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Lived Experiences of Queer Female Youth in High School

Ruth Etcheverria
ruthetcheverria@gmail.com

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University of San Francisco

Lived Experiences of Queer Female Youth in High School

A Thesis Project Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts in Human Rights in Education

by
Ruth J. Etcheverria
May 2018

Lived Experiences of Queer Female Youth in High School

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in

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

by

Ruth J. Etcheverria

May 2018

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

Dr. Manuel Alejandro Pérez

May 17, 2018

Instructor/Chairperson

Date

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to explore the experiences of self-identified queer female high school students in relation to experiences with their peers related to sexuality. Through semi-structured interviews, the three participants of this study poured out anecdotes of coming out, and sexuality-related common or unique interactions with peers. Additionally, the participants shared their perspectives surrounding the ways peers have supported and/or marginalized them based on their sexuality. Queer feminist theory is engaged to explore the intersectional experiences of the queer female participants as they recount stories of coming out to classmates, supportive friendships, and daily exposure to homophobic language. Resilience theory is used to highlight the successful development of coping mechanisms that have built the participants' confidence in their identity as non-heterosexual young people and resilience against the overt and subtle experiences of homophobia surrounding them within their high school context. Pushing back against studies focused solely upon marginalization, this study considers the positive experiences of support and love from peers as essential to painting a complete picture of life as a queer female student at this particular San Francisco Bay Area high school.

Keywords: Queer studies, LGBTQ, lesbian, bisexual, experiences, education, queer feminist theory, resilience theory

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Do you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender? A study of 1.6 million adults reports that 4% of the sample responded “yes” to this question, suggesting that at least 13 million adults in the United States are LGBT (lesbian gay bisexual transgender) (Gates, 2017). As the percentage of the population that self-identifies as LGBT increases, so does the dominance of public discourse on, about and for non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender populations. Current movements of young, non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender people are reclaiming the term “queer”. In this research, queer will be used to refer to any person who is not heterosexual and/or not cisgender.

Queer students can have profoundly different experiences in middle and high school, involving intersectional experiences of marginalization, and additional needs for support and community. Marginalization will be used in this research as a blanket term encompassing, but not limited to, subtle and overt experiences of social exclusion, derogatory language, stereotype-based assumptions, microaggressions, harassment, violence, inequitable treatment, bullying, and victimization. Queer students of all ages experience more marginalization than heterosexual and/or cisgender students (Schuster et al., 2015). Recent research corroborates past findings that while experiences of bullying and victimization decline with age, the gap between queer and non-queer experiences persists (Schuster et al., 2015). This wholeheartedly affirms the importance for research focusing specifically upon queer students to occur, so that the

experiences of queer students may be ameliorated by administrators, legislators, educators and students themselves.

Queer female and male students often have different experiences of the high school social scene. Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz and Sanchez (2011) found that queer females experience less “LGBT school victimization” compared with queer males. Yet, queer females are truly understudied in existing literature, with far less known about their unique experiences of marginalization compared to the experiences of queer males. A meaningful body of knowledge must be developed on how queer female youth experience interactions with peers within the formal educational setting of high schools.

This study will attempt to fill the existing void by using qualitative interviews to build a formal understanding of current experiences of queer female students in a public high school setting. The focus of the study will be on recording, coding and analyzing personal accounts of general and specific incidents of peers supporting and marginalizing the participants due to their sexual orientation.

Definition of Terms

In this proposal, the term “queer” will be used as an umbrella term to refer to any individual who self-identifies as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender. In practice, this is inclusive of those who explicitly identify as “queer”, as well as all other non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identities, including, but not limited to, lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, trans*, and agender. When further detail beyond “queer” is relevant, specific terms for identities, as well as constructs of prejudice, will be used. Many of the following definitions have been adapted from the LGBT Terminology list published by the University of Southern California’s LGBT Resource Center (n.d.), while others have been operationalized through my personal experiences

within the queer community. When based upon the USC's list or any other resource beyond my personal experience as a member of the queer community, the citation will be listed after the definition. These key terms are:

- agender = a gender identity which disassociates with gender entirely (requires an individual to self-identify with this term) (University of Southern California, n.d.);
- cisgender = a gender identity which aligns with sex assigned at birth (University of Southern California, n.d.);
- hetero-misogyny = a composite term referring to the overlapping and intersecting of heterosexism and misogyny, essentially discrimination and prejudice against non-heterosexual women.
- heterosexism = prejudice and discrimination against non-heterosexual people (University of Southern California, n.d.);
- microaggressions = commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental “slights, snubs, or insults” which communicate negative sentiments or hostilities towards a marginalized population, such as queer people and people of color (Wing Sue, 2010);
- misogyny = prejudice and discrimination against women;
- pansexual = sexual attraction towards people of all gender identities and all variations of biological sex;
- quotidian queerness = daily, common, or expected experiences of life as a queer person;
- trans* = a gender identity where gender does not align with the sex assigned at birth (also known as trans or transgender), or a gender expression which fundamentally breaks gender norms or assumptions. The asterix signifies inclusion of gender identities that fall outside of the typical understanding of transgender as a “male-to-female” or “female-to-

male” person whose identity is within the bounds of binary understandings of gender, for example people who identify as genderqueer or genderfluid would also be covered by “trans*” because of the inclusion of the asterix (Jones, 2013);

- transphobia = fear or hatred of people who are gender variant (including, but not limited to, trans* people and gender expressions that are non-conforming in terms of normative gender standards) (University of Southern California, n.d.).

As evident in the lived experiences of queer females, heterosexism and misogyny may exist in a composite form of hetero-misogyny where these two forms of prejudice combine to create an experience of intersectional marginalization that may differ in form and impact from experiences which have foundations in simply one of these concepts.

Background and Need for the Study

Heterosexism results in many queer youth experiencing cognitive, social and emotional isolation (Malinsky, 1997, p. 43). As a consequence, this population of queer youth are at higher risk of failing classes, having low self-esteem, experiencing social alienation, suffering from mental illnesses such as depression and suicide, and of dropping out of school (Friend, 1993; Gibson, 1989; Herdt, 1989; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Heron, 1994; Hetrick & Martin, 1988; McManus et al., 1991; Savin-Williams, 1990; Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992; all cited in Malinsky, 1997). This plethora of related negative health and academic experiences highlight the status of queer youth as an at-risk population that deserves thorough, in-depth research in attempts to mitigate, and eventually remove entirely, these higher risk factors.

Queer high school students who experience comparatively higher levels of victimization

based on their sexual orientation report missing at least one day of school in the previous month at a three times higher rate than those experiencing lower levels of heterosexist marginalization (62.2% vs. 20.1%) (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016, p. xviii). When these students reported that they planned to, or may, drop out of school early, 32% indicated that this was due to the hostile climate created by “gendered school policies and practices” (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xix). An example of a gendered school policy is an official school dance restricting students from bringing a date of the same gender, which genders the school event within heterosexist expectations. The impact of “gendered” policies and practices is that heterosexism and transphobia become entrenched within explicitly and implicitly restrictive bounds, effectively ostracizing students who exist outside of perceptions of normative sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. These policies affirm student behavior and interactions which marginalize queer students through social ostracism, discrimination, and physical and verbal violence.

Education which is inequitable for queer youth is a violation of the human right to receive an education free from discrimination. While not legally enforceable, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides internationally agreed upon norms which nations are to entrench into their respective domestic laws to provide a legal guarantee and path for enforcement of these rights in practice. The UDHR states in Article 26 that “everyone has the right to an education” that is for the “full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (United Nations, 1948). All rights laid out within the UDHR are, based upon Article 2, to be guaranteed for all people “without distinction of any kind” (United Nations, 1948). When queer female youth exist within a space which is hetero-misogynistic it is unlikely that their experience of school, or the school

experience of their peers, is going to intentionally develop a respect for human rights including principles of anti-discrimination. Moreover, a hetero-misogynistic education is not equitable for queer female youth in comparison to the quality of education appreciated by non-queer male youth. Therefore, in order for these human rights to be realized by queer female youth, it is necessary for educational institutions to be rid of the marginalization impacting educational outcomes and creating health risks for these youth.

The historical biases of research into queer populations is dominated by studies which engaged general terms of queerness despite seeking out dominantly male samples, and which centered upon predominantly negative experiences. Studies engaging all genders of queer students, or those focusing exclusively upon male queer populations, are not necessarily generalizable to the specific population of queer female students. Furthermore, the substantial basis of research in North America contributing to the development of this study is centered upon risk and negative experiences of “queer youth”, read: queer male youth (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011; Russell, 2005, cited in Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015, p. 255). However; this “one-dimensional risk profile” of queer youth is limiting and ignorant of the many positive experiences empowering and supporting queer youth to flourish, or simply survive, in oft hostile hetero-misogynistic environments (DiFulvio, 2011; Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010, cited in Craig et al., 2015, p. 255). Herrick, Stall, Goldhammer, Egan and Mayer (2014), state that the focus upon deficits rather than resilience is a flaw that limits the effectiveness of interventions designed to address disparities in marginalized populations (p. 3). This study will use questions seeking to explore positive experiences with peers in order to amplify the voices of queer female youth with support, acceptance and empowerment (see Appendix A for interview questions 1.a.i. and 1.b.i.).

