an exclusive preoccupation with the oppression and liberation of the homosexual subject to an analysis of the institutional practices and discourses producing sexual knowledges and ways they organize social life, attending in particular to the way these knowledges and social practices repress differences. (1996, p. 14)

To understand how my suggestions shift the focus from the individual to the system of power, readers need to know how dialogues on sexuality and gender identity are currently structured. In the Seacoast area, a speakers’ bureau approach is often used to foster dialogue about difference in connection to sexuality and gender identity. This approach focuses on the marginalized individual’s story and tends not to foster reciprocity. Panels of three or four LGBTQQA people are invited into educational settings to share personal experiences and to engage in a question and answer period. While speakers bureaus do present openly identified LGB(TQQA) youth and/ or adults and offer an experience that can support agency, the model also exacts a huge personal toll on LGBTQQA people. Speakers can gain increased self-awareness through the process of preparing to speak, but the “audience’s” attention tends to be on learning about the “other” with little connection being made to their own lives. In contrast, my examples, the Safe Zones program and vignettes, promote the shift from the individual towards the system of oppression. These programs are designed to help all participants increase their levels of self-awareness and reflexivity about how compulsory heterosexuality and gender duality impact everyone, albeit in unequal ways.
Safe Zones Program. In contrast to the speakers’ bureau model, the “Safe Zones” Program shifts attention away from individual stories, while acknowledging that homophobia and heterosexism are still experienced in very personal ways by individual LGBTQQ people. Briefly, the “Safe Zones” program at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) provides an example of an institutionalized educational effort that decreases the burden and risk generally shouldered by people who identify as LGBTQQ. Interested students, faculty, staff and administration join the “Safe Zone” program to visibly show their support for all members of the UNH community regardless of their sexuality and/or gender identity. Members of the “Safe Zone” program receive the “Safe Zone” image of interlocking triangles surrounded by a green circle on a button and/or sticker. People who display the Safe Zones sticker are indicating that they have chosen to do some work on their own to increase their understanding about sexuality and gender identity; there is no implication that they are counselors or experts on heterosexism.

To become a “Safe Zones” participant, one must attend an hour long workshop, which contains a twenty minute video showing students, faculty, staff and administrators discussing the positive aspects of visibly displaying one’s support of inclusion by displaying the stickers and buttons. The workshop also contains a forty minute question and answer period. At the end of the workshop, anyone wishing to join the program is invited to take a button and/or sticker and do the best they can to fulfill the spirit of the program. Safe Zones workshops are facilitated by LGBTQQA peer educators, adding a leadership development component to the program. Facilitators are welcome to draw on their own personal experiences, but they are not the major focus of the workshop. The opportunity to facilitate workshops and/or coordinate the “Safe Zones” program supports
the personal agency of LGBTQQA people with a reduced level of personal toll as the onus is not on the individual to use their personal experience as the basis for their educational efforts.

**Vignettes.** Like the “Safe Zones” program, the use of vignettes, short stories that describe an event or situation, can provide a springboard for dialogue that is not directly connected to a particular participant in the discussion. The advantage to using vignettes in educational settings is that they allow the conveyance of particular personal information for discussion purposes, yet they do so in a way that is separated from any actual people. This separation is intended to be sensitive to people who, like the “Create Our Destiny” conference participants, might be silenced by not wanting to hurt the feelings of others by saying something inappropriate. My vision is that participants in small groups of about six or seven would receive a series of vignettes from a facilitator. After reading each vignette, each group would discuss the issues raised. The following questions are offered as examples that might be used to facilitate discussion:

- What do we learn about what is important to the individual, what supports the individuals personal sense of self?
- What appears to be valued by the character(s) in this vignette?
- Does what is valued vary from different people’s perspectives? If so, how?
- What tensions emerge?
- What did you learn about your own assumptions based on your responses to the situations in the vignettes?
- Pick an affiliation group with which you identify. Now think of a scenario where you have felt like your individuality or what you value was being cataclumped, due to your affiliation with that group.

The following four vignettes are based on material gathered for this study. While they are not direct quotes, the material has been altered only to reduce it into succinct paragraphs. The first scenario offered here expresses Laura’s feeling of being
cataclumped by a student who cares about her but who also connects her with groups which he does not support. This vignette might prompt discussion among participants about how reactions to LGBTQQA people are not always prompted by their sexuality and/or gender identity; other factors such as race and class or even personality are involved. However, given the normative standard of compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality, white, middle class LGBTQQA people in particular often perceive that their sexuality and/or gender identity are the primary sources for the responses they experience from others.

(1) Laura. Scene: Laura, a teacher, is at school. She is in the company of two students. Xavier is currently enrolled in her class; Greg, a former student, is just about to leave.

Greg: I have got to go home. “Days of our Lives” is on.
Xavier: Only girls watch that, that’s women’s stuff, only girls watch those shows.
Laura to Xavier: How come your world is not big enough for guys who like to watch soap operas?
Xavier: Laura, my world and your world just don’t mix.... Everybody in my world wants the people in your world dead.
Laura: Jesus, you would rather see me dead than living the life I want to live.
Xavier: No, I guess I really don’t want to see you dead. Exit Xavier.

Later as Laura recalls her experience she adds

It was not just about me being gay. It was about me being educated, and a pacifist and you know having a whole world open to me that just scares the shit out of him. Yet, I know this wasn’t about me, you know this is really not about me. I know Xavier loves me, I know this kid really cares about me. But who knows what ideas he gets from his dad who is in the Klu Klux Klan. Maybe he has even defended me at home and gotten beaten up for it, which is really quite possible.

As is the case with the vignettes that follow, this particular vignette could be acted out by members of the groups, rather than read by one member. I suggest that the readers stay in
character first and discuss their reactions to the scene from that perspective before
switching back to their own personal perspectives.

(2) Christopher. ‘’Many gay men grow up hearing societal messages that part of
claiming the identity of being a gay man means being very active sexually. In this
context, gay male sexual interaction is often portrayed as being outside of a caring or
committed relationship, and in some cases involves public anonymous sex. Conversely,
being a ‘‘good’’ citizen generally precludes one from engaging in anonymous and/or
promiscuous sex. Therefore, the societal messages given to gay men appear to indicate
that being gay and being a good citizen are incompatible. These mixed messages cause
difficulty for some gay men whose lack of interest in anonymous or promiscuous sex
might make it more difficult for them to reconcile their attraction to men in general. In
this vignette, Christopher discusses his experience with the Fenway, in Boston. This
vignette can be used to uncover some buried assumptions about what discussants believe
to be ‘‘right’’ and ‘‘wrong’’ in the context of trying to personally construct an identity that
has been set in opposition to ‘‘generally acceptable behavior.’’

Scene: The Fens, in Boston, is a well known meeting place for gay men interested
in engaging in anonymous sex with other men. Christopher is in Boston with a group of
friends, and they decide to try their luck.

There is a part of me that’s like I’ll try anything once. I might as well see it with
my own eyes....I’ll probably never be back; I am going to have the whole
experience. So I ended up with this guy....We were both so pathetic. We could not
finish having sex. We ended up just talking, because I can’t, I can’t with a
stranger....We just stopped, went off and sat under a tree and talked for hours.
Who else would go to the Fens and get a relationship out of it? I’m hopeless. I’m
not a very good fag. I just can’t just go and get sucked off and walk away from it.
Number one because I would never come, they would be like ‘‘What is your
problem?’’ I’d be like ‘‘I don’t know enough about you.’’
(3) Mikki. This vignette prompts discussion about what LGBTQQA people have in common. We see a Gay Pride Parade through Mikki's eyes as she struggles to understand what she has in common with others in the parade.

Scene: San Francisco, Gay Pride Parade. Mikki struggles with her comfort level around the degree of rigidity which ought to be maintained around traditional sexuality and gender expectations.

We were all just laughing and having a good time, and these floats came by. And these people came by in the parade, all these people dressed in leather, chains and leather straps around each other, and I am thinking "What has that got to do with me? I don't want to be associated with that!" A woman on the float with cut offs on and her bare behind showing - and she had buttons like all those buttons we have, and she had a couple of them stuck on her flesh, on her ass, and lots of other scars on her body from that kind of stuff. And I am thinking - that's not me, how can I stand here and want to say to the straight world - this is my community and I am proud and this is who we are. When I thought people are showing abhorrent, sexually deviant behavior and strutting it on the street. Maybe it's because I am somewhat of a prude - but I don't know. This is not my community....I identify with men who love men, and women who love women who are just wanting to live a life, that is their life, together. And I hear myself and say God I sound middle-aged. But so that's when all of these different people come together and we say we are a community and I say, why?

(4) Terrence. I offer the following simple every day decision about what one wears because it reveals interconnections between gender identity and sexual orientation.

The vignette also provides an example of how LGBTQQA people can sacrifice their own sense of integrity in order to satisfy the cultural gender norms. Such decisions ultimately diminish one's ability to strive toward singularity.

Scene: Summer day, Terrence is preparing for a walk along a beach popular with gay men. In the back of his mind is the idea that he might meet a potential date while he walked.

I wanted to wear my Korean bathrobe, which has like these long sleeves and it is somewhat feminine looking. It is a man's bathrobe, but it's Korean. Along with
the bath robe, I planned to wear my gardening hat to the beach because it would have looked fabulous, they look great together. It doesn’t look masculine or feminine, it’s kind of both, it’s kind of fun, it’s kind of neuter. I believe gender is meant to be played with. Not being willing to step outside of your gender role is very confining. I think we should just do what you want to do, but that day I just wasn’t quite ready to wear my hat and robe to the beach. Beauty is important to me, and I find both the hat and the bathrobe beautiful but as a friend of mine once said, people might want to be friends with queens, but they don’t want to date them. I will wear that some time to the beach.

Inherent in this description is Terrence’s understanding of cross cultural variations in appropriate clothing designs based on gender. However, another issue overrode his personal interest in wearing what felt comfortable to him. It appeared to me that when Terrence weighed his options, he chose to limit his gender presentation based on assumptions about the impact it would have on his ability to make connections with people he might enjoy dating. His sense of how he wanted to present himself was tailored by the risks involved, including the loss of potential social interactions, and clearly shows that LGBTQQA communities are far from immune when it comes to reinforcing normative standards.

The possibilities for the use of vignettes are endless. On one level, external parties can write and present vignettes, as I have done here, and workshop participants simply attend the program, participating in the presentation of the vignettes and discussing their experiences. One another level, participants could be involved in writing actual vignettes and presenting them for others to enact, and vice versa, followed by discussion. In the Fall of 1998, a group of faculty, staff, and students from the University of New Hampshire started to explore the use of vignettes, or playlets, using a psychodrama orientation. Using this method, participants enact a script that is not complete. When the initial script ends, participants are asked to create what they think might happen next. The
individuals acting out the various parts can utilize the input of other workshop attendees, creating more possibilities for dialogue among participants. In addition, the participants might be asked to switch roles, e.g., from being the son coming out, to being the father receiving the news, literally requiring participants to change their perspective on the situation. After the participants complete their version of the playlet, all of the participants engage in a dialogue about their experience.

I now want to turn our attention away from the characteristics of effective dialogue to examine how actual settings might reflect a true commitment to singularity. I begin by offering suggestions for the traditional school setting. My focus is directed initially towards school settings because our youth currently spend a significant portion of their lives in the school environment and because as an educator I have an interest in promoting positive change in schools. Next, I present Seacoast Outright, a support group for Seacoast area LGBTQQA youth, as a model for a community based program that supports young people under the age of 22. By helping to develop youth’s self-awareness about their sexuality and gender identity, Seacoast Outright in turn supports their singularity. Then I offer weekly movie nights and the annual Pancake Breakfast as examples of other programs and activities that help support singularity.

**Suggestions for Educational Settings**

In the following section, I share some suggestions that if instituted would allow school environments to be more conducive to helping all of our students to strive toward singularity. As I reported earlier, my position here shifts attention from the individual towards the limiting nature of compulsory heterosexuality and presumption of gender duality, the impact of which is far from limited to LGBTQQA students. For example,
eating disorders for girls/women," or domestic violence attacks by boys/men have their roots in societal norms that impose different standards on people based on their sex. Threats to these conventional norms are often met with violence. The rationale given by the alleged killers of Matthew Shepard, a 21 year old Wyoming student, was that they were so humiliated by his alleged attempt to pick them up and by being seen leaving a bar with a gay man that they had to pistol whip him and leave him to die tied to a fence.

First, I present the Students' Bill of Rights, originally proposed by Dr. Virginia Uribe, the founder of Project 10, a dropout prevention program aimed at gay teens. If the bill were adopted, students would have the right to:

- Attend schools free of verbal and physical harassment where education, not survival, is the priority.
- Attend schools where respect and dignity for all is a standard set by the board of education and enforced by every principal.
- Gain access to accurate information about themselves, free of negative judgment, delivered by trained adults who not only inform but affirm them.
- See positive role models, both in person and in the curriculum.
- Be included in all support programs that exist to help teenagers deal with the difficulties of adolescence.
- Be represented by legislators who fight for their constitutional freedoms, rather than reinforce hatred and prejudice.
- Enjoy a heritage free of crippling self-hatred and unchallenged discrimination. (Woog, 1995, p. 374)

In addition to non-discrimination policies, schools and other institutions serving youth need to create interventions that increase the levels of awareness of administrators, educators, support staff, and students, on issues pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity. Such policies ought to include the hiring of openly LGBTQQA staff and faculty. Woog (1995) suggests that all new teacher interviews ought to include discussion about the candidates' experience with, and personal attitudes toward, gay and lesbian students. But I believe we ought to go further to determine whether a candidate
recognizes that negative experiences of LGBTQQA people are symptoms of a much larger issue: the invisibility of compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality. For example, when asked about their ideas to support a positive learning environment for LGBTQQA youth in school, a candidate for principal may suggest a gay straight alliance (GSA), thereby indicating awareness of LGBTQQA students’ higher risk for difficulty in school, dropping out, etc. I am an advocate for GSA’s in schools, particularly if their missions include opportunities for deeper dialogue about how compulsory heterosexuality and the presumption of gender duality impact all students. For example, do we include straight in the title of the group simply because no-one would come if they had to out themselves, or do we seriously attempt to build bridges between people whose experiences of the normative standard happen to differ?

Without further commitment to deep-rooted institutional change, schools will continue to perpetuate climates that maintain the normative standard for sexuality and gender identity, and GSA’s will merely offer students respite. For example, celebrating important life passages such as announcements of engagements, wedding showers, or the birth of babies, if limited to heterosexual unions, privilege certain sexuality and gender identifications over others. A genuine institutional commitment to making educational institutions supportive of all students, faculty, and staff’s ability to strive towards singularity would ensure that educators responsible for creating learning environments would recognize such important life passages for all.

Schools ought to have clear channels for reporting sexual orientation harassment and inappropriate uses of language and consequences that will be administered for violations. LGBTQQA issues ought to be incorporated in school wide programs such as
the inclusion, in appropriate classes, of information about the higher risk factors for
suicide, drug and other alcohol abuse, dropout, and pregnancy, for LGBTQ youth.
Schools ought to also identify and advertise an advocate in the administration to address
gay issues. Even when a school has an unofficial person who carries out this role, it is
important that the additional work load be compensated and recognized for the
contribution it makes to the community. In my view, there is no reason such a position
has to be filled by someone who identifies as LGBTQ, I believe allies are very capable
of carrying out the responsibilities. In fact, having allies modeling how they are striving
toward singularity by examining their own relationship to the normative standard is very
much in keeping with my position.

Schools that aim to support people’s ability to strive toward singularity would
take serious steps to eliminate harassment. The phrases “That’s so gay,” “You’re so
queer,” “faggot” and “dyke” are heard on an hourly basis by students in our nation’s
schools. Based on numerous discussions I have had over the years with youth who readily
admit their partiality to these slurs, I believe they are often used in general conversation
to refer to something unpleasant, odd, or out of place, not directed at someone with the
intent to insult them. In these conditions, students tend to see these remarks as harmless
because the intent behind them is not to hurt anyone. But several fallacies underpin their
argument:

1) No-one gets hurt. Think of some aspect of your being which causes you some
insecurity based on what is generally assumed to be “normal.” Perhaps it is your
weight, your height, your relative wealth, your skin color. Now picture hearing,
“That’s so (put in your concern here, e.g., fat),” all day, every day.
2) My intention was not to hurt anyone. This may well be true. But the truth is
that we have allowed an entire generation unconsciously to equate gay, queer,
faggot, and dyke with odd, weird, out of place, and that sets the tone in which all
our youth grow up. This has to stop.
The suggestion offered below is one I and others have used in educational workshops to enhance students’ agency by teaching them to verbalize their discomfort with language used in their presence. The following example is a bit strained, but you will get the idea.

- **Name it** - “Hey, that remark was homophobic.”
- **Claim it** - “I’m offended by that because it puts down other people” or “I’m gay and I don’t appreciate that remark.” The student owns why the remark was a problem.
- **Stop it** - “Please don’t use that language around me” or “What are you trying to say, that you don’t like something?”

To achieve schools that meet these criteria will require political risks on the part of many educators, school board members, and politicians. As educators, we must accept our obligation to our youth to make our schools safe places for all students. That means the entire curriculum ought to be infused with a more accurate representation of their society which includes recognition of the contributions of LGBTQQA people. Class reading materials and discussions ought to reflect diverse perspectives. School libraries must also be assessed for their offerings and not be limited to harsh reality-type accounts, but include more upbeat, hopeful accounts of LGBTQQA people’s lived experiences, both fiction and non-fiction. Our youth deserve to have access to a wide range of role models, offering different perspectives on how they are striving to become fully and wholly themselves.

**Suggestions for Community Settings**

I now turn our attention from the institutional educational setting to an example of a community based support group for LGBTQQA youth. The stories throughout my dissertation support the need for an increase in safe areas for youth and adults to mix and increased visibility of adult/youth role models. Intergenerational opportunities for
dialogue provide younger LGBTQQA people with perspective about the speed with which progress toward equality is being made. In turn, by interacting with youth, older LGBTQQA people are presented with new, often more positive, perspectives about what it means to identify as LGBTQQA.

Seacoast Outright. Seacoast Outright is a community-based support group for LGBTQQA youth. Its mission is to help LGBTQQ youth mature and develop into healthy, caring, productive citizens. Allied youth are also welcome to all of the outreach programs and services offered by the organization. To provide support to youth, Seacoast Outright utilizes approximately 30 volunteers, all over the age of 24. Support group meetings, which are facilitated by two to four adult facilitators (depending on the number of youth), are designed to provide youth with a safe place to socialize and access to positive adult role models. Through support, affirmation, and accurate information, we foster feelings of wellness, self-worth and dignity in an environment free from harassment and discrimination. Upon invitation, the Executive Director for Seacoast Outright along with trained youth and volunteers also engage in educational outreach in the local school districts. While Seacoast Outright offers intergenerational interaction, our focus is on youth; therefore there is still an unmet need for intergenerational interactions. And for adults, there is a need for intergendered interconnections as most LGBTQQA groups in the area tend to limit access by age, sexuality and/or gender identities.

The philosophy of Seacoast Outright is to recognize the role and responsibility of all adults to provide support for youth. However, we are also cognizant that as youth first come out, they are looking for peers and others who can understand their coming out experiences. Therefore, while we have allies who facilitate, we always ensure that there is
diversity in the gender identities of the facilitators and that a sexual minority is present at meetings. Facilitators not only provide support for youth; we receive educational and social support from each other by attending monthly continuing educational sessions and organizing quarterly social events. The momentum for the creation of Seacoast Outright came from the “Respect for all Youth” conference held at the university of New Hampshire in 1993. I believe the model of a community-based support group is a much needed resource for LGBTQQA youth, particularly in non-urban centers. When it was founded, Seacoast Outright was the only support group for youth in the state of New Hampshire; currently there are six such organizations, several of whom received technical assistance from Seacoast Outright. Seacoast Outright has also begun to expand and has recently grown from one support group meeting site to two. In addition, the organization is increasing its relationships with local schools and service providers who work with youth, e.g., conducting workshops to increase faculty and staff and student awareness about sexuality and gender identity issues and offering technical assistance on how to run a GSA.

**Examples of Opportunities for Affiliation that Support Singularity**

Given the level of personal risk involved and the complexity and contingent nature of being out, it ought not to be surprising that participants cited burnout as an issue for them in their everyday lives. Rushing from one gay rights ordinance to another, from one school board ruling to another, or one gay bashing incident to another is a recipe for burnout. After conducting this study, I recognize the level of burnout more as a symptom of our current difficulty with striving toward singularity. I propose that we will find an inverse relationship between singularity and burnout, i.e., the more we strive
towards singularity the less burned out we will feel. As I argued in chapter eight, while singularity does not require that we attend to all of our specificities equally, it does mean that we ought not focus all of our attention on one aspect to the detriment of all others. In this section, I present two examples, one weekly social activity (movie nights) and one annual celebration of progress towards equality (Pancake breakfast) that support singularity. Participants recognized the importance of feeling a sense of community.

Making friends with people has been crucial, I mean that is probably the most crucial thing. The more people you know and the more people you like and respect, the better you’ll be able to avoid [burnout]. (Laura)

It is crucial that we not overlook the importance of social interactions as we strive toward singularity because they offer opportunities for us to present ourselves in multidimensional ways. While planning team members collaborated on the conference report required by those funding the “Create Our Destiny” conference, we noticed that in the alphabetical listing of action teams, the biking group appeared first. Based on our own assumption that the funders would not want to see a bike group as the first action group created by the conference, we agreed to list the group by the name used at the conference, i.e., the “We like to bike,” ensuring that it appeared near the end of the list. In hindsight, my preference would be to educate people like the funding body about the importance of having social outlets that support LGBTQQA people because this is an integral part of our singularity efforts.

Social Activities - Movie Nights. My partner and I host movie nights at our home every Sunday night. Movie nights are an example of a social outlet that fosters interaction around specificities including lesbian / bisexual, women, generally educated, living in a non urban community. Movie nights, the creation of which coincided with the end of the
“Create Our Destiny” conference, provide an opportunity for people to get together and watch films, but more importantly to reconnect on a weekly basis. The movies vary, and anyone is welcome to attend, but there has been a lesbian / bisexual women slant to the films we have selected and to the group who attends.

Movie nights play a role in establishing a connection between our daily lives and the way LGBTQQA experiences have been portrayed on film. Given the 25 year age span among those who attend the films, our spontaneous discussions often include recognition of changes that have occurred over time, not only in ways LGBTQQA people are portrayed on screen but in our own lives. While we do watch films and critique them, we also discuss our day-to-day lives, swap stories about family, about work, about partners, even about issues such as retirement and estate planning, and what kind of vehicle to purchase (Saturn as a personal preference and Subaru for political reasons, and the all-wheel drive!). While these may not appear to be specifically lesbian issues, movie nights allow us an opportunity to access lesbian and bisexual women’s perspectives on these issues. In the lesbian tradition of a communal approach to community building, people often bring food on a pot luck basis, so these get togethers nourish the body, mind and spirit. 

Celebration of Progress towards Equality (Pancake Breakfast). The creation of community based forums, such as the Pancake Breakfast, support people’s ability to strive towards singularity. The Pancake Breakfast is an annual event at the University of New Hampshire during which LGBTQQA communities come together with the community at large to celebrate publicly the previous year’s achievements towards equality on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The reason we chose a
“Pancake Breakfast” comes directly out of the history of LGBTQQA organizing on campus. In the spring of 1974, the governor of the state of New Hampshire took a very public stand against the formation of the Gay Student Organization on campus. Students unsuccessfully tried to arrange a meeting with the governor to discuss the situation. At the same time, our local Public Television station was conducting its annual auction of donated items, including a pancake breakfast with the governor, upon which viewers could place bids. The students managed to raise about $2,000 to bid on the breakfast, but mysteriously the bidding was stopped, despite the fact that the students still had funds available to raise their bid.

So in 1993, when I was told this story, I was struck that we had never had our pancake breakfast and decided to institute one. Members of the LGBTQQA community at the time decided to use the annual event as an opportunity to honor those who had made significant contributions to equality on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity on campus. The campus community is invited to nominate faculty, staff, and students who have made outstanding contributions to the promotion of understanding and equality on campus. The university’s president presents the awards during the breakfast. The Pancake Breakfast provides an opportunity for the larger campus community to come together from across generations, sexualities and genders, reconnecting with our history, honoring achievements and publicly celebrating efforts taken to create a more inclusive environment for all.

Failure to recognize that such individual acts and other small events such as the “Create Our Destiny” conference gain historical significance over time, can make social change efforts appear too daunting for some people.
I think that there’s a danger that you can become so overwhelmed by how big the changes need to be....People might be too daunted, might not ever even try. (Laura)

Given the challenges that face us as we strive toward singularity, we could benefit by having mechanisms that allow us to recognize the progress being made towards equality for LGBTQQA people on a regular basis.

**Personal Resonances**

Suppose you and I are friends. (In fact, I hope we are friends.) My well-being, my happiness depends very much on you, and your well-being, your happiness, depends upon me. I am responsible for you, and you are responsible for me. Anything I do wrong, you will suffer, and anything you do wrong, I have to suffer. Therefore, in order to take care of you, I have to take care of myself....[I]n order to understand, you have to be one with what you want to understand. (Hahn, 1987, 35-37)

My focus throughout this project has been on the members of the planning team, the 57 participants at the “Create Our Destiny” conference, and on the 34 people who granted me follow-up discussions after the event. However, my engagement with them and their lives has also had a profound impact on me and on my life. The challenge of constructing my personal position for readers and of ensuring that I accurately presented participants’ experiences as they described them to me in a cohesive piece of work has provided me with great personal growth. As a result, I gained a deeper sense of self awareness, becoming more conscious of my own buried assumptions. Engaging in this work has constantly challenged me to ask myself what striving towards singularity means in my own life. As I complete this project and contemplate my future, trying to heed the words of the Buddhist philosopher Thich Nhat Hahn I now reflect on which aspects of my being are causing me the most anxiety at this time.
This project began in January 1997, two days after I returned to the United States from a trip to Ireland. It is now spring 1999, and I have just returned from my biannual trip home. This trip always provides an opportunity for some soul searching, but my recent visit, coinciding as it does with the end of my doctoral program, has even greater significance than usual. Now, I can allow myself to contemplate what opportunities exist in Ireland, where the Celtic Tiger is roaring and peace has a new chance. Under current political conditions, my partner has no legal opportunity to seek employment in Ireland, and I find myself wondering whether the current leftist direction in the European Union will legally recognize our relationship making a return home even feasible.

At the age of 37, despite my interest in the political process, I have never voted in an election, anywhere! When I lived in Ireland, the only elections in which I was eligible to vote took place while I was at college in Belfast and absentee ballots were not available. During the recent mid-term elections, I was again frustrated by my inability to participate in the democratic process; so I am also contemplating becoming an American citizen in time for the presidential election in the year 2000. The tax implications for my partner of my death if I remain a non-American have also pushed me closer to a decision in favor of American citizenship. If the irony here did not have such serious implications it might be amusing! I have just spent two years developing an argument for the clearer understanding of the socially constructed nature of categories such as “Irish” and “American” “citizen.” Yet I am contemplating moving from the former to the latter due to the privileges that accompany such belonging (in the encompassing not the affiliative sense!). In making such a shift I get the sense that I am in turn supporting the boundaries.
Currently, I am employed at a university as a member of the Student Affairs staff, focusing on research and assessment of the impact of the university experience on our students. While this position allows me the opportunity to teach on an adjunct basis, to conduct research, and to engage in several forms of public service, my efforts will not lead to tenure. Nor will my work overcome the stigma some attach to working in student affairs rather than academic affairs. However, I currently prefer the flexibility of working in student affairs over the potential security of tenure. However, once I am officially qualified for faculty positions, that decision may change.

In keeping with the participants whose stories provided the foundation on which this dissertation was built, my sexuality and gender identity have occupied more or less of my attention at various times. At this point in my life, my attention has been on completing this dissertation and in order to do that successfully I have spent considerable time thinking about how to educate people about sexuality and gender identity. As I complete the project another unknown factor is the impact this dissertation and the Ph.D. for which this dissertation was a requirement will have on my future employment picture. The prospect of creating a full time position as a consultant/diversity educator has a certain appeal to me and may become a more viable option as time goes on. For now, I envision continuing to conduct educational workshops, focusing on the areas of sexuality and gender identity on a volunteer or part-time basis.

As this section's opening quote by Thich Nhat Hahn, a Buddhist philosopher, implies, achieving affiliations that support integrity will not be achieved without personal sacrifice, without self-reflection, and without real effort on the part of all the parties interested in social change. The personal sacrifice, self-reflection, and effort inherent in
the process of researching and writing this dissertation have allowed me to achieve
a deeper understanding of questions that have underpinned my academic and personal
lives. Whatever my ultimate decisions are on the questions of residency, nationality, and
employment, the dissertation process has reenergized me as I face these decisions about
what course of action will further enhance my ability to strive towards singularity.

' In the interests on full disclosure, I should note that I am personally very familiar with all of the examples
I present in this section: Seacoast Outright (a support group for LGBTQQA youth), the Safe Zones
program and the annual Pancake Breakfast at the University of New Hampshire, and weekly movies nights
at my home. I have been involved in their creation and maintenance throughout the last five years.

* For readers who might be contemplating a similar community building project, I want to be clear, all the
information we needed to make these important decisions was present in the context and not the result of
my now having the luxury of two years of hindsight.

** At the March 1993 Respect For All Youth Conference, also held at the University of New Hampshire,
participants who agreed to speak to the press were identified by a particular symbol on their name tags.

*** Interestingly, although a “Real Dialogue/ Unspecified Outcomes” action team did emerge from the
conference, it represented resistance to the very regimented structure imposed throughout the weekend as
much, if not more than, an opportunity to create a healthy future.

* In the Seacoast area, depending on the semester, there is a coordinated and trained group of students,
faculty and staff at UNH who go out to classes and other venues to answer such requests. Additionally,
Seacoast Outright is called on a regular basis to go to a variety of settings, to bring youth trained to discuss
their coming out experiences particularly in high schools.

** Participants are given a list of resources so they can make appropriate referrals if necessary.

*** Being cataclumped is a term combining categorized and clumped coined by one of the participants. Her
goal was to avoid being cataclumped, as she wanted to be been seen as an individual not just as a member
of a group.

**** Due to the personal nature of the material in this vignette, I have used a different pseudonym than in the
rest of the text.

* In reviewing the Seacoast Outright logs for her Master’s degree research, Anna Kay Vorsteg found that
issues concerning school were the most frequently discussed concerns, followed by issues concerning
family. The Seacoast Outright log is kept by the facilitators to serve as a consistency measure so that from
week to week facilitators know what topics have been discussed.

* Several of these suggestions for changes in schools have been influenced by the work of Dan Woog
(1995) who has written about the impact of gay and lesbian issues on America’s schools.

* While some young men suffer from eating disorders, the vast majority of people affected are young girls
trying to emulate the societal standard for beauty required by compulsory heterosexuality.

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Special thanks to Mim Easton who incorporated this exercise into the Seacoast Outright repertoire.

Other opportunities for interaction, including intergenerational communication, included the following suggestions from the common ground:
- Placing a community bulletin board in a gay friendly atmosphere
- LGBTQQA friendly neighborhoods, communities, services
- Public Kiosk
- Gay positive cultural events
- Regional pride events
- LGBTQQA economic development hiring LGBTQQA folk
- Book store / cafe
- Rainbow Realty
- Corporate recruiting.

I was one of the founding members of this organization, and I served as chair of the board of directors until January, 1999.

Volunteers must attend a day long training session, after which the trainers have a discussion about the skill and comfort level of the volunteer and match up the needs of the organization with the skills and talents of the volunteer. Volunteers interested in facilitating the youth support groups are matched with a more experienced facilitator who serves as a mentor. The new volunteers must attend three youth meetings as observers prior to their first meeting as actual facilitators.

In part, the connection between aspects of the gay rights movement and the impact of the AIDS crisis has led many people to get caught up in a frenetic pace demanded by trying to achieve social change. One of my regrets is the degree to which the impact of the AIDS crisis on the area was not as evident in the narratives as it is in daily life. One of the nine action teams created at the end of the conference mirrored the mission of Positive Action, a statewide group for people infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS: Social, service, education, prevention. Members of Positive Action created the group at “Create Our Destiny” and welcomed others interested in joining them. Their goals were to:
- identify current HIV/AIDS education programs in NH and identify gaps
- assess geographical gaps in NH services
- increase community awareness and involvement through PR and membership recruitment/networking
- promote socialization by utilizing networks.
I did not get the opportunity to interview any of the members of this action team.

Some might argue the physical value of the nourishment provided by Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream and Pepperidge Farm Cookies that have featured prominently as movie night staples!

Two of my committee members, Prof. Jean Kennard and Prof. Kristine Baber, have been honored for their efforts as faculty. I have also been recognized for my work as a staff person.

The 1999 Pancake Breakfast will be the twenty-fifth anniversary of the original ill-fated Pancake Breakfast. Ideally, our current governor, who signed the bill to include sexual orientation in the state’s non-discrimination policy, would be invited to attend the event, to celebrate with us the progress we have made not only on campus but across the state of New Hampshire. However, my vision for next year’s Pancake Breakfast has gone no further than my dissertation at this point.
Based on a discussion at one of our Movie nights, I learned that recipients of inheritances from non-
citizens start to pay tax on the total amount inherited, whereas a significant amount of any inheritance from
American citizens is protected from tax liability (in the hundreds of thousands of dollars). This concern
added to the tax handicap any same-sex couple already faces as unmarried people cuts any small amount I
might leave to my partner in half!


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Savin-Williams, R. C. (1995). Lesbian, gay male, and bisexual adolescents. In D’Augelli, A. R., & Patterson, C. J. (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities over the*
lifespan: Psychological Perspectives (pp. 166-185). New York: Oxford University Press.


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Dear Nancy

It is with excitement that I submit an application for a grant in behalf of the Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership. We are requesting $30,000 from the National Lesbian & Gay Community Funding Partnership to conduct a future search conference, coordinate follow-up activities and implement strategies. The purpose of the conference is to develop an intentional focus to overcome and move local community members (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people) from a place of fragmentation and disconnectedness to one of unity and vision.