Despite the prominence of male-biased and mixed-gender research on queer youth, studies that do not disaggregate for gender cannot be assumed to represent the experiences of a specific gender with any accuracy. These studies highlight the serious risks which **may** be at play for queer female youth, yet without providing evidence suggesting that such negative health and academic outcomes would also exist to the same degree and in the same manner for this specific population. Furthermore; the form or prevalence of the negative and positive experiences leading to these outcomes may vary wildly from those of their male-identified counterparts, with the intersectional experiences creating a unique actuality of lived experiences for queer female youth. This study intends to contribute to the development of a body of exploratory research into the experiences of queer female youth with their peers in high school. This research will provide a basis for determining whether the experiences of queer female populations align with the dominantly studied male populations, and support further research into the health and academic outcomes for queer female youth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to further explore the experiences of queer female youth in high schools, in terms of their perceptions of received support and/or marginalization from their peers. This study will use qualitative research methods to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with 8th-12th grade female-identified queer students. It is intended that this study highlight the specific, unique experiences of queer females, particularly the manners in which they are supported and marginalized based upon their intersectional identities as, at minimum, both women and queer.

Queer females are often less frequently victims of non-sexual physical violence based upon their sexual orientation, but more commonly experience the sexualization and objectification of

their sexuality within a hetero-misogynistic frame (Kosciw et al., 2016). To better understand the prevalence of experiences with a hetero-misogynistic foundation, the experiences explored through interviews in this study will provide a current context through the lived experiences of the participants.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore the perception that 9th-12th grade female-identified queer students have of the degree and manner by which their peers support and/or marginalize them based upon their sexual orientation. This study will engage qualitative research methods to engage the following research questions: (1) What do queer female students perceive to be the ways in which they are supported by non-queer peers? and (2) What do queer female students perceive to be the ways in which they are marginalized by non-queer peers? Through semi-structured interviews with participants who are current attendees of a public middle or high school GSA, this research aims to explore how they perceive their experiences with non-queer peers as positive and/or negative. Themes likely to be explored include support, affirmation, and a multiplicity of forms of marginalization, within the context of interactions with peers at their high school. This research will add to the limited body of knowledge on queer female experiences which often is conducted retrospectively and with limited female voices incorporated into larger studies which are primarily focused upon male queer experiences.

Theoretical Rationale

Queer feminist theory, a composite reaping the rewards of both queer theory and feminist theory, and resilience theory will form the basis for analysis of data collected through this study. The intersection of these two theoretical frameworks will provide for a critical analysis of the impacts of hetero-misogynistic social constructs of peers within the public middle and high

school in this study.

Queer Feminist Theory

Rather than selecting a specific strain of feminism, this research engages the key principles widely shared across many dominant current feminist theories. Three “basic starting points” are shared widely, despite the exhibition of incredible variety within feminist theorizing (Ferguson, 2017, p. 271). Per Ferguson (2017), one of three main tenets of modern feminist theory is a suspicion of dualistic thinking. In challenging naturalized hierarchies, such as that existing between men and women in patriarchal society, it is essential to resist concepts of dichotomous, opposing variables which produce oversimplifications rather than fluid interconnected productions of meaning (Ferguson, 2017, p. 271). Similarly, the second tenet synthesized by Ferguson is the belief in “fluid processes of emergence” (2017, p. 271). This engagement with process thinking emphasizes the process through which things come into being within a context of change and fluidity, rather than static relationships (Ferguson, 2017, p. 271). The third tenet highlighted by Ferguson (2017) is that feminist theory both engages as political through its role in activism for change, and as theoretical through the understandings it provides of the world.

Feminist theory facilitates a critique and analysis of inequities between genders, which will be vital in understanding the element of sexism present in the negative experiences forming queer females’ lived experiences with peers at their high school. Queer theory will build upon this through challenging traditional concepts of sexuality and gender, allowing for this study to better highlight the experiences of current youth who experience their social sphere at school through a context of their shifting concepts of sexes, genders, and sexualities. The amalgamation

of feminist theory and queer theory is intentional, as together they form a powerful tool for understanding the plethora of experiences impacted by sex assigned at birth, of genders, through identity and expression, and of sexuality, through a spectrum of attractions ranging from “not at all” through to “all people” and every combination in between.