The conference will be a continuation of the work initiated by the ASCP and the community scan. It will be an opportunity to give form, structure and independence to the ASCP, separate from the sponsorship of the Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation. This is an important next step for the ASCP if it is to maintain a permanent role in this community. ASCP members have placed a high value on the conference and have committed $10,000 of the remaining grant resources to the conference and follow-up budget. The remaining $8,000 will not be distributed until after the conference to accommodate new ideas or priorities which will emerge from the two days of discussion.

I am pleased to inform you that the ASCP now has almost $20,000 in permanent endowment in the Bob Kaman Fund for an Inclusive Community. Beginning in 1998, the GPCF executive committee will assume responsibility for distributing grants from the fund. There are at least two benefits to folding in the fund. First, it assures the issue the attention of the Foundation’s top leadership, and, second, is likely to attract more resources from other funding sources within the Foundation.

As this next phase of the Partnership begins, it is clear to me that it will succeed. Not because of the role the Foundation has played, but rather because there is a solid ground upon which to build the permanent structure. Those who have been involved with ASCP have learned from each other. developed bonds and achieved a level of trust that was not present prior to the inception of the ASCP. With a grant to support the conference there would be no interruption in the momentum. Just imagine what could happen!

Sincerely,

Angela Matthews
Executive Director
Affirming Seacoast
A vision for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People

When we formed the Partnership two years ago, we envisioned a community in which it is safe for all people to be true to themselves, inclusive of sexual orientation, at all times and without fear. We continue to affirm that vision, and to commit ourselves to bringing it to reality.

Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership. 1/13/97

Background

When the Affirming Partnership began in January of 1995, Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation had experience with GLBT issues through one fund, the Respect for All Youth Fund serving GLBT and questioning youth. The fund’s donors are active with the GPCF and are one of several foundation families who are personally touched by GLBT issues because they have gay or lesbian family members. They expressed their stories and concerns because of the fund and, later, the Partnership. Both have served to raise the floor of safety and to open discussion at the level of GPCF and community leadership.

The GPCF annual report told the story of the Respect for All Youth Fund and listed the grants supported by the fund including a conference for educators and youth organized by a local chapter of P-FLAG and held at the University of New Hampshire. Remarkably, the conference attracted almost 300 professionals, indicating the level of interest and concern about issues facing GLBT youth and the need for continuing education and advocacy. Grants funded since the inception of the Affirming Partnership range from education to health care, public advocacy training to group membership building. A recent achievement came in the form of a grant to a mainstream organization, Child and Family Services of New Hampshire. This eighty-year old family service organization will offer a parenting education and support program for gay and lesbian parents. Sensitive written and thoughtfully presented, the proposal will get beyond the typical parenting class issues by addressing the unique concerns these families face. We think that’s progress and we are excited and gratified.

Foreground

Today, two years after the start of the Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership, we are still learning about the communities we seek to serve. Just as no one African American can speak for all, no one gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person can. What we learned from individuals who responded to our Community Scan we experience in the practice of moving our Affirming Partnership agenda forward:

"There is very little sense of community. It is probably the single most powerful factor in keeping GLBT people isolated and ineffective in creating real change and acceptance in society at large."
Lack of interaction between subgroups, scant communication between GLBT groups and limited social options and meeting places contribute to fragmentation within the Seacoast GLBT communities. Fragmentation also compounds the challenges facing many volunteer, grassroots organizations serving GLBT people. Isolation, a lack of community self-esteem and access to information were also cited as the primary issues among GLBT people. These, however, are the results not the cause of the problem. They are the symptoms which when treated separately will provide only temporary relief from the heart of the matter, being “out”.

“My aim isn’t just tolerance. My aim isn’t to just be able to walk down the street. My aim is to be able to live a full, whole life. To not leave parts of myself at the door.”

What confounds the process of coming together, the problem that is at the core of GLBT issues, is the constraints upon GLBT people that keep them from being “out” in all aspects of their lives every day. We have learned that even in safe employment environments, for example, GLBT people are afraid to be fully “out”. We recognize as a committee that legislation and workplace policies are not necessarily what one may need to be fully and wholly him/herself. We have also witnessed what can happen when GLBT people step forward.

- Last year, a highly respected lawyer and community volunteer moved to South Carolina so that she and her partner would be allowed to adopt a child. Because of her work with the Affirming Partnership, Sue Groff went public. The article in three local papers, including the Boston Globe,roused support for Sue and affirmation of the loss her move would mean to Portsmouth and New Hampshire.
- Seacoast Gay Men’s Club organized an adopt-a-spot effort for a local park. Local papers covered the group and their volunteer activity as a positive contribution to the community.
- The Gay History Walk organized by the Affirming Partnership generated positive press coverage last year and this year and highlighted the contributions of GLBT people throughout history.
- GLBT members of the Unitarian Universalist South Church initiated a gay pride celebration in June this year. It was one of the most popular services of the year and was lovingly received by the entire congregation. We can expect to have that service every June from now on.
- The Music Hall of Portsmouth has added GLBT films to its film series and is broadening its touring roster to include audience specific entertainment. In January TMH will outreach to the GLBT communities with a performance of Kiss of the Spider Woman. TMH staff credit the GPCF initiative which they believe gives legitimacy to the issue and gives their board the courage to expand programming in this direction.
- The GPCF through this initiative has created a second permanent endowment, the Bob Karnan Fund, to support grants to GLBT specific activities. With a balance of almost $18,000 the endowment will generate income that will become a part of GPCF’s discretionary grant resources. The GPCF Executive Committee will review GLBT proposals and make grant recommendations, thereby expanding their perspectives and reach.
- A forum on diversity (Searching for the Ties that Bind) sponsored by Strawberry Banke, Portsmouth Advocates and GPCF, will include address issues related to sexual orientation as well as the traditional issues related to race, class and ethnicity.

Individual and community self-esteem is nurtured and strengthened by these examples of GLBT affirming arts, culture, and social options (Community Scan, page 5). These are in
short supply in the Seacoast because youth and adults alike must first find each other, a process complicated by lack of visibility. The remedy —

_to build a community where GLBT people are free to be fully and wholly themselves._

**Futureground**

The Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership proposes to develop an intentional focus to overcome and move local community members from a place of fragmentation and disconnectedness to one of unity and vision. We will accomplish this through a Future Search Conference where people with diverse interests come together to create a shared vision and coordinated action. 65-85 people will be invited to attend the two-day session which will be organized around a critical question. The stakeholders participate in a series of self-managed tasks that will explore the history, ideals, constraints, opportunities and trends within and around the Seacoast. Conference participants will identify the widest common ground all can stand on without force or compromise.

The conference will be co-facilitated by two professionals skilled in this area. A planning team of community leaders will assist the co-facilitators in developing the critical question, identifying the 65-85 stakeholders, and responding to the two-day conference plan. Additionally, the team will recruit, motivate and mobilize the conference participants.

Our objectives are to:

- Learn from each other and educate new participants to the process
- Bridge the cultural, regional or values differences represented by participants
- Identify shared values
- Generate consensus
- Create achievable strategies

The planning process, the conference and the implementation of the objectives will be the first time since the Open Door City Coalition in 1994 that critical leaders in the GLBT communities will come together to work toward a shared vision. The process itself addresses issues of fragmentation that historically has been the norm.
Beyond Futureground

We are requesting a grant of $30,000 from the National Partnership to conduct the conference, coordinate follow-up activity and implement strategies.

We recognize that the conference will be another powerful step and the continuation of the work of the Affirming Partnership. This Future Search Conference will require substantial coordination and facilitation in order to be successful. The volunteer commitment must be supported by a staff position, Project Coordinator, who will insure continuity and be responsible for supporting the implementation of conference objectives.

There is approximately $18,000 remaining for grantmaking from the original grant and fund raising effort. The Affirming Partnership voted to reserve

• $10,000 of this to support the conference and implementation budget
• $8,000 will be reserved for making grants to projects stimulated by the conference.

In addition,

• the GPCF will provide workspace, a desk, phone, fax, copier and computer at no charge to the Partnership for one year. The approximate value of this in-kind donation is $7,500, and
• Conference facilitator Donna Mellon is donating half of her time and co-facilitator Ann Driscoll is donating all of her time at a combined value of $12,500.
## Budget

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APPENDIX B

AFFIRMING SEA COAST COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

COMMUNITY SCAN AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT

FINAL REPORT

The Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership

Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation
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II. Data Collection Methods ........................................... 2

III. Data Analysis .......................................................... 3

IV. Categories and Themes ............................................... 4

V. Summary ....................................................................... 8

VI. Appendices:
   A. Theme Comparison Chart
   B. Focus Group Demographics
   C. Community Survey Results
   D. Service Provider Input


Community Scan and Needs Assessment Final Report written by: Racheal Stuart

* Indicates Community Scan Committee member

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I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The purposes of the Community Scan and Needs Assessment are 1.) to identify issues and concerns facing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the seacoast; and 2.) to formulate program objectives and grantmaking priorities for the "Bob Karman Fund For An Inclusive Community."

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect and analyze data. Qualitative methods included a series of focus groups attended by LGBT people and allies, and a survey of LGBT service providers. Issues that emerged from the focus groups were used to construct a questionnaire for community wide distribution. The questionnaire provided demographic data and quantitative testing of focus group themes.

LGBT people in the Seacoast face challenges and conditions that are locally unique. This Community Scan represents the first ever attempt at a detailed exploration of their lives. It is essential that we develop a holistic, and contextually sensitive understanding of the issues. The qualitative approach allows us to examine complex interdependencies - the "lived experience" - of LGBT people. This sort of deep understanding and clarity is vital in the development of program priorities, review of grant applications, and evaluation of outcomes.

Also of significance is the participatory nature of the Scan. This research approach acknowledges that LGBT people are the experts about their lives and their communities, and that their input should drive the development of program objectives. Participation of those who will be served by the Fund was invited early in the design of the needs assessment, and continued throughout the data collection and analysis. Broad stakeholder participation is essential for the development of community wide commitment to the initiative. Through this Scan, the voices of LGBT people living in the Seacoast are made central to the process.

II. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

A. FOCUS GROUPS

The primary objectives of the focus groups were: 1.) To describe the experience of Seacoast area LGBT people in their own words and through their eyes; and 2.) To identify key issues and concerns facing LGBT people in the Seacoast.

Focus group participants were identified through Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership members, who submitted names of potential LGBT people and allies. Five of the groups were comprised of adult LGBT people and allies: One focus group was conducted at Seacoast Outright, a support group for LGBT and questioning youth.

Focus groups ranged in size from 5 to 9 participants and met for a period of two hours. The groups were largely self-directed. The primary role of the facilitator was to guide the groups from general descriptions - "Describe your experience as an LGBT person in the Seacoast" - to specific concerns and service needs as each session progressed. All of the focus groups were facilitated by the project consultant, taped and transcribed.

Categories and themes from the focus groups are presented in section IV; Demographic description of focus group participation is included in appendix "B".

B. SERVICE PROVIDER INPUT

The two objectives in seeking provider input were 1.) to describe organizations currently providing services to LGBT people - funding sources, staffing patterns, current programs and services, organizational challenges, collaborative efforts, etc. and 2.) to under-
II. DATA COLLECTION METHODS —— continued

stand their perceptions of the needs of LGBT people in the Seacoast. Organizations were identified by Partnership members, focus group participants, and other service providers.

A "Service Provider Survey" was mailed to 100 individuals and organizations, including LGBT social and political groups, therapists, health and mental health care providers, churches and schools. Twenty individuals and organizations responded.

A provider focus group was also conducted to review, synthesize and expand upon the results of the provider survey. This group was attended by 13 individuals representing 10 organizations. Detailed results from the provider input are presented in appendix "D" which is available from GPCF upon request.

C. COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

The objectives of the Community Needs Assessment Survey were 1.) to quantify and test the issues and themes that emerged from the focus groups. 2.) to expand input and participation in the data collection process, and 3.) to collect demographic data about LGBT people participating in the Scan.

The survey explored the following themes:
1. LGBT Community development (i.e. - access to information, arts and culture, social programs, meeting other LGBT people.)
2. Human and Civil Rights (i.e. - workplace policies, safety, legal protection from discrimination, marriage and adoption.)
3. Community Education / Building bridges (i.e. - educational programs, integration w/ larger community.)
4. Social Services, Health and Mental Health (i.e. - support groups, finding "gay-friendly" service providers, access to HIV/AIDS information.)
5. Relationship and Family (i.e. - couples issues, sexuality, parenting, coming out to family.)

The survey also asked respondents about frequency of use and level of satisfaction with regard to existing programs and services.

Distribution of the surveys was targeted, with the intent of "bracketing" various demographic continuums (i.e. Gay AA attenders and bar attenders, social groups and political groups, "closeted" individuals and very "out" individuals). Focus group participants, Partnership members, LGBT organizations and service providers assisted in the distribution, and surveys were made available in strategic public places such as LGBT bars and the Lesbian/Gay section of a local bookstore. 750 Community Needs Assessment surveys were distributed; 144 were returned. Detailed results from the Community Needs Assessment Survey are presented in appendix "C."

III. DATA ANALYSIS

A. FOCUS GROUPS

Data analysis was performed by a task group comprised of the project consultant and two Partnership members. Complete transcripts of the focus groups were read by each individual, and broad themes were identified. It is important to note that the analysis was inductive: patterns and themes were allowed to emerge from the data without preconceived expectations on the part of the task group members. We were not "looking for" anything except what emerged from the voices of the participants.

Following individual review, the task group met once to compare and synthesize themes and develop categories. Specific quotes were identified as examples for each category. The task group met a second time to incorporate the themes
III. DATA ANALYSIS continued

into a survey instrument for the next phase of the Scan.

In addition to the data that emerged, the focus groups also served to develop ownership and commitment to the Affirming Seacoast Community initiative - in other words, community building took place for those involved. Community members who did not directly participate in focus groups described hearing positive reports of the process, and expressed excitement and hopefulness. It is clear that the Scan, in addition to information gathering, has been a process of community empowerment. Building on this positive energy will increase acceptance and ownership of the program priorities and grantmaking guidelines developed by the Partnership.

B. SERVICE PROVIDER INPUT

Responses from the "Service Provider Survey" were compiled and broad themes related to organizational needs, existing programs and client needs were identified by the project consultant. These themes were "fed back" to a focus group of 13 service providers who clarified, added to and synthesized the themes. The outcomes of the provider survey and focus groups were combined and thematically compared with the focus group and community survey information. Outcomes from the Service Provider Survey and focus group are presented in appendix "D" which is available from GPCF upon request.

IV. CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The following categories were developed as themes and issues emerged during the Scan process: Development and nurture of the LGBT community in the Seacoast; Civil and human rights for LGBT people; Bridge building and education in the wider Seacoast community; Health and social services; and Youth.

A. LGBT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

"There is very little sense of community - it is probably the single most powerful factor in keeping LGBTs isolated and ineffective in creating real change and acceptance in society at large."

The category that we describe as LGBT Community development was the strongest to emerge from the Community Scan and includes several themes:

- Invisibility and isolation: the need for visible role models and connection to LGBT community
- Community self-esteem: the need for an empowered LGBT community
- Access to information: communication between individuals, groups and service providers
- Fragmentation: the need for connection between sub-groups
- Social options: "friendly" spaces, alcohol free meeting places, entertainment
- Diversity and common ground within LGBT community
- Challenges facing grassroots LGBT organizations

Invisibility, low community self-esteem and access to information are three themes that are tightly interconnected: LGBT people in the Seacoast, like their counterparts in other rural communities, fear the loss of relationships or jobs if they come out; a largely invisible community reinforces a sense of isolation and low self esteem. Communication is circumspect and often indirect, preserving invisibility. As one focus group member commented: "What we are really good about as a community is being discrete.
IV. CATEGORIES AND THEMES continued

We have isms, acronyms, names... If you didn’t know what they were you wouldn’t know how to find out.” A significant number of LGBT people surveyed were unfamiliar with existing programs and services such as the Sexual Minority Advisory Committee or the Coalition to End Discrimination.

Social options, particularly “gay friendly” spaces within the larger community and alcohol-free activities were mentioned frequently in connection with community. Individual and community self esteem is nurtured and strengthened by LGBT affirming arts, culture, and social options. One focus group member talked about needing to leave the Seacoast to find this affirmation:

“I needed to go someplace where there were people who had a life that showed me what it might look like. Where I could go around and there were books and theater and movies and families and sensitive people in the school system, and classes. It wasn’t once in a blue moon, but on a regular basis being able to open up to things and see things related to my life. So I think about it because I don’t have a bad life here, but I have to work hard to have a good life.”

Another participant directly connected availability of LGBT arts and culture with community development:

“These [gay friendly events, speakers, entertainers] create a feeling of community because people can go and be out and see role models from the world of famous people who have something in common with you...you feel validated and you feel part of the community. I think that’s really important for people...to build community you need to build self esteem.”

Survey results indicate that LGBT bookstores, films, theater and dance clubs are used more often and with more satisfaction than programs such as support groups or civil rights organizations. At the same time, respondents expressed strong dissatisfaction with current availability of LGBT focused arts, culture and entertainment.

Lack of interaction between sub groups (i.e. - men & women, adults and youth), scant communication between LGBT groups and limited social options and meeting places contributes to fragmentation within the Seacoast LGBT community. Service providers, uninformed about what other providers are doing, often miss opportunities for referrals and resource sharing. Fragmentation also compounds the challenges facing many volunteer, grassroots organizations serving LGBT people: burnout, leadership and membership turnover, and financial struggles. The voice of one participant sums it up: “We need to pull ourselves together.”