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory will contextualize the role of positive experiences in the lives of queer female students. Resilience theory focuses upon complex interactions among the many systems of a person’s life, such as relational experiences in the school sphere, that “promotes competent functioning under adversity” (Craig et al., 2015). This focus supports this research engaging with the positive factors that build resilience in queer youth (Craig et al., 2015, p. 256).

Foundationally, resilience theory aligns with an ecological theoretical approach, which examines microsystems (an individual’s immediate social environment), exosystems (the indirect impact of setting upon the individual’s immediate environment), mesosystems (the connection and impacts of one microsystem upon another microsystem), macrosystems (the ideological and cultural frameworks), and chronosystems (the changes over time in the individual and the environment) (Craig et al., 2015, p. 255-256). This study will explicitly engage with the school as a microsystem of experiences with peers, while the semi-structured nature of the interview protocol provides for participants to invoke anecdotes and explanations of their exosystems, mesosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems in their responses to the open-ended questions.

Summary

A critical lens of queer feminist theory will assist in identifying and analyzing the interactions of normative perspectives in queer female youth’s experiences with peers at their

school. In this study, peers' normative perspectives be analyzed as leading to negative experiences of marginalization, including microaggressions, harassment, and violence, for queer female youth within the school context. These experiences are founded in hetero-misogyny, as well as specifically heterosexism, homophobia, sexism, and transphobia. These themes will be analyzed in this study through a framework of queer feminist theory, combined with the analysis of positive experiences of support and acceptance through resilience theory.

Methodology

Restatement of Purpose

This study will conduct exploratory research on the experiences of students who identify as female and as non-heterosexual and are currently attending middle or high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. Using qualitative, semi-structured interviews, this study intends to highlight queer female youth's perceptions of experiences of support and/or marginalization enacted upon them by their peers.

Research Design

The school selected for this study is based on points of contact and distance from the researcher. The high school was chosen due to the researcher residing nearby and being employed by the same school district. These factors render the school easier to disseminate information about the opportunity to participate in the study, and render it possible to conduct the interviews immediately after school hours end when students are able to remain at school for an additional 30 minutes in order to participate in the research. If a school farther from the researcher's current employment or place of residence was chosen, it would not have been

possible to conduct the interviews during business hours when students are more likely to be available.

The researcher will search on the school district or specific school website to find the names and email addresses of the teachers who oversee the Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) at the selected school. The researcher will email the relevant teacher with the details of the research participation opportunity, requesting that these details be presented to students to gauge interest. The teacher will receive digital and, if desired, hard copy versions of the required forms for participation in the study. The teacher in charge of the GSA will present the opportunity to be a research participant to all eligible attendees of the club's meeting. Interested students will be given further information, through an assent/consent form, a participant rights form and an Interview Time/Date Request Form. Interview times will be scheduled individually with interested students via the Interview Time/Date Request Form, with confirmation the agreed upon date and time confirmed via text message, email or via correspondence with the teacher in charge of the GSA through which the participant was sourced.

The decision to offer the opportunity to participate in the research exclusively to participants of the school's GSA is to specifically reach the target population of queer females. As GSAs cater to queer students, connecting with the teachers overseeing GSAs provides a point of contact to students more likely to be non-straight and therefore to fulfill the requirements of this study. This provides the opportunity for information about the study to be provided to the target population, queer female-identified high school students.

At the beginning of each interview the participant will need to present their signed consent/assent form. Any fundamental questions about the research will be answered prior to the

commencement of the interview. The interviews will take place in a public location, such as a café, or in a private location on their school campus. Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be of a semi-structured format.

Population and Sample

All students participating in the study will be currently attending a San Francisco Bay Area high school. The sample will be sought at a public high school. The final participants interviewed and included in the study may include participants from any high school grade level, and will include participants who agree to be in the study and fulfill the requirement of being non-heterosexual female-identifying teenagers. A requirement of participating in the study was for the student to self-identify as female and as non-heterosexual. The only opportunity for qualifying students to volunteer for the study will be through the GSA of their school.