B. HUMAN/CIVIL RIGHTS

“My aim isn’t just tolerance, my aim isn’t to just be able to walk down the street. My aim is to be able to live a full, whole life. To not leave parts of myself at the door. I think that there are a lot of ways to do it, but I’ve gotten more appreciative of legal rights.”

The category of Human / Civil Rights include issues related to:

- Fear of discrimination - family, work, housing, friends
- Workplace policies: Inclusion of LGBTs in EEO policies, same-sex partner benefits, etc.
- Outness at work
- Family rights: adoption, marriage, children

Human and civil rights, discrimination and legal issues are critical issues for LGBT people on the Seacoast. Living with fear was cited again and again by focus group members: fear of job loss, fear of verbal and physical harassment, fear of losing one’s children, fear of being ostracized by churches and religious communities. These concerns are daily barriers for LGBT people, preventing full and authentic
participation in many aspects of community life. Fear of discrimination is discrimination.

Being “out” in the workplace represents a risk for many LGBT people, a risk that is intensified when LGBT people are left out of company non-discrimination statements. Almost one third of survey respondents said that they were uncomfortable being “out” at their workplace, and only 26% said that they were always “out” at work. Being closeted to any degree is stressful, isolating LGBT people from their co-workers and compromising performance. One person stated: “I go to work everyday and feel like I’m beating my head against the wall most of the time...It’s immensely time consuming. Immensely emotionally draining.”

Same sex relationships are routinely excluded from benefits such as medical insurance coverage and family leave policies. These types of LGBT friendly workplace policies were identified as important by 92% of survey respondents.

Civil rights also include “Family rights” such as legal recognition of LGBT parents, adoption, and marriage. 95% of survey respondents identified family rights as issues of concern. One person described the struggle faced by many LGBT people: “The [legal] system doesn’t seem to understand that I’m a real person. a parent, because I’m a lesbian. We have absolutely no rights - gays and lesbians. They [the legal system] need to be educated that I am a parent.”

Barriers to participation in religious communities were mentioned by many LGBT people when discussing discrimination. Many people spoke of their need for spiritual nurturing and support and described experiences of feeling unwelcomed or unacceptable by churches. In the words of one group member: “I moved back into my home parish where I was raised 8 years ago, and pretty quickly realized that there was no place there for me there...there is very little tolerance for gay people.” A notable exception to this theme was the many positive references to South Church (Unitarian Universalist) in Portsmouth, which was identified as a haven and community center for LGBT people.

C. COMMUNITY EDUCATION/ BUILDING BRIDGES

“I think we have to be careful that we don’t get too far disconnected from the real, larger community that we exist in.”

The Community Education/Building Bridges category relates concerns about LGBT people relative to the community at large and includes the following:

- Sustaining LGBT sub-culture within the larger culture
- LGBT community integrating & connecting w/ larger culture
- Education and awareness in larger community

During the focus groups, many people described the LGBT “community” as a sub-culture, and questioned the desirability of trying to integrate that sub-culture into the larger community. A dynamic tension exists for area LGBT people: Creating and sustaining a uniquely rich and vital “gay” culture while reaching out and creating a place for themselves within the community at large. At what point does the sub-culture become isolating? And when does acceptance in the larger community become assimilation? The people involved in focus group discussions acknowledged the broad range of feelings and opinions about these issues, leaving the questions themselves suspended for continued dialogue. As one focus group member stated:

“I think there’s a real struggle between people. Do they want to be part of the general culture, all mixed in, homogenized and accepted everywhere? Or do some people want to have a distinctly separate gay and lesbian subculture? I don’t think it’s clear. I think there are people in both camps.”
Survey respondents were nearly equally interested in feeling part of the "LGBT subculture" (88%) and feeling integrated with the "larger community" (89%). One survey respondent commented: "Being totally and proudly "out" to the heterosexual community has been the best tool in bridging the two communities in my experience."

The need for community education was identified as a key issue throughout the Community Scan. Awareness education programs in schools and workplaces were mentioned most frequently, reflecting the deeper concerns for youth and equal opportunity. When asked about the needs facing LGBT people, service providers overwhelmingly identified education, awareness and acceptance by the larger community.

**D. SOCIAL SERVICES/ HEALTH/ MENTAL HEALTH**

"It's tough enough out there. Without a good support source or group it's very tough to live day by day and feel confident, connected, and a vital part of the community."

The category of Social Services/ Health / Mental Health includes the following themes:

- Need for non-alcoholic social options
- HIV/AIDS – more education and support for women and men
- Visibility and access to supportive providers

There are threads connecting this category and those of Community Development, Civil Rights, and Bridge building. Many health, mental health and social service needs are rooted in the marginalization of LGBT people, and their exclusion from mainstream community support systems. Invisibility and isolation, overt and covert discrimination, and the struggle for acceptance all contribute to the need for safe support services.

The impact of alcohol among LGBT people is notable; among existing health and social service programs asked about in the community survey, Gay Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the most frequently used by respondents, second only to the local AIDS service organization. One focus group participant expressed poignant frustration: "The damage that's been done to the gay and lesbian community by the fact that people have been essentially forced into places that serve alcohol as their only major social venue!"

HIV/AIDS education was identified in the community scan as a continuing need. Prevention education for all LGBT people, and particularly efforts targeting lesbian and bisexual women, was seen as important by a number of respondents. At the same time, 88% of survey respondents said that it is easy for them to find HIV/AIDS education information.

Finding supportive service providers is a concern of many seacoast LGBT people. "Gay-friendly" health and mental health care providers are relatively invisible to LGBT people who are not "in the loop." A large percentage of survey respondents were not familiar with existing health and social service organizations serving LGBT people. One social worker commented "...the two calls that essentially weren’t my job, that I definitely would field, were questions from people new to the area about health care and gay and lesbian friendly physicians."

The need for increased awareness education for health and social service providers was identified by survey respondents and the providers themselves.

**E. YOUTH**

"It's hard enough being a teenager anyway, but if you're gay and you want to come out you have to be really careful... because you know that someone's going to make a comment, someone's going to try to start something with you."
IV. CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The category for youth includes concerns expressed by both youth and adults:

- Role models and support systems for LGBT youth
- Meeting other LGBT youth and adults
- Concerns about "outness" at home, school, work, etc.
- Involvement in LGBT Community

Concern for “our youth” was expressed over and over again in all phases of the Community scan. Many adult LGBT people identified the need for positive, “out” role models for LGBT youth, and an interest in forming mentoring relationships with young people. Support services and awareness education, especially in school settings, are seen as critical. One focus group member lamented: “Our youth are killing themselves!”

The youth themselves expressed frustration about limited opportunities to meet and socialize with other LGBT people. Those who participated in a focus group at Seacoast Outright (a support group for LGBT youth in Portsmouth) were well informed about youth support groups in Boston and Portland, and about under 21 nights at Boston area LGBT clubs. A common barrier in accessing these social outlets is the feeling that they must remain closeted to family and “straight” friends at school. Several youth were impatiently awaiting their 18th birthday so that they could go to local gay clubs to meet other LGBT people.

“Outness” was a strong theme during the youth focus group. LGBT youth fear harassment and rejection by their friends if they “come out,” and many do not expect to receive support from teachers or other adults at school. One young person commented: “What I have a problem with is teachers who giggle and make comments. And I’ve heard teachers say things, not only about gays, but women too.” Loss of support from parents is also seen as a risk for many LGBT youth. In the words of one teen: “My biggest fear is my parents.”

V. SUMMARY

The Community Scan and Needs Assessment identifies strong themes in several categories: “Community Development,” including issues of invisibility, isolation and fragmentation, and access to social and cultural options; “Community Education/Bridge Building” between LGBT people and the larger culture; “Civil/Human Rights,” including fear of discrimination in all areas of community and family life; “Social Services/Health/Mental Health,” for access to safe and supportive providers and programs; and “Youth,” which identifies specific needs for support and social options for young LGBT people.

Grantmaking guidelines developed by the Affirming Seacoast Community Funding Partnership should address these issues. Collaborative projects, projects designed to have broad system impact, and projects that impact interconnected issues should be encouraged.

The Community Scan and Needs Assessment began a dialogue among LGBT people and allies in the Seacoast. The focus groups engaged nearly 45 people in a process that began to “peel back the layers,” moving toward deeper understanding and shared meaning about their lives in the context of the larger community. The “Provider Focus Group” brought a diverse group of LGBT service providers into the same room - to our knowledge for the first time ever.

There is a growing energy and excitement about the potential of the Affirming Seacoast Community initiative. The Partnership has an important role in supporting and encouraging continuation of this community dialogue.
### APPENDIX A: COMPARISON OF FOCUS GROUP, COMMUNITY SURVEY, AND SERVICE PROVIDER THEMES

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<td>Social options</td>
<td>Integration w/larger community</td>
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<td>Community Education/Bridge Building</td>
<td>Sustaining LGBT culture w/larger culture</td>
<td>Sustaining LGBT culture w/larger culture</td>
<td>Integrating with larger culture</td>
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<td>Integrating w/larger culture</td>
<td>Integrating w/larger culture</td>
<td>Education and awareness in larger community</td>
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<td>Fear of discrimination - family, work, housing, friends</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Family rights: adoption, marriage, children</td>
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<td>Fear of discrimination - family, work, housing, friends</td>
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<td>Safety</td>
<td>Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Services/Health/Mental Health</td>
<td>Need for non-alcoholic social options</td>
<td>Need for non-alcoholic social options</td>
<td>Need for non-alcoholic social options</td>
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<td>HIV/AIDS education &amp; support</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS education &amp; support</td>
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<td>Support groups</td>
<td>Support groups, counseling</td>
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<td>Couples/relationship support</td>
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<td>Connection between LGBT youth &amp; adults</td>
<td>LGBT community/social options for youth</td>
<td>Connection between LGBT youth &amp; adults</td>
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<td>Outness</td>
<td>Support groups for LGBT youth</td>
<td>LGBT community/social options for youth</td>
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<td>Meeting other LGBT youth</td>
<td>Educational programs in schools</td>
<td>Educational programs in schools</td>
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<td>LGBT community/social options for youth</td>
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</table>
**APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS**

- **Total Attending:** 42
  - Women: 25
  - Men: 17
- **Age Range:**
  - Early 20's to mid 50's (adults)
  - 16 to 21 (youth)
- **Race:**
  - 39 White
  - 2 Black
  - 1 Hispanic
- **Sexual Orientation:**
  - 19 Lesbian
  - 16 Gay male
  - 3 Bisexual
  - 3 Unidentified/ally

**Occupations:**
Among the adults, 26 out of 34 were in professional or white collar positions including: computer systems analyst, mental health provider, teacher, college instructor, college student, college administrator, health care provider, trainer, consultant, municipal planning, clergy, newspaper advertising, photojournalism, and lawyer. The remaining participants held positions in retail, construction, manufacturing, restaurant and hospitality, and small non-profits.

**Place of Residence:**
Focus group participants were residents of various towns and cities in the Seacoast area, including Portsmouth, Exeter, Newmarket, Barrington, Dover, North Hampton, and Rye, NH and Kittery and Eliot, ME.

* Based on self-identification by focus group participants and observations of the facilitator

**APPENDIX C: COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS**

The following categories and themes are based on responses to the Community Needs Assessment Survey. A total of 144 surveys were returned; Not all questions were answered by all respondents. Percentages are based on total number returned.

**A. MAJOR THEMES**

**LGBT Community Development**

- 141 responses (98%) said it is very/fairly important to get information about gay friendly events.
- 85 responses (59%) said it is fairly/very difficult to get information about LGBT events: 33 responses said it was fairly/very easy to get information.
- What would help provide information:
  - LGBT newspaper (#1) & LGBT column in existing paper (#2) and LGBT Resource/Service guide (#3).
  - 141 responses (98%) said it is very/fairly important to meet other LGBT people.
  - 73 responses (51%) said it is fairly/very difficult to meet other LGBT people; 40 responses said it is fairly easy.
  - 134 responses (93%) said it is very/fairly important to have an LGBT Community space.
  - 138 responses (96%) said it is very/fairly important to have combined social programs for LGBT people of all ages.
  - Combined programs for LGBT adults were felt to be very/fairly important to 133 respondents (92%)
  - Combined programs for LGBT youth were felt to be very/fairly important to 120 respondents (83%)

(Programming for men of all ages and women of all ages received relatively low responses; Programs for transgenderal people were ranked lowest in importance)
APPENDIX C: COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS ——continued

- 141 responses (98%) said a sense of community with other LGBT people is very/fairly important.
- 95 responses (66%) said they were fairly/very dissatisfied with availability of LGBT arts, culture, entertainment.
- Respondents were more interested in: LGBT Community/resource center (#1) and LGBT community newspaper (#2) than in LGBT Business and professional network, LGBT resource directory, and LGBT film festival.
- LGBT human & civil rights received the highest average rating for “important issues”.

Human & Civil Rights, Discrimination and Legal Issues

- 88 responses (61%) were very/fairly comfortable being “out” at workplace & (32%) were fairly/very uncomfortable being “out” at work.
- 133 responses (92%) said LGBT friendly workplace policies are very/fairly important.
- 131 responses (91%) said health insurance for same-sex partners is very/fairly important.
- 137 responses (95%) said legal protection against discrimination in housing, employment, etc. is very/fairly important.
- Non-discrimination statute or ordinance received highest average among civil/human rights issues.

Community Education/Building Bridges w/Heterosexual Community

- 129 responses (89%) said it is very/fairly important to feel integrated with “larger community”.
- 127 responses (88%) said it is very/fairly important to feel part of “LGBT” subculture.
- 131 responses (91%) said LGBT awareness education for “larger community” very/fairly important.
- 136 responses (94%) said LGBT awareness education for schools very/fairly important.

- 93 responses (65%) said “Heterosexual only” programs fairly/very unimportant.

Social Services, Health and Mental Health

- 127 responses (88%) said HIV/AIDS education information is very/fairly easy to find.
- 114 responses (79%) said they are very comfortable/fairly comfortable being “out” to health care providers.
- 58 responses (40%) said it is fairly/very difficult to find “gay friendly” health care providers.
- LGBT health care provider resource guide (#1) and HIV/AIDS prevention education (#2) received highest interest ratings.
- Support groups for LGBT people of all ages were felt to be very/fairly important to 122 respondents (91%).
- LGBT youth support groups were felt to be very/fairly important to 121 respondents (84%).
(Support groups for men of all ages and women of all ages received relatively low responses; Support groups for transgendered people were ranked lowest in importance)

B. EXISTING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Respondents were asked to rate 24 existing programs and services regarding frequency of use and degree of satisfaction. Programs in the following categories were listed: Educational programs, Social/Support groups, Human/Civil Rights, Violence, Health and Social Service programs, and Arts, Culture & Expression.

The highest percentage of responses indicated the respondents are “not familiar with” or “never use” the existing programs and services listed. Least frequently used programs were in the categories of “Human/Civil Rights” (Open Door City Coalition, Coalition to End Discrimination.
**APPENDIX C: COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS ————continued**

NH Women’s Lobby) and “Violence” (A Safe Place, Seacoast Anti-Violence Project), Sexual Assault Support Services, Sexual Minority Advisory Council). People who do use these services are generally satisfied.

The categories of “Social/Support groups (Out and About, Seacoast Gay Men, Seacoast Outright, Dover LGB Support Group, UNH Alliance) and "Health & Social Service Programs" (AIDS Response - Seacoast, AIDS/HIV support groups, Gay AA, Feminist Health Center) were identified as more frequently used. Respondents were fairly satisfied with the “Social/Support” programs, and generally very satisfied with the “Health and Social Service" programs they used.

Programs in the category of "Arts, Culture, and Expression" (Lady Iris Bookstore, Adult Bookstores, LG identified films and theater, LGBT sections of bookstores, Members Club, Desert Hearts Club and Gay Pride celebrations) were used more often than programs and services in any other category. (Adult Bookstores was the exception - respondents use them infrequently and with very little satisfaction.) Gay clubs are used fairly frequently with moderate satisfaction. Lady Iris, LG sections of bookstores, LGBT identified films and theater, and Gay Pride events are used most often with very high satisfaction.

### C. COMMUNITY SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

#### 1. Sexual Orientation:
- 67 Lesbian woman
- 7 Bisexual woman
- 3 Transgender woman
- 2 Ally
- 2 Heterosexual
- 58 Gay man
- 2 Bisexual man
- 2 Transgender man
- 2 Questioning
- 1 Other (please specify)

#### 2. Income Level:
- 24 A. $14,900 or under
- 20 B. $15,000 - $19,900
- 18 C. $20,000 - $24,900
- 28 D. $25,000 - $34,900
- 26 E. $35,000 - $44,900
- 20 F. $45,000 or over

#### 3. Number of People in Household:
- 40 A. One
- 39 B. Two
- 15 C. 3–5
- 7 D. More than five

#### 4. Age:
- 5 A. 18 or under
- 11 B. 18 - 24
- 44 C. 25 - 34
- 48 D. 35 - 44
- 22 E. 45 - 59
- 7 F. 60 or older

#### 5. Degree of “Outness”

**A. Family**
- 16 1. Never
- 45 2. Sometimes
- 76 3. Always

**B. Professional/Workplace**
- 21 1. Never
- 77 2. Sometimes
- 38 3. Always

**C. LGBT Friends**
- 1 1. Never
- 16 2. Sometimes
- 120 3. Always

**D. Heterosexual Friends**
- 7 1. Never
- 79 2. Sometimes
- 50 3. Always

#### 6. Education Level:
- 0 A. Less than High School
- 32 B. High School
- 48 C. 4-year College Degree
- 44 D. Graduate or Post Graduate Degree
- E. Other: GED (2), 2-year degree (14)

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CREATE OUR DESTINY

CONSTRUCTING A HEALTHY FUTURE
FOR SEACOAST LESBIAN, GAY,
BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER,
QUEER, QUESTIONING & ALLIED PEOPLE

FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE

May 16 - 18, 1997
SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES

FRIDAY

5:00 - 6:00 pm Dinner
6:15 - 7:30 pm Welcome, Conference Overview, Introductions
7:30 - 9:30 pm Focus on the Past

SATURDAY

8:30 - 8:45 am Gathering and Coffee
8:30 am - 12:30 pm Focus on the Present
12:30 - 1:30 pm Lunch
1:30 - 3:30 pm Focus on the Present (continued)
3:30 - 6:00 pm Focus on the Future: Creating Ideal Scenarios

SUNDAY

7:45 - 8:00 am Gathering and Coffee
8:00 - 9:50 am Our Common Vision for the Future
9:50 am - 12:10 pm Action Planning
12:10 - 12:30 pm Reflections on the Conference
KEY ASPECTS OF A FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE

The WHOLE SYSTEM - a cross section of as many interested parties as practical - participates in the Conference. Everyone brings important experience and perspectives. Participants join their perspectives to create a comprehensive picture of the past and present and to develop a common future to which all can commit.

Participants first explore the PAST and then the PRESENT. They create awareness and understanding of what has brought them to where they are and the important issues they now face. Then they FOCUS ON THE FUTURE. They develop a picture of the future they want to create together.

Participants use DIALOGUE, not debate. They work to understand one another, building an increasingly complete picture of what they all face together rather than stopping to solve particular problems.

Participants work toward COMMON GROUND. Differences are recognized and honored. Participants do not stop to focus on and resolve those differences.
ROLES AND GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants' Role

Provide information and analysis.

Manage own small groups.

Develop your common future.

Identify and commit to action steps.

Help to maintain Future Search principles and guidelines for participation.

Conference Managers' Role

Set agenda, tasks, time frame.

Manage large group.

Help to maintain Future Search principles and guidelines for participation.

Conference Recorders' Role

Transcribe everything on newsprint to computer disk.

Guidelines for Participation

We are all learning. Respect each person's learning process.

Treat all ideas as important.

Listen and inquire with the intent to understand, not to critique or debate.

Put all information on newsprint.

Adhere to the schedule.

Seek common ground.

Recognize, honor and explore differences; do not focus on resolving them.

Maintain confidentiality. It is ok to share general themes but not information about individuals. This guideline will be maintained in all spoken and written communication about the conference.

Enjoy!

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR INTRODUCTIONS

STEP ONE. Someone at the table volunteers to track time so all participants are able to introduce themselves in the time allotted.

STEP TWO.

Each person at your table will have 3 minutes to introduce her or himself. Each introduction should include:

• Your name and what brings you to this conference.

• An explanation of the object you have brought and what it symbolizes for you in relation to the theme of the conference.

• One outcome you would like to see result from this conference.

• One concern or worry you have about the conference (if any).

STEP THREE. Conference managers ask those individuals who would like to do so to share their desired outcome for the conference and/or their concern with the large group.
WORKSHEET 1A - FOCUS ON THE PAST

PURPOSE: Develop understanding of our history, how we have come to be where we are as individuals, as a society, and as seacoast LGBTQA people. This sets the context for understanding our present situation and for developing our common future.

STEP ONE. Make notes below on key events in:
- your personal history;
- our global history;
- the history of seacoast LGBTQA people.

STEP TWO. Use a marker to transfer your notes to the appropriate sheets on the wall. If someone has already written something that is true for you, put a check mark next to it.

PERSONAL HISTORY: KEY EVENTS

1950s

1960s

1970s

1980s

(continued next page)
WORKSHEET 1A (continued) - FOCUS ON THE PAST

PERSONAL HISTORY: KEY EVENTS (continued)

1990s

GLOBAL HISTORY: KEY EVENTS

1950s

1960s

1970s

1980s

(continued next page)
WORKSHEET 1A (continued) - FOCUS ON THE PAST

GLOBAL HISTORY: KEY EVENTS (continued)

1990s

HISTORY OF SEACOAST LGBTQA PEOPLE: KEY EVENTS

1950s

1960s

1970s

1980s

1990s
ROLEs FOR SELF MANAGING SMALL GROUPs

Each small group manages its own discussion, data, time, and reports. Before each activity, please be sure that the following roles are assigned. Roles should be rotated.

- DISCUSSION LEADER: Assure that each person who wants to speak has an opportunity to do so. Help to keep the group on task so the group is able to complete the task in the time available.

- TIMEKEEPER: Provide the group with periodic time checks. Monitor reporters and signal time remaining.

- RECORDER: Write the group's ideas on newsprint, using the speaker's own words. Ask people to restate long ideas in briefer form.

- REPORTER: Report to the large group in the time allotted.

- DATA MANAGER: See that all newsprint is posted. Help to keep related information together on the walls.

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WORKSHEET 1B - FOCUS ON THE PAST

REPORTS ARE DUE AT _______ O'CLOCK.

PURPOSE: Develop a more thorough understanding of our history by identifying themes and patterns. Establish a foundation for exploring the present and developing our future.

STEP ONE. Select roles for self management.

STEP TWO. As a group, develop your analysis of themes and patterns for your assigned timeline(s). Record your views on newsprint. If you have differing views about the themes and patterns, record them, and include this in your report to the large group.

TABLE ASSIGNMENTS

PERSONAL HISTORIES: Table(s) ______

Use the personal timeline to develop the collective story of the individuals in this room. What themes and patterns do you see?

GLOBAL HISTORY: Table(s) ______

Use the global timeline to develop the story of our global history. What themes and patterns do you see?

HISTORY OF SEA COAST LGBTQA PEOPLE: Table(s) ______

Use the seacoast LGBTQA timeline to develop the story of seacoast LGBTQA people. What themes and patterns do you see?

THE WHOLE PICTURE: Table(s) ______

Look at all three timelines together. What story do they tell? What themes and patterns do you see?

REPORTERS: BE PREPARED TO SUMMARIZE YOUR GROUP'S WORK IN A THREE MINUTE REPORT.
WORKSHEET 2A - FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

CRITICAL TRENDS IN THE ENVIRONMENT OF SEA COAST LGBTQA PEOPLE

PURPOSE: Build a shared understanding of the environment within which we will create the future for seacoast LGBTQA people.

ACTIVITY ONE - ARTICLE SUMMARY

In your groups, each person summarizes the article she or he brought and explains why its topic is important to the future of seacoast LGBTQA people.

Allow two minutes per person. It is not necessary to record this discussion on newsprint: this activity is preparation for the task that follows.

ACTIVITY TWO - GROUP MIND MAP

The entire group will create a mind map of all the current trends affecting the future of seacoast LGBTQA people.

Guidelines for mind mapping:

• Each person offering an idea names the trend in her or his own words and says where it goes on the mind map.
• Be concrete. Say who is doing what. Describe what is happening.
• Do not evaluate one another's statements.
• Help the conference managers to manage this process. Their aim is to get everyone's ideas on the mind map.
WORKSHEET 2B - FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

WHAT ARE WE DOING TO ADDRESS CURRENT TRENDS? WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

REPORTS ARE DUE AT __________ O'CLOCK.

PURPOSE: Identify what we are doing and what we need to do to address critical trends in the environment of seacoast LGBTQA people.

STEP ONE. Select roles for self management.

STEP TWO. Choose up to three trends which you believe are critical to the future of seacoast LGBTQA people. You may combine trends from the mind map in any way you choose.

STEP THREE. Record the following on newsprint. If you have differing views, record them and note the differences in your report.

For each trend, identify what is currently being done to address the trend.

For each trend, identify what you think needs to be done to address the trend.

REPORTERS: BE PREPARED TO SUMMARIZE YOUR GROUP'S WORK IN A _______ MINUTE REPORT.
WORKSHEET 2C - FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

PROUDS AND SORRIES

REPORTS ARE DUE AT __________ O’CLOCK.

PURPOSE: Recognize and take responsibility for what we are proud of and what we are sorry about in regard to our roles in creating a healthy future for seacoast LGBTQA people.

STEP ONE. Select roles for self management.

STEP TWO. Draw a line down the middle of a newsprint page. On one side, brainstorm a list of what you are doing now that you are proud of. On the other side, brainstorm a list of things you are doing or not doing that you are sorry about.

STEP THREE. Select your group’s _______ “proudest prouds” and “sorriest sorries” to report to the large group.

REPORTERS: Be prepared to summarize your group’s work in a _______ minute report.
WORKSHEET 3A - OUR IDEAL FUTURE, YEAR 2005

PRESENTATIONS ARE DUE AT _________ O'CLOCK.

PURPOSE: Create a vivid picture of the future we want to create for seacoast LGBTQA people by 2005.

YOUR TASK: Create a presentation which brings to life a healthy future for seacoast LGBTQA people. Your group will present your ideal scenario to the entire group. You will have seven minutes for your presentation.

STEP ONE. Select roles for self management.

STEP TWO. In your group, develop your vision of a healthy future for seacoast LGBTQA people. Be specific. Exactly what is happening? Discuss the barriers that you will have to overcome to achieve this ideal.

Criteria for your scenario:

• It is a feasible ideal that stretches your thinking, engages your creativity, depicts your dream.
• It is desirable; you want it to happen.
• It is motivating; you will work to make it happen.

STEP THREE. Develop a creative way to bring your ideal future to life in front of the large group. It is the year 2005. Act out what is happening. Note barriers that have been overcome and how this was accomplished.

STEP FOUR. Present your scenario to the entire group. You will have seven minutes.
WORKSHEET 3B - NOTES ON THE FUTURE SCENARIOS

PURPOSE: As the scenarios are presented, note common themes and unresolved differences that appear. These will serve as the basis for developing our common vision of a healthy future for seacoast LGBTQA people.

Notes:
WORKSHEET 4 - OUR COMMON VISION

PURPOSE: Develop common ground on the future we want to create to together.

STEP ONE. Select roles for self management (no need for a reporter for this activity).

STEP TWO.

As a group, brainstorm common themes and unresolved differences observed in the presentation of future scenarios.

Write each theme or difference on a strip of newsprint. Please write in large letters.

STEP THREE. As an entire group, we will sort the themes to develop our common vision of a healthy future for seacoast LGBTQA people. Conference managers will provide instructions for this process.
WORKSHEET 5A - PERSONAL ACTION PLANNING

(This sheet is for your own use.)

PURPOSE: Identify short and long term action steps you want to take to work toward a healthy future for seacoast LGBTQA people.

SHORT TERM ACTIONS (next 3 months)

What I will do                      By when

LONG TERM ACTIONS (beyond the next 3 months)

What I will do                      By when

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WORKSHEET 5B - PLANNING ACTION PROJECTS

PRESENTATIONS ARE DUE AT __________ O'CLOCK.

PURPOSE: Identify goals, an action plan, and specific next steps for your action project.

STEP ONE. Select roles for self management.

STEP TWO.

Determine the goals for your action project.

Sketch an action plan from the present to the accomplishment of your goals. (Go as far with this as time allows.)

Identify specific next steps to be taken following the future search conference. Identify WHO will do WHAT by WHEN.

STEP THREE. Prepare a _______ report to present to the large group summarizing the goals of your project and specific next steps (who, what, by when).

REPORTERS: BE PREPARED TO SUMMARIZE YOUR GROUP'S WORK IN A _______ REPORT.
APPENDIX D'

The following questions guided my thinking about the categories:

- How did participants choose to label or identify themselves during the “lens group” work at “Create Our Destiny”?
- How do participants choose to label or identify themselves in terms of the categories gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and allied people?
- How do participants see society at large viewing the categories gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and allied people?
- What implications do these societal views have on the participants’ internal view of themselves?
- How does the data created by the conference participants inform current theory on sexuality and gender identity?
- Are there broader implications in terms of queer pedagogy and social action for this model which is designed to focus on common ground, and if so what are they?

The following kinds of questions spurred my thinking about labels:

- What does a particular label mean to the person who chooses it? Are labels convenient ways of describing actual (as opposed to hypothetical) associations in which the individual has engaged.
- Conversely, is a label used to describe a broader notion, the way in which individuals see themselves in the world, in this case in term of their potential to be sexually and emotionally intimate with others of the same or different genders?
- Are labels used in a rigid fashion in day-to-day life?
- Do individuals use labels in ways which vary based on the context, on their assumption of what will garner the desired effect?
- What role do labels play in connecting the individual to a large group and to larger political positions?

Other questions for the follow-up meetings:

- Why did you come to the COD? Where does your motivation come from?
- Walk me through your experience with the COD. What group # were you on Friday night, and what are your recollections of the time line discussion that you had resulting in this information?
• Someone mentioned that the speakers for the groups were 6 males and 2 females what were the circumstances in your group.
• On Saturday you came back and were asked to pick a lens group from which to view the present. How was that experience for you?
• What process did you go through to pick a group/ lens.
• What others would you have been comfortable with, and why did you not pick them?
• Did you connect up with others who had similar views, experiences, interests, notions of what is happening and what needs to happen?
• A remark was made “I want to be what I do not who I am” Did that kind of thinking have any bearing on your decision to join the group you picked?
• Show a list of the results of the mind map.
• How did you decide where to put your dots?
• When you look at the results of the mind map dot placement, the struggle we have with labels and words came in with 1 dot, while legal workplace, home and school support received 86 dots. What does that say to you?
• Take a look at your groups report outs on the three trends of most interest. Can you share your recollection of that discussion?
• Visibility seemed to be a key concept in the prouds and sorries.
• What did you see as the themes that emerged in the vignettes.
• How do the synopsis accurately reflect the plan for your group?
• Were they realistic?
• Any surprises?
• Tell me about seeing the common ground laid out on the group with the unresolved differences off to the side.
• What was your understanding of the homophobia that was listed as an unresolved difference?
• Groups formed to work on the action plans, how did you decide which group to go with?
• You were given the law of personal mobility, did you need it, was it good to have it there just in case?
• How did it feel to be in a room with that many people engaged in work around gender identity and sexual orientation?
• How much did the climate around the conference, Ellen and HB 421 influence the energy level?
• There was a lot of discussion about burnout, what are your thoughts on the reasons for the high level of burnout amongst the participants?
• What kinds of messages do LGBTQ people receive from society about who they are, how they are perceived and where they fit in the current social milieu?
• What kinds of messages have respondents received from schools, curricula and educators about who they are, how they are perceived and where they fit in society?
What kind of experiences have had a profound effect on respondents’ racial, cultural and personal identities as GBLTQA people?

Based on their personal experiences, what recommendations do respondents make in terms of educating GBLTQ children in a racially and culturally diverse society such as ours?

In what ways do you see the commonly held stereotypes influencing your sense of identity.

Read the following quote:
Silin (1997) After all, our stories are not abstract fictions separate from the world “out there.” They link our lives to particular cultures, offer maps for others, provide insights into sociopolitical realities. Stories change over time and are transformed by the times. If we constitute ourselves through the stories we tell, we are also constituted by the communities available to hear them.

What are those communities who can listen and how different is the story based on who will hear it?

What do I need to be particularly conscious of as I plan to write up this experience perhaps for publication.
### AFFIRMING SEACOAST COMMUNITY
### PARTNERSHIP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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<th>Name</th>
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<td>Geoffrey Clark</td>
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<td>Martha Fuller Clark</td>
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<td>Suzannah Colt</td>
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<td>Carol Trecosta</td>
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<td>Yared Wube</td>
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### FUTURES CONFERENCE PLANNING COMMITTEE

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent Form

April 14th, 1997

Dear Creating our Destiny Participant:

Historically the lives of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender (GLBT) people have often been represented in stereotypical and marginalizing ways. While change is occurring slowly, there is still little information detailing the actual life experiences of LGBTQA* people. The "Create Our Destiny" conference provides a unique opportunity for LGBTQA people in Seacoast to create a shared sense of the past and present, and to work on constructing a healthy future. I am presently conducting a doctoral research project in education which will document events, from the inception of the conference, to its completion on May 18th, 1997.

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that, with the approval of the rest of the planning team, I will be collecting, describing and analyzing the data created at "Create Our Destiny." This project will document the sequence of events and describe the work done by the participants throughout the two and a half days. In keeping with University of New Hampshire research guidelines, individual confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

Additionally, I am interested in carrying out follow-up interviews with each member of the planning team and some of the participants shortly after the conference. The conference itself will dictate with whom I request interviews. Your participation in follow-up interviews is voluntary. If you consent to be interviewed, I will ask you to discuss, in open-ended fashion, topics such as:

- your experience with the "Create Our Destiny" conference;
- perceptions of the Seacoast LGBTQA communities or lack thereof;
- experiences as a LGBTQA person in Seacoast;
- experiences or interactions you have had with, or as, a visible role model;
- access to information which you feel is pertinent to the Seacoast LGBTQA communities;
- general background information about your role in the Seacoast LGBTQA communities.

Again, your responses will remain strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for each person that I interview. To help ensure confidentiality, I will have sole access to all interview notes or transcripts. You will have the option of saying things "off the record" that will not find their way into the final account. You may choose to end the interview at any time. Participants who wish to obtain copies of their interviews may do so upon request.

I am available to answer questions or concerns about this project at my home, 868-2468, or by e-mail <carim@christa.unh.edu>. Please sign and return a copy with your completed application. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Cari Moorhead
Ph.D. Candidate. UNH Dept. of Education.

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The purpose of this project has been explained to me. I understand that the data created during the Creating our Destiny conference will be collected and utilized for research purposes, to enhance understanding of the life experiences and long term goals for LGBTQA people in Seacoast. I understand that my participation in further interviews is voluntary. I further understand that the confidentiality of all data associated with my participation in this project, including my identity, will be maintained to the fullest extent possible.

___ I understand that the “Create Our Destiny” conference is being documented, and that the data will be used for research purposes.

___ I am interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview.

________________________  ________________________
Name                           Signature, and Date
There was a large group interaction that allowed participants to state openly any hopes or concerns they had brought to the conference:

**Hopes**
- Space for younger people ... visible role models for younger people.
- Cohesiveness within the community, conserving resources less fractured community.
- Acceptance to other types of life styles, lesbian transsexual wants to help people like her gain acceptance in the community. Has experienced difficulty feeling accepted in the community.
- Feel part of a larger community, not a community within a community, within another community, feel like a community first.
- Start the momentum to start a gay community/conference center/coffee shop/bookstore.
- Greater momentum around legalization of same sex marriage, adoption of LGBTQ.
- Haven’t seen this kind of organizing (community development/networking) on a grand scale; would like to see a yellow pages or some kind of broadcast media for all people regardless of socioeconomic status. Free Internet time?
- Address schools becoming a safe space for youth, friendly for students and teachers.
- Personal view not presented as represented an entire mixed group table: Action as a desired outcome; participant felt compelled to work hard to overcome her past inaction against homophobia.
- Wants people to see themselves as activists.
- Make it safe for everybody to come out.
- Stop judging people and stop using labels.
- Transgender people honored as part of the GLBT community.
- Meet and influence people, develop a network, create a million butterflies.
- Honor everyone, including seeing the importance of labels and their nonuse.
- Sensitivity training with law enforcement.
- Domestic partner benefits standard in every workplace.
- An end to silent discrimination.

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Concerns

- A woman stated that she came to the conference concerned that she and her friends would be the only ones here. This was no longer a worry.
- Sad that there isn't 50/50 male/female representation.
- There aren't more youth here.
- It will be the same people carrying on and doing the work; there won't be any new people stepping forward.
- Folks could be silenced in subtle or not-subtle ways during the process. Asked for mindfulness as participants converse.
- This is 64 people. There are a lot of people who are not here, will they accept and embrace the outcomes?
- The concerns about youth and suicide, due to fear around LGBTQA concerns.
- Concern we are a diverse group can also be a weakness in getting a task done, it may get in the way of getting us to solutions.
- Where the money will be coming from to deal with this stuff, its never going to happen in this state.
- Hoping that tomorrow is not a gorgeous day.
APPENDIX H

The list of brainstormed lens groups generated by the large group but ultimately not used were is as follows:

- Big Queens and Gender Benders (merged)
- Bisexuals in opposite-sex relationships
- Closeted gay professionals and Gay teachers (merged)
- Coupled gay men
- Cross-cultural gay men
- Dyke
- Emotional gay men
- Feminist LGBTQQA people
- Gay men new to the "coming out" process
- Gay men over 40
- Gay men who support bisexuals
- Gay mental health workers
- Lesbians in committed relationships
- Lesbians who would like to be in a committed relationship
- LGBTQA bridge-builders (merged with Service Providers)
- LGBTQA people of color
- LGBTQA Unitarian Universalists
- Married bisexual women
- New women lesbians
- Non-labeling or people with label concerns
- Out lesbian (evolved into "Out" group)
- Parents of a gay child
- Partners in (or have been in) inter-racial relationships
- People who are HIV positive
- Queer
- Queer service workers (merged with Bridge Builders and Service Providers)
- Sexually ambiguous and shy
- Single bisexual women (became Switch-Hitters)
- Single gay men (evolved into Gay Men)
- Sober gay & lesbians
- Spiritual LGBTQA people
- Transgender activists
- Transgender allies
- Youth
APPENDIX I

Mind Map Counts

The following tallies were produced by the groups. Once participants had put their dots on the Mind Map planning team members traced, and named, the roots each idea as they branched out of the center in a way that was inclusive of the concept contained in all of connected shoots and branches. We then tallied the total number of dots on each branch. The following list is not meant to be hierarchical, rather an indication of the interest among the participants in the various topics. For the exercised that followed the Mind Map groups can choose any topic, including those on the mind map which received no dots. These major trends were written on strips of newsprint and pasted on the wall in descending order based on the number of dots assigned to them.

Counts emerged as follows:

- LGBTQA supported in legal system, workplace home and school - 86
- LGBTQA in collaboration - 41
- Out Youth and their supporters - 31
- Coming out of the closet - 23
- Need for fun safe places for LGBTQA (chem free neighborhoods) - 20
- Out role models in workplace media and schools - 19
- Increased gender identity / sexual orientation education - 15
- Teaching LGBTQA history - 14
- Inclusivity /affirmation - 11
- Public education with allies speaking out - 11
- Improving images smashing myths - 7
- Suicide prevention - 7
- Ending stereotypes types within and around gay/lesbian communities - 7
- Main stream service providers knowledge of LGBTQA issues - 7
- Comprehensive sex education/ HIV education - 6
- GBLT Support - 6
- Becoming activists - 5
- Presence in national and state politics - 4
- Connection inclusivity/ affirmation + LGBTQA collaboration - 4
- Out professional role models - 4
- Christian Coalition - 4
- Internalized homophobia - 4
- Senior citizens/ youth coalition - 4
- Access and referral to all services - 3
- LGBTQA couples and health support workshops? - 3
Fear/ safety issues - 3
Out Capital - 2
Connection inclusivity/ affirmation and recognizing connections ending 'isms' - 2
Dealing with addictions - 1
LGBTQA Senior citizen housing - 1
Our struggle with labels and words - 1
APPENDIX J

Allies

1. LGBTQA Collaboration:
What is being done?
• Women's health consortium
• South Church
• Affirming Seacoast Community Partnership
• ARS
• COD
• PFLAG

What needs to be done to address trend, what's being done to bring these organizations together?
• More of what is happening here today ("Create Our Destiny" Conference).
• Allies need to be more active (in searching out these organizations) and alerting their friends to LGBTQA issues etc.
• Allies need to be more activist; gay pride march, letters, newspapers.
• Allies need to be out.

2. Public Education, meaning education of the public -with allies speaking out.
What is being done now?
• We're allies and we're here!
• We are searching out education
• In some churches allies are speaking out
• Some legislators and the Governor are speaking out.

What should be done / needs to be done:
• More!
• Education of the Christian Coalition
• More positive media attention to the value of this community & problems.
• Allies forming groups with other allies to educate ourselves, the community and to support LGBTQAs
• Be outspoken, not silent
• In order to collaborate, information needs to be available to all of us. (information what is going on)
• Allies need to be more proactive in getting the information
• Remove the them and us feeling.
3. Increased pressure in National and State politics

**What is being done**

What needs to be done:

- It is easier to effect change from the top.
- More LGBTQA legislators and senators including national.
- Get someone to run against Bob Smith and Judd Gregg
- We need to lobby
- We need to do it in outlying areas beyond Seacoast - Rochester, Farmington etc.
what has been done in Portsmouth. Expand our influence in Seacoast.

**Bridge Builders and Service Providers**

1. LGBTQA collaboration,
2. Inclusivity and affirmation,
3. Fun, safe places for LGBTQA to congregate/play

**Needs:**

- LGBTQA Newsletter/Newspaper
- More opportunities (venues) for LGBTQA dialogue and leadership, training and development
- More activism from the heart
- Connections with and networking with other groups outside the LGBTQA community
- Community Center: Until then, a bulletin board! (In Market Square)
- To provide an opportunity for regular meetings of LGBTQA organizations (e.g. monthly breakfast) a.) share resources, b.) develop list of speakers
- COD-style conference for boards of all LGBTQA organizations. Recognize burnout, support one another
- Fun, safe community-wide events, a diverse offering: Film fests, educational programs, celebrity speakers, dinner-dance frolic

**Gay Men**

1. Teaching LGBTQA history
2. Need for fun places
3. Increased presence in politics

1. Teaching LGBTQA History
- More textbooks and magazines
- LGBTQA bookstore
- Increased availability/mainstream/from more diverse groups
- TV / Theater - openness and frequency -
- more positive, more accurate, more everyday media diversity storytellers oral tradition
- Queer study in Universities
- Honored by LGBTQA community as a legitimate pursuit
• Federal / State funding
• Outreach on the Seacoast
• OUT RIGHT/ PFLAG
• Continue to increase complexity
• PFLAG inter-library Program
• Nationwide - books to town library.

2. Need for fun places
What is being done?
• Being out in local places.
• House Parties/small group activities.
• Local organizations

What needs to be done?
• Smoke free, Conversation Friendly, Danceable, Inclusive, not just singles bar or club LGBTQ Bookstore/cafe
• More of being out in local places
• Like interest groups e.g. Two stepping, biking, Chiltern Mountain club.

3. Increased presence in national and state politics.
What is being done?
• Log cabin club/Stein/Toklas
• Some individual participation in political parties
• Some Out Politicians
• Human Rights Campaign Fund
• Radical Right - enter the debate with them
• Expose the Right Campaign
• Gay rights Legislation

What needs to be done?
• Greater expanded participation, more queer candidates
• Politics is part of every day life
• Greater pressure on the media
• Greater awareness of the radical right

Gay Parents

1. LGBT legal support
What is being done?
• Maine gay rights bill, HB 421, CED, CAGLR, some domestic benefits, custody cases

What needs to be done:
• form political/ action group in Seacoast
• request cities and towns to offer DP benefits
• propose same-sex marriage bills/ adoption
• propose more inclusivity to school boards
• police, need to understand there are diverse families, gay kids and kids with gay parents
2. Collaboration
What is being done?
• Common dances, share newsletters, NET
What needs to be done:
• community center (saw as separate issue)
• common newsletter but keep individual groups
• increase communication
• rainbow NET

3. Homophobia Prevention (internal and external)
What is being done?
• Coming out, news stories, school workshops, local organizations
What needs to be done?:
• alphabet history
• more school/ programs/ sensitivity
• come out, be out
• more media visibility (letters, stories)
• raise the rainbow flag at city hall in June (gay pride)

Gay professionals /teachers (closeted and non closeted.)

Theme coming out in a Venn diagram around coming out.
1. Legal
2. Social
3. Personal

• All of this is interconnected
• it’s getting better but we need more
• it all starts with making peace with ourselves
• we must be united
• any missing link threatens the whole thing
• support groups
• importance of foundational / institutional support
• legislation.

1. Legal
What is being done? (Underlined are the most important)
• HB 421. Maine’s law too
• domestic partnership benefits
• don’t ask don’t tell
• family leave act
• becoming activists
• internet
• court advocates/ out lawyers
• out/supportive politicians (governors)
• local groups

What needs to be done:
• Inclusive legislation/ language  
• adoption  
• foster case  
• partner benefits  
• marriage  
• extending HB 421 to all levels - EXPANDED

2. Personal

What is being done?
• Fear for personal/ youth safety (hate crimes)  
• role models  
• internalized homophobia  
• increase pride  
• courageous kids  
• fairly supportive community  
• increasing caring community, media support  
• increased integration  

What needs to be done:
• educate ourselves  
• role models  
• increasing caring community, media support  
• increased integration  
• lifestyle support  
• (family, social, legal)  
• to be out more  
• sense of humor  
• job security  
• eliminate internalized homophobia, fear  
• need more media support  
• increased integration  
• community center  
• being able to be supportive just as a human being.

3. Social

What is being done?
• Support groups/ environment, Portsmouth, Ogunquit  
• Churches  
• Resource guide and accessibility, (could be on the WEB)  
• suicide prevention  
• HIV  
• local organizations and out people  
• Schools  
• Speakers bureaus  
• Foundation support
What needs to be done:
- Out retailers
- more media support
- resource guide
- accessibility

Gender Benders (Combination of Big Queens and Gender Benders)

What's being done?
- More inclusive language (adding T's wherever applicable)
- Individuals educating others through local organizations
- Celebrity Gender-Bending
- Clothing Stores: Transgender night -- is this support or exploitation?
- More dialogue
- Bookstores, libraries, resources. A gender revolution!

What needs to be done...
- Access to "good jobs"
- Pay for gender education
- More information and resources on gender identity issues, support groups
- Play with gender more
- More understanding and dialogue about the overlap between the GLB community and the transgender one
- Self-awareness around gender
- Legal protection for transgender people
- Tracking and training relative to hate crimes; safe mechanism for recording of crimes
- More media representations, not just talk shows (they’re unreal)
- More help for dealing with families
- Safe healthcare

Background notes from the group:

- Suicide prevention
- Hate crimes
- Gender identity issues, education of transgender diversity, inclusivity and affirmation, programming supporting and representing transgender people
- Self-created economic justice/anti-exploitation: Creating capital to create opportunities, job safety and security, sex industry
- Group tensions and education
- Fun and safe space
- Outness
- Creating safety
Lesbians

1. Need for fun, safe places.
Currently, collaborative efforts are underway:
• Local groups
• support groups and events

Needs:
• Community Center (The group put this need at the center of a tree with these branches):
  • safe space
  • meeting space hangout
  • outreach
  • live entertainment
  • information center
  • events
  • library
  • educational information
  • discussion groups
  • coffeehouse
  • volunteers of both sexes

2. Need for out role models.
Currently:
• Ellen, other celebrities
• politicians
• teachers
• business leaders
• family members
• friends
• co-workers

These people all have these things in common:
• Financial security, Job security, Support systems, Inner strength to educate,
  Validation

Needs:
• More public acceptance
• Education
• Visibility
• Legal rights
• Safety
• Validation

3. Need to improve images and smash myths
Currently:
• Somewhat visible
• Coming out

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• Label jars, not people!

Needs:
• Be more visible
• To educate
• The more we come out, the more myths are dissolved!

**Midlife Lesbians**

1. Fun and safe places for GLBTQA people.

Current trends:
• Particular groups
• Liberal religious groups
• Not integrated into larger community
• Trend toward more integration between segregated groups in the GLBTQA community
• Attendance at Creating Our Destiny!

Needs:
• Greater integration into larger community with more visibility
• More collaboration between groups and larger community
• Community centers with a full range of programming; place of empowerment/education
• More outreach from the liberal churches to the larger community

2. Supportive legal system.

Current trends:
• Write-in LGBTQA friendly candidate
• HB 421 passed, Maine law passed, election of Jeanne Shaheen governor of NH
• Redefinition of family: More adoption and children, more services of union (even if not legalized)
• Backlash: Defense of Marriage Act in response to Hawaii trying to legalize gay marriage

Needs:
• All politics are local — Tip O’Neil: i.e. grassroots/neighborhoods/town council/school boards
• More joining and visibility
• Integration with the larger community!
• Challenging internalized homophobia

3. Support for youth.

Current trends:
• Not much support for kids: fear, lack of safety, homophobia
• Respect for All Youth conference in 3/93 leading to the birth of Seacoast Outright!
• More awareness of needs for youth

Needs:
• More role models
• More GLBTQA presence on school boards and committees
• More education to teachers/parents/community
• Support groups for youth in churches: South Church, etc.

The Out Group

Goal statement: Changes in the legal system are a “goal” and the 3 “trends” we’ve identified seem to be a means to that goal. Or ... changes in the legal system can lead to being more out.

The Three Trends:

1. Educating through activism
What is being done?
• Media exposure (positive) challenging the status quo
• gay history walk in Portsmouth, other orgs. And local events.
What needs to be done (what should be done in our humble opinion):
• collaboration, make activism, assessable, (child care, financial issues, etc.), challenging the status quo.

2. Coming out/Out role Models
What is being done?
• ELLEN, Xena (and Gabrielle), Melissa, Greg L., k.d., Martina, Barney “fag” Frank, Local faculty and teachers are out, out gay clergy.
What needs to be done:
• Increase safety for folks who want to come out thru legal protection, sensitivity, training. Boost self esteem / Battle Internalized homophobia,
• break down legal battles for mentoring, i.e. parenting, big brother and sister, adoption, foster care, ...)
• increase awareness of resources, inclusive community center.

3. Recognizing Connections/isms
What is being done?
• SMAC broadening to Minority Advisory committee,
• UNH orientation linking sexism and homophobia,
• educational systems simultaneously fractionalizing and merging minority groups (DSC at UNH), --- service providers doing that too,
• Cornell West at UNH,
• Strawberry Bank Diversity Conference
What needs to be done:
• Training/ increasing awareness in current GLBTQA groups,
• Cross-training between groups that deal with issues of oppressing,
• cross training for advocates,
• GLAAD training.
• “Come out! Come out! Wherever or who ever you are!”
Switch Hitter and Our Supporter(s)

1. Recognizing connections between all societal oppressions

What is being done?
• “Create Our Destiny” Conference
• Peace studies
• Local organizations

What needs to be done:
• More education
• More coalition/collaboration
• Teach history of oppression
• Teach value of diversity
• Recognize and honor diversity/ LGBTQ visibility in other social justice causes (e.g. women’s issues, race issues, weight.)

2. End to prejudice within gay and lesbian communities

What is being done?
• “Create Our Destiny” Conference
• public speaker at UNH
• Local org.
• Exclusivist groups becoming inclusive
• Media inclusion
• Image changing
• Image shattering

What needs to be done:
• Coalition/collaboration
• Recognizing sexuality as a social construction and increasing awareness of sexual orientation and gender identity as a continuum.
• Create bisexual speakers bureau
• Increase self-awareness body/mind/spirit
• Broaden our perspective on beauty, race and weight.

3. Teaching educators and public workers to teach realistic and inclusive sexuality and gender identity education.

What is being done?
• Dover’s sex education curriculum, not enough 6541 which requires that the curriculum is not exclusionary concerning sexual orientation.

What needs to be done:
• Public worker training
• Find funds
• Political pressure and political activism
• GLBT community and other local state and national government
• Inclusive, balanced curricula
• More communities develop and present realistic must be developed.
• Increase availability of gender identity issues and materials.
• Work with mainstream groups to achieve same end.
APPENDIX K

Prouds and Sorries

1. Allies
   
   Sorries:
   • Didn’t write that letter to the Portsmouth Herald
   • Any gay-themed jokes I laughed at before I met a gay person
   • Haven’t been that much of an activist in the past year
   
   Prouds:
   • Made sure my company supported an HIV-positive employee
   • Talked to my sister about lesbians
   • My out bisexual children

2. Bridge Builders and Service Providers
   
   Sorries:
   • semi-totally burned out
   • to not have been more active
   • to not have thought more about issues of inclusivity
   
   Prouds:
   • exploration of gender identity
   • to be here with everyone else trying to make a difference.
   • sexual minority health projects, Positive Action, the Net, appearing on national TV,
     being part of video “True Voices.”
   • Rainbow Net being created and creating waves

3. Gay Men
   
   Sorries:
   • That we didn’t come out earlier
   • Not being able to deal well with corporate, personal and family regarding coming out
     issues
   
   Prouds:
   • striving to be out in all aspects of life
   • community and political activism

4. Gay Parents
   
   Sorries:
   • not enough time for the community
   • not being demanding enough as parents
   • not being out to more people we know
   
   Prouds:
• to be part of a lot of activities
• to be out
• to have made efforts to reach out to people with AIDS.

5. Gay Professionals

   Sorries:
   • Falling victim to fear
   • Not always being really honest when different situations arose
   • Having a lot of hindsight

   Proud:
   • Being here at the conference
   • Coming out to family and self
   • Reaching out to kids through Seacoast Outright, and to students

6. Gender Benders/Big Queens

   Sorries:
   • Self-abuse, using chemicals, and consenting to sex we’re not comfortable with
   • Keeping silent in the face of bigotry
   • We project our internalized self-hatred onto other people in our community

   Proud:
   • We’re out in our neighborhoods, at our jobs, to our families; we’re role models
   • We’re educators, role models, sexuality educators and public speakers on safer sex
   • We’re here, and we’re alive, despite being at higher risk of suicide

7. Lesbians

   Sorries:
   • not coming out sooner
   • tolerating homophobic remarks
   • not working for legal rights

   Proud:
   • coming out
   • being members and participants of various support groups
   • out at work.

8. Midlife Lesbians

   Sorries:
   • Because of our lack of practice, we stumble over the letters LGBTQA and offend people
   • The strong internalized homophobia we struggle with, and the fact that we hold back other things as a result
   • That we’re not more active in the community

   Proud:
   • The steps we’ve taken to be publicly out
   • The way we’ve dealt with objections that came from family members
• Our grassroots involvement in the community at large, for instance through the Cabot Street Area Neighborhood Association

9. The Out Group
   Sorries:
   • We have not done more to educate ourselves and advocate around transgender and gender issues.
   • Our personal losses within the Seacoast community and the global community.
   • We are not superhuman; or rich, and can’t give lots of money to organizations; or unlimited time and energy
   Prouds:
   • Out in our work and with our families, and continuing to come out in our extended families
   • Found our voices and are speaking out against homophobia
   • Volunteers advocate and activists are working toward legal gains; we’re also being role models for youth; being on TV; volunteering for Seacoast Outright and SMAC and YSPAA. 3 of 7 of us testified for HB 421.

10. Switch Hitters and Their Supporters
    Sorries:
    • We don’t have a single word to define everyone
    • I let people think I was a homosexual instead of just being me!
    • All the homophobic things I did when I was closeted
    Prouds:
    • Personal activism: The Bisexual Support Group; the Dover group built bridges through community activities such as adopting a park, plus actions such as coming out at work and at home.
    • To be a supporter of diversity for all LGB people
    • To honor my attractions to all people.
APPENDIX L

Categories which emerged during the common ground exercise

Political -
Inclusive politics, LBTQQQA people in office
  LBTQQQA candidates and organizations
  Visibility in politics
  People in office x 6
President Sheehan
  (name removed) run for public office
  (name removed) for governor x 2
Friendly political figures

Legal / Rights
Legal support
Equal housing rights
No discrimination in commercial ventures
Legal Marriage x 5
Legal rights for all
LGBTQQQA friendly legal system
Adoption
  Adoption and foster care rights x 4

Law Enforcement Education
  Sensitivity training police and service providers x 2

Support groups
Adequate social support services
Support for healthy couples
Family support child care
Retirement communities for LGBTQQQA
More same-sex public displays of affection (PDA)
  More PDA's in general
  Tasteful PDA's for all

New Medical Technology
Accessible and affordable
  Cure / vaccine for HIV x 5

Alternative family structures x 3
Broadening the Range beyond Portsmouth

Farmington?

Money
Not focused on our deficits any more
Fundraising
Development of permanent LGBTQQA endowment

Inclusive Education
Alternative lifestyles included in sex education
HIV education x 2
Inclusive education

Domestic Partner Benefits x 9

Safety
Safe to be out x 3

Web page / Internet x 3

Queer Studies
LGBTQQQA studies in schools x 2
University majors
Informed, affirming curriculum for all x 2
Education / sensitivity training
Open the closet on history

Youth Issues
Out youth in the schools
Open and inclusive early childhood education
GLBTQQQA Teachers
LGBTQQQA Friendly & knowledgeable schools/ curricula
Safe schools
Visibility in safe schools
Children

Communication/ Media
Community Newsletter
Active Newspaper
Positive Media Visibility
LGBTQQQA Media (radio, print, etc.) x 2
Queer radio and media
Multi media presence
Community Center x 8
Full service agency
Total community support
Community bulletin board in a gay friendly atmosphere
LGBTQQA friendly neighborhoods, communities, services.
Public Kiosk
Community reunion x 2
COD Reunion
Gay positive cultural events
LGBTQQA bicycling
Regional pride events
LGBTQQA economic development hiring LGBTQQA Folk
Book store / cafe
Rainbow Realty
Corporate recruiting
Intergenerational connections

Acceptance of Difference / Dialogue
LGBTQQA Communities have deep, profound dialogue about differences
We embrace differences within the community, labels, gender identity, bisexual
Tolerance within the LGBTQQA community
End lateral oppression
We handle differences between affirming and non affirming people
Expand gender roles
Gender identity sensitivity
Transgender affirmation
Gender bending spaces
Gender diversity is the norm
Support for the diversity of coming out experiences
Acceptance spreads beyond Seacoast
Importance of allies
Enlightened allies
No assumption of heterosexuality

Leadership
Leadership training
We have leadership development / strategies/ frameworks for how we do our work
We are linked to other social justice movements, link to Eco movement

Spirituality
Religious life
Religions (all) accepting

Lifespan services
LGBTQQA friendly fertility clinics
Adoption / Foster care
Day care
Friendly elder care

Creating and maintaining a sense of humor

Queers in Space

Visibility
Transgender visibility,
Visibility x 2
APPENDIX M

Unresolved Differences (number of checks in parenthesis):

Adoption/foster care (1)
Alternative insemination
Awkward language (9)
Babies for all
Backward made Forward
Conception
Conflict/tension among and between groups community (10)
Diversity Studies Course as college graduation Requirement
Everybody OUT & SAFE (1)
Expand current support groups (with publicity)
Get rid of labels (1)
Heterophobia (30)
Lack of LGBTQQA collaboration and understanding (3)
Language /labels clarifying language (4)
LGBTQQA retirement home (1)
LGBTQQA dominant culture- heterosexual subordinate (role switch) (2)
LGBTQQA Health Center (1)
Limited ally involvement (9)
Open public affection
OUT every one can be out (5)
OUT teachers
Rural community involvement (1)
We don’t need all those support groups in 2005
We handle unresolved differences between and among groups
We won’t need a community center -we may want one.
APPENDIX N

Action teams created by the participants at "Create Our Destiny"

The resulting groups emerged with short and long term action steps:

- Community center
- Community newspaper/Web page/Resource guide
- Gender issues resource center
- HIV/AIDS education and prevention
- Leadership development/Networking
- Rainbow PAC, Political organizing/Legalized same-sex marriage and adoption
- Real dialogue
- Weekly queer biking
- Youth stuff/Sensitivity training for those who work with kids
APPENDIX O

The following evaluations were received at the end of the conference. They are presented here in no particular order.

Evaluations

1) What did you like most about this experience?
Creating new connections. Rejuvenating my spirit.
Open discussions.
Incredible sense of community + energy.
Becoming part of something / getting involved.
Feeling the connection to all who attended.
Getting to network with so many different + exciting new people.
Learning the Future search Model. Becoming a part of the GLBTQQA community in this area. Asking questions + learning about other’s view. Seeing real tasks + outcomes result.
Meeting others & getting away from everyday tresses - rejuvenated - Working together within our differences and building strength.
Networking & energy
Feeling like there are a lot of us working together. The future search model is valuable for other work. Networking with such great people. Committing to concrete goals.
Belief in the potential. Pride in myself + the community. Outcomes were doable / realistic.
I enjoyed the self selected group activity on Saturday. I liked, in general, the fellowship, exposure to new ideas/ perspectives.
Seeing the timeline. Working with people I have never met.
Getting into our lens groups.
Being in a room of queer people working toward understanding and attempting to create a deeper meaning of the many diverse issues we grapple with as individuals.
We kept it real. We kept it (relatively) positive. We got a sense of our power as a community. We acknowledged our shortcomings, but we did not spend the weekend “gazing at our belly-buttons.” We met each other.
Getting all the communities (GLBTQQA) to come together and work as one. I felt tremendous support and encouragement. I’m new to the Seacoast and was able to learn so much.
That it exceeded expectations, and I wouldn’t have been here if I hadn’t expected a lot.
The number of people involved. The ability to include every bodies differences. The brainstorming and then recognition of trends and common ground.
Facilitators helping us develop our future. Having 2 major, different grouping patterns
Having us join groups which we are passionately interested in. This caused me to commit myself (time + energy) to working with this group.

Merging of LGBTQA people, sharing of info, lives + common goals. Meeting other “like” people.

Making connections w/ other community members I didn’t know before. Also generating energy.

Skit with all the humor and good points.

Meeting folks, energy. Sitting in a big circle @ end.

The diversity of the group and the willingness to listen to others + value their differences.

The “skits” on Saturday afternoon and the activities Sunday morning demonstrated this point.

Listening to new ideas, and seeing the cooperation. - The diversity of the attendees and acceptance.

Participating in the conference and realizing what a diverse community it is, and that I truly have had a fairly narrow experience (i.e. lesbian community).

Diverse perspectives of others - introduced to, - experience, - gained better understanding of.

Creating specific goals. Reflecting on status of community. Meeting new people.

Process, Process, Process

Interaction with others. The outcomes are terrific!

To come together as a group - great sense of cohesive community - great amount of work and in short time coming to clear action plans. To feel increased empowerment.

To feel challenged and educated around my own internalized issues / conflicts by increased exposure to entering GLBTQQA community.

Seeing the common vision. Evaluating the prouds and sorries. Rotating roles having a chance to report to full group. Needing and flushing out concrete action steps. Self-managing was empowering and efficient. Timeline and past, present, future process - skits!!!

My most valuable experience was that I didn't think I was an activist, not sure where to start either, but wanted to be more involved. I learned that by being gay I already am an activist. I had a place to start already. Now with that start, I could explore a vision, I could find my passion and I could now do more. I now have a passion and a clear vision of what I could do for our Seacoast Community. Thank you.

Meeting so many great people. Making real plans for the future. Envisioning a perfect future!! (very invigorating!)

The networking and action oriented focus of this conference was very positive. I am glad that we walked away with well-developed tasks after processing what those tasks would be.

The self-selecting group process - I was afraid of the selection and the inherent dangers, but was very affirmed by and connected to my two groups. I've never connected with other bisexuals at all and the growing sense of connection is very important to me.

Bringing together, new people. energy, ACTION.

Networking - meeting new people. Generation of action plans.

More new voices brought into mix. New skills developed re: listening, managing
difference.
Gave me the “spark” I need to take action! Having 2 groups: Table # and “lens” groups.
Healthy food was essential to sustain energy level. Skits were an excellent way to
motivate and create a vision.
The people involved. The energy present. The respect we all showed to each other.
Letting “issues” go when I could have gotten into a heated debate.
The people! The warm caring and committee individuals. The feeling that as a
community we can get things accomplished. Being able to honor each of our
differences and embrace all of our similarities.

2) What do you wish had been done differently?
Openly discuss why transgendered are involved. What is the affinity?
More time to process in small groups.
Can’t think of a thing.
Superbly done – wouldn’t change a thing – (in one class we ended with a large ball of
twine that we passed around, across the circle, eventually ending up w/ a large
web-like design - to remind us of our interconnectedness).
Later start - Later finish.
Perhaps more space for “real dialogue” questions + answers, curiosity about each other
and who we are at the label level and beyond.
A few more breaks.
I wish I hadn’t stayed up so late Friday night! This process requires energy and attention
and there were times when I was a little too tired.
Only wish that the self selected groups on Sat. had a chance to explore meaning + ideas
for the group identity.
Nothing.
Our future part of the conference.
I wish there had been more room for asking questions and seizing teachable moments. I
recognize the model works in a very specific way and for what it is I think it
works quite well. It’s a grand opportunity for education and it’s difficult to allow
many teachable moments to pass by. Ideally I would like to see the model worked
to incorporate the theme of “teachable moments” for our community to truly
flourish into the future.
I wish there had been more youth here. I wish there had been more people of color here. I
wish there had been more men here. I wish there had been queers with disabilities
here. Question: How representative was this conference of our Seacoast
Community? What perspective were left out?
Time was important but little to restraining. Not enough time to process and reflect upon
things.
Not a thing! [Well - maybe a commitment to some kind of REUNION / check - in?]
More days - less hours each day. Saturday was too long.
Nothing comes to mind - sorry I know this part is important too!
Be a little stiffer about presentation times. Generate list on Sat. Distribute it on Sunday.
Provide non H2O bev’s in room at all times along w/ the fruit. Let people know ahead of
time the specific schedule...starting w/ dinner @ 5pm.
A few active activities outdoor like fun type quick O2 energizers even though they take
Up time which there wasn’t much of free but maybe 10 min. out of the breakfast/brunch time would have been good for me. Eat less, exercise more!

Shorter process, deeper dialogue, feelings.
I am not sure.
You can never have too much humor / laughter.
Nothing!
More time for emotions. Deeper dialogue, More education done on TG, Bi, Race + Class + ability.
Break-out rooms for preparing scenarios (too much noise!)
Water at lunch! Maybe a stretch exercise after lunch on Saturday? A bit more mixing tables but always returning to your table!
If a longer process, having more time to share more personal experiences.
Plan in intros for all focus groups, not just first random group. More introductions on 2nd day. Plan for distributing address list at end of conference, (e.g. Collect names and addresses on 1 sheet on Saturday, take up collection $ and photocopy to distribute on Sunday) (but point of wanting to jump in too soon and getting burned out is well taken.)

That the conference had been longer. That we could have spent more time on each segment. And each was very important.
Not much... Maybe more personal intros/ icebreakers - The articles/ artifacts were good but maybe those and something a little deeper b/c we really enjoyed getting to know each other on a personal story level.

It would have been helpful to have little scraps of paper (maybe index cards) to write folks names and addresses that you wanted to keep in contact with. We found ourselves scrounging name tags and tearing up huge newsprint papers to write info. on (I realize this is fairly concrete and possibly even rather simplistic, but it would have been handy.)

I would like to have had a safe space and time to share and work through emotionally charged issues that came up for me. I would prefer not to have plastic cups + utensils. I would like a social event at the end of the first or second night.

Had more personal 1 on 1 to “connect” with others.
Fascinating process - a bit rushed on Sunday AM, great food!
More time for deeper dialogue and listening (more time?)
I can’t think of a thing.
I have, at this time no suggestions!

3) Any feedback for the Planning Committee or for (facilitators) ?

Thank you.
Great Job!
Great job! Kept us going - Clear roles + goals.
Good Job.
You both did a great job.
I felt safe, secure in the process. I knew you knew where we were going. We accomplished an amazing amount due to your diligence + gentle control. Thank you.

Awesome facilitators.
Thank you!

**WOW!**

**FANTASTIC JOB ALL AROUND.** Good job dealing w/ different learning styles. Great visuals.

**GREAT JOB!**

Thank you. I was very glad to see issues of inclusion of those on the margins. I was concerned that actions didn’t seem to follow that trend. However, I think the model was very effective.

None.
Just re-structure the future search.
I appreciate all of your hard work and energy. Thank you!

Thanks for doing things in a way that appealed to various learning styles. (Introvert/ extrovert, visual/aural/ kinesthetic, intuitive/sensing, etc.) Ann/ Donna made a good facilitation team.

They did a great job in keeping things organized and running smoothly.

Thanks.

Gratitude - for the hours of preparation, for the flexibility in allowing the process of self-selection according to where our PASSIONs were! (spoken by a Scorpio here)

No you did a great job.

Amazingly organized for size of group. You motivated us well!

Wonderful job! Great energy. Well organized. Good food.

Oh you are amazing awesome very professional well organized fun intelligent women.

Thank you for all you planning time + hard work.

Great job!

Outstanding sheep-dogging without pushing agendas. You supported each other nicely!

Great job! I applaud the members and the work they have done and their flexibility throughout the conference.

You’re wonderful, thanks for your personal dedication to the success of the process.

You did an awesome job! I respect you for your dedication and commitment.

As far as this subject of the conference, it would’ve been helpful to have talked about the definition (in the mind’s eye of the group) of each of the letters in LGBTQQA.

Less structures! More room for feelings: sadness, anger, bitterness, frustration.

More conferences!

It was great!

Great job.

Thanks for helping us stay on task and on schedule! Thanks for leaving lots of opportunities for feedback. Good job at recruiting a diverse group of attendees.

Well - organized, but also flexible to our needs. Good food!

You were fantastic. You heard each one of us skillfully, openly and kept us moving forward toward our vision and visions. Thank you so much!
Don’t work too hard you dedicated LGBTQ+ friends you!
(Facilitators names deleted), great working team. Good energy and vibes from them as individuals as well as a facilitation team. Excellent job all!!! It was evident that your hard work and forethought really paid off. Future Search model is very good - past, present, future, process and action all melded well. I am excited for the ripples to spread into the community at large.
(Facilitator 1, name deleted) is a fabulous group leader. You are clear, concise, and are perceptive and careful in directing comments and questions (e.g., redirecting (participant 1, name deleted) vis a vis (participant 2, name deleted), views on adoption, back to (participant 1, name deleted) view of unrecognizable differences.)
Ditto for above (minus the public example) for (facilitator 2, name deleted). One minor point for (facilitator 2, name deleted) - you tend to insert the frequently diminishing word “just” in your directions. I think it’s unnecessary. You both are organized, clear, concise, sensitive and easy for me to listen to and respect as leaders, professionals, and individual. Thank you both for showing us your skills.
Great job - very pro, very patient
Do we meet again?
Thank you - wonderful job - great modeling you are all very beautiful.
Yearly event??
You guys/gals should really be proud of this conference. It truly made and will continue to make a difference. Thank you.
Thank you for keeping us focused and task orientated. Your leadership will follow me in my work and in my life.

4) Any other comments...
Thank you!
Many participants seems averse to action - perhaps they were here as a “feel good” experience.
I simply loved this experience and am glad that I had the opportunity to attend.
Great energy, new friends. Renewal to continue.
THANKS.
Reunion!
I'm venturing off, feeling brave, connected, and full of rigorous loving.
Thanks!
Awesome conference.
I loved the Future Search model + what you did with it. It helps me as I think about how I work with other groups and what information I privilege.
Community is the greatest healer. We all need healing. Here we have built community.
Delighted that Sunday’s tasks were so specific + concrete, Action Plans.
Food was great!
Nice work!
Thanks!
COME OUT - “Be the person you were meant to be”
Being TG was rough - but building coalitions is rough too. I think a lot of people need to be better educated. They need to do more than talk the talk, they need to walk the walk. Too much lip service, not enough true knowledge. People need to know GLBTQQA more than by name only. They need to know our pressing life concerns. What it means to me to survive in the world as a transgender person. I’m tired of assimilationism, tired of ignorance + tired of misogyny / transphobia in the gay male community + exclusionism from lesbians.

Great rapport between (facilitators)!! If general discussion happened around what the group perceived LGBTQQA meant, I would’ve been a bit enlightened earlier on + could’ve offered more of my own perception.

You are all superstars!!! You rock!! THANK YOU!!

I wish we could do this every few years to offer the people we tell of our experience and to grow exponentially with a continuing vision of our Seacoast.

It was great for me as a younger person to be able to interact and work with older members of my community. It widened my vision and appreciation of what came before me as well as giving me increased confidence in working with older people.

Please recycle the newsprints.

Great to see Seacoast Community finally becoming reality.

I hope that as a community we can reach out to bring more individuals back. I only wish I could share what I feel inside at this moment with every LGBTQA in NH. Thank you soo much!!
APPENDIX P

Global History (as described by participants on the time-line)

- **1940's**: The Holocaust.
- **Before the 1950s**: LGBT experiences were marked by their invisibility; people were basically in the closet. A slow glimmer of gay life appears, the first lesbian social organization was formed, and homosexuality slowly starts to come out of the closet. The 1950s was a time of conformity, “Leave it to Beaver” and plastic people, Barbi ‘came out’ [as a product not as a lesbian]. Evelyn Hooker conducts the first study of male homosexuality.
- **In the 1950s and 1960s**: Individuals were given credit for paving the way, e.g., Christine Jorgensen went to Sweden for a sex change. Also, Rosa Parks refused to sit at the back of a bus, the law at the time for African Americans, and showed that an individual can make a difference. LGBTQQA people formed organizations such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis.
- **The 1960s**: A time of change and experimentation, as well as a time of social and political agitation and upheaval regarding civil rights. There was fragmentation between various social and political issues. Participants recalled the war in Vietnam as a big part of the US experience, as were the assassinations of several political leaders, and civil rights leaders. Woodstock took place. The riots at Stonewall occurred in June 1969, and marked the start of LGBTQQA people fighting back against the brutal treatment to which police subjected them. TV was becoming a powerful tool of the mass media.
- **The 1970s**: were recalled as a time of laid-backness, smoking pot, free love, bars and discos (Village People), women’s music (Olivia Records) and feminism. Growth of gay culture and gay commerce. The media started to take notice of homosexuality, e.g. there was an openly gay supporting character on TV show SOAP. Gay pride began to flourish. This was the period seen as the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, then called GRID (gay related immune deficiency syndrome). Homosexuality was removed from the DSM as a mental illness. Unitarian Universalist church becomes a group where people are organizing.
- **The 1980s**: The AIDS epidemic emerges. The crisis prompted LGBTQQA people, from various perspectives to come together, including the women’s and the gay rights movement, to support each others efforts in numbers not previously seen. AIDS started to gain attention nationwide. There was political apathy on the part of the president. Grass roots organizations started to grow such as ACTUP, Queer Nation, and PFLAG. Drugs got harder. There was an increase in the number of gay movies. National Coming Out Day
(October 11, the date of the 1987 March on Washington) was started. Massachusetts legislates against discrimination.

- **In the 1990s:** HIV+/AIDS treatments have improved, but there is still no cure. There were marches and conferences for women's rights/gay rights. International support grew for gay issues vis a vis an international conference where the Netherlands and South Africa speak to the topic. The U.S. military policy "Don't ask, don't tell" was introduced. People in powerful positions were coming out. There was more support for gay marriage, and more legislation against it. Efforts have been directed towards legal changes. Eleven states have gay rights legislation, and referenda are being instigated. Organized political support to counter the increasing visibility of LGBTQQA people increased. The media continued to play a significant role. As visibility increased so did increased understanding/less stereotyping. Media made attempts to present a more realistic portrayal of queers in the media (Ellen). Global communication, the Internet and other media develop. Participants recognized the importance of role models vis a vis community and individual liberation.
APPENDIX Q

Seacoast history (as described by participants on the time-line)

- **The 1970s**: Time of struggle for acceptance and community, women's clubs on the rise, gay clubs on the rise, social things, clubs happening, softball, lesbian brunches, UNH Gay Student Organization needed supreme court approval to become a recognized student organization. Participants experienced more visibility.

- **The 1980s**: The dim light of awareness sparks. Participants noted that in the 80s life became harder on the Seacoast. There was an emergence of support groups, e.g. AIDS Response of the Seacoast (ARS). Adoption was outlawed for gays and lesbians. The religious right made a stand against homosexuality. More clubs opened; some closed. Participants noted the lack of any notation on the timeline specific to men or women of color prior to the 1980s.

- **The 1990s**: Less focus on larger political movements, such as women's issues, the anti war movement, racism. There was been an explosion of political and networking initiatives and exposure. Legislative issues were ongoing issues (adoption, same sex marriage). A wide variety of LGBTQQA groups and initiatives were created, especially population specific groups. New trend emerged toward collaboration. More transgender visibility on the Seacoast, with a note that there had been no mention of anything about transgender people before the 1990s. New Hampshire added protection on the basis of sexual orientation to the state's non-discrimination policy (HB 421.) Seacoast area youth / education emerged as an issue, with a note pointing out the lack of any attention directed towards youth, except at UNH, prior to the 1990s. Managed care seen as taking a big toll on health care. Clubs and stores on the Seacoast opened and closed. Emergence of the term sexual minority. To indicate the extent to which changes have occurred, participants pointed out there were forty entries in the 1990s, whereas the total for the other decades was twenty-nine.
APPENDIX R

The following list of insights are intended to be helpful to someone planning to conduct a community building event such as the “Create Our Destiny” conference. The order with which this material is presented mirrors our conference experience.

Pick your planning team membership carefully.

A high percentage of the “Create Our Destiny” conference attendees were personal friends, or at least acquaintances, of members of the planning team. Therefore, there can be no doubt about the extent to which the make up of a planning team dictates the make up of the participant pool, which in turn influences the extent to which the conference outcomes can meet the needs of the various communities in a given context. Therefore, I believe that the time spent debating and discussing who ought to be on a planning team was time well spent. It is important to be conscious of the extent to which a planning team membership ought to allow the group access to diverse segments of the local communities, and in turn the membership ought to also be sensitive about the extent to which access to certain segments of local communities are lacking.

Attendance meant different things to different people

Don’t assume that people’s participation in a community building event represents any particular social change agenda. Based on participant’s rationale for attending the “Create Our Destiny” conference, reasons for such involvement vary widely. Some participants wanted to connect with local communities and some wanted to meet new people. The chance to attend a big “gay” event held appeal for some, while the
potential long term significance of the event drew others. Not wanting to be apart from
their partners for an entire weekend was motivation enough for some people to attend. In
addition, I feel it is important to note that several participants mentioned they have a lack
of interest in politics that caused them to question the wisdom of attending the
conference. However, the success of an event like the “Create Our Destiny” conference
will be dictated by the extent to which a wide variety of people, political and non-
political alike, perceive their voices are not only welcome, but are vital to the project.
Therefore, a planning team that anticipates people’s fear of not being political enough to
participate in community building can take steps to market their event in ways that make
it attractive to a wide range of participants.

Clearly articulated ground rules are important

The ground rules for the “Create Our Destiny” conference were clearly articulated
verbally and in written form on the first night of the event.

We are all learning. Respect each person’s process.
Treat all ideas as important.
Listen & inquire with the intent to understand, not to critique or debate.
Put all information on newsprint.
Adhere to the schedule.
Seek common ground.
Recognize, honor and explore differences; do not focus on resolving them.
Maintain confidentiality: Talk about what happens here, but do it collectively
without attaching individual names (unless the group unanimously decides
otherwise)
Enjoy!

However, participants repeatedly indicated to me that they were not comfortable with
some of the language being used during the weekend, particularly the Alphabet, but they
did not feel comfortable raising a concern. Reiterating these ground rules might have
alleviated some of people's worry and created a context where people may have learned to be more self-aware and reflexive.

The intended lesson is not always the one we learn.

The time-line exercise at the "Create Our Destiny" conference provided me with a reminder that as educators, as social change agents we would do well not to forget that our audience may not be attending to the lesson that we have scheduled for them. In this case, the goal of the "Create Our Destiny" conference was to support striving for singularity, and the time-line exercise was designed to assist with that goal by creating a shared view of history. However, given the timing of the exercise as the first activity during the weekend, participants were engaging in the exercise at the same time as they were trying to get to know each other.

At our table we had a lesbian, a post operative transsexual M to F woman who identified as lesbian, a bisexual youth, a straight ally, a woman who just labeled herself as questioning I would say her age was 35 or over and she was still not quite sure where she was on the whole continuum, and a gay man who had been married for years and has kids and everything, but has since divorced and is now self-labeling as a gay man. So we had a really, really diverse mix at our table and as we did our introductions, the vast majority of the people indicated that they felt like outsiders and that they didn't fit in. So, we spent a lot of time that night building bridges within our table and kind of forming personal links so that we all felt a little bit less like outsiders. (Xena)

According to Xena's description of her Friday night experience, the more long-term pedagogical benefits of the timeline exercise seemed less significant for some participants than the need to forge connections with their fellow participants. The lesson here is to be conscious of the ultimate goal of an event. In our case becoming more fully and wholly ourselves, which involves social interaction, was our goal. As planners, we might have been more supportive of people's interactions by limiting the level of programming at those times when they were seeking interconnections.
Head Model not Heart Model

During my follow-up meetings with participants, they described the Future Search model used for the “Create Our Destiny” conference as very effective for the purpose at hand. However, the model’s cognitive focus allowed little time for affective work. Given the personal and often painful nature of social change work, some participants indicated the difficulty they faced in carrying out various tasks without attending fully to the emotional concerns raised in the process. Based on this discovery my recommendation here is not to steer away from cognitive models that can help diverse groups of people to focus on ways their particular agendas overlap with others, with the intent of creating concrete steps for action. However, I believe it is clear that community building opportunities ought not be limited to models that favor cognitive approaches.

Valuing community building labor requires compensating community builders

Based on our experience, I urge groups planning to have an event such as the “Create Our Destiny” conference to employ a paid staff person to help sustain the energy such a project might generate.” In my view, the lack of a “go to” person after the “Create Our Destiny” conference was a mistake, and while I did not spend time critiquing the success of the various action team projects, my sense is that participants experienced a lack of support after the conference ended. For example, I was personally involved in two separate attempts to produce a conference report to be sent to the participants and other interested parties. Due to personal concerns in both cases, the persons who volunteered to take on that task were unable to bring it to completion. Having someone with the responsibility to follow up on something as fundamental as the conference report would have ensured that such a report was forthcoming.
March 3, 1997

Ms. Carl Moorhead
4 Bayview Road
Durham, NH 03824

IRB Protocol #1817 - Development of a Sense of Community for GLBT People in the Seacoast Area

Dear Ms. Moorhead:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research has reviewed the protocol for your project as Exempt as described in Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46, Subsection 46.101(b)(2). Approval is granted to conduct the project as described in your protocol. If you decide to make any changes in your protocol, you must submit the requested changes to the IRB for review and approval prior to any data collection from human subjects.

The protection of human subjects is an ongoing process for which you hold primary responsibility. In receiving IRB approval for your protocol, you agree to conduct the project in accordance with the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research, as described in the enclosed "The Belmont Report." Additional information about other pertinent Federal and university policies, guidelines, and procedures is available in the UNH Office of Sponsored Research.

There is no obligation for you to provide a report to the IRB upon project completion unless you experience any unusual or unanticipated results with regard to the participation of human subjects. Please report these promptly to this office.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Kara Eddy, Regulatory Compliance Officer (for the IRB), at 862-2003. Please refer to the IRB # above in all future correspondence related to this project. We wish you success with the research.

Sincerely,

Kathryn B. Cataneo
Kathryn B. Cataneo, Executive Director
Office of Sponsored Research
(for the IRB)

KBC: sw
Enclosure

cc: Tom Schram, Education
APPENDIX T

TO:
Cari Moorhead
4 Bayview Road
Durham, NH 03824

Your Reference Number: n/a

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January 15, 1999

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Much of the material presented in the appendixes appears in unedited form. My intention here is to provide readers with a sense of people's thinking (mine and the other participants) as this project progressed, rather than as I now see it at the end. Therefore, I have included some of my rough research notes along with material as it was presented to, and recorded by, the recorders during the actual “Create Our Destiny” conference.

* The number of states with civil rights laws which protect people on the basis of their sexual orientation has gone down to 10 since Maine’s law was repealed.

* The conference participants exhibited little direct knowledge of LGBTQQA related activity in the Seacoast area before Stonewall (1969). However, after that time there appeared to a dramatic increase in activity, matching national trends. Having said that I have no doubt that there was a lot of LGBTQQA activity in the Seacoast area, which has simply been lost over time.

* While the original proposal to the National Lesbian and Gay Community Funding Partnership budgeted for a project coordinator (15 hours/week @ $15/hour for 50 weeks), due to the amount of the actual grant and to hesitancy about interfering with the participants’ momentum, this position was never filled.