Demographics are vital in understanding the population from which the study's sample is being sought. In this case, the school is located within a city considered locally as working class. The demographic of the school is majority latinx students, with the groups represented as minorities being black and Asian, followed by a small minority of White students. Despite the variation between the school's demographics and that of the wider county, I have decided to utilize the overall racial and ethnic demographics of the county in order to preserve the anonymity of the school, and therefore the participants. Rounded to the nearest percentage, the racial breakdown of the county is: 44% white, 11% black or African American, 1% Native American, 28% Asian, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 6% two or more races, 9% "some other race" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Additionally, the percentage of the county which identifies as ethnically Hispanic or Latinx is 23% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Instrumentation

Interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews requires the researcher to deliver questions using exact phrasing and pre-determined prompt questions (see Appendix A.). Two key questions guide the entire semi-structured interview; these questions are numbered (1) and (2) (see Appendix A for interview questions). Two further tiers of prompt questions have been included to ensure that participant responses include information relevant to each of the research questions for the study. Prompt questions are marked (1)a., (1)a.i., (1)a.ii., and (2)a., (2)a.i., (2)a.ii., indicating the key question that it is building upon. All interview questions are open ended, though four follow up questions, (1)a.i., (1)a.ii., (2)a.i. and (2)a.ii., provide opportunity for a response of “no, I have not had such experiences” rather than the production of an anecdote. Further prompt or follow up questions may be delivered in addition to the set questions, as is deemed necessary by the researcher to facilitate a comprehensible interview procedure for the participant and in depth, focused data production for the researcher.

Each interview will be recorded using the researcher’s personal phone. This will occur using the “Voice Memo” application. Within 24 hours of the interview, the recorded will be transferred to the researcher’s laptop computer in order to begin transcribing with the audio and transcriptions both being stored on that computer.

Researcher’s Background

Interest in conducting this research comes directly from my membership in the LGBT community. As a currently queer-identified female who was out as bisexual to all friends from 15 years of age, I have personal experiences of peers acting out roles of both support and subversive marginalization. These experiences and identities connect me to the participants in

this study, and allows for relevant questions to be well understood through years of engagement in queer social spheres and principles of support and compassion for the experiences of all members of the queer community. I will engage in reflexivity to increase self-awareness of bias in order to monitor and control personal biases which may impact the study due to the researcher's past experiences and connection to the population and subject matter of the study.

As a practice of critical self-reflection, reflexivity will occur once prior to interview sessions, and once prior to IPA coding, and once prior to the analysis process beginning. Reflexivity will occur in the form of self-reflective writing, where I will write my personal thoughts and attempt to critically reflect upon these in order for me to self-identify any biases that may be present. Any biases that I identify during each of these writing sessions will be recorded and presented in this thesis. Bias will be reduced through this process of identification and recording. Reviewing my own bias in this way will allow each stage of coding and analysis to be completed with cognitive awareness of bias. Frequent critical self-reflection will reduce the impact of bias upon the interview process and upon the evolving interpretations of data during coding and analysis.

Human Subjects Approval

IRB approval has been granted through a blanket application by IME-649 instructor Dr. Manuel Perez within the University of San Francisco's International and Multicultural Education Department. This approval covers the qualitative interviews described in this proposal and protects participants' privacy. The names of participants will be attached to the raw data, but will never be included in any publication of the study.

Data Collection

These students were offered the opportunity to participate in this study through communication with the teacher overseeing the GSA, with participants receiving a \$10 Starbucks gift card after participation. Each interview will be recorded using a voice memo app on the interviewers iPhone. This audio file will then be transferred to a laptop to play during manual transcription. The transcript will be saved in a word document and then undergo coding based on theme.

Data Analysis

Data, in the form of transcribed interviews, will be coded using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Coding will seek to identify key themes, such as feelings, experiences, and perceptions, and if necessary these key themes will be grouped into superordinate themes. Further stages of analysis have been adapted from Smith, Jarman, and Osborn's (1999, cited in Robinson, 2010). A master list of key themes and superordinate themes will be created, to which any new themes found through repeated analysis of the transcripts will be added. These new themes will then be tested against all other transcripts to ensure all connected data is identified. Analysis will engage all data produced in phenomenological descriptions and interpretations to highlight the common perceptions of queer female youth in terms of their experiences with peers at their high school.

In order to ensure the validity of the results of the study, low-inference descriptors, in the form of verbatim quotes, will be used in the final written presentation of results. This will allow readers of the study to experience the emotions, experiences, and direct language of the research participants, which allows for a better understanding of the experiences of support and marginalization, enacted upon them by peers at their school, to be better understood.

Furthermore, validity of this study will be grounded in engagement with multiple theoretical perspectives, specifically queer feminist theory and resilience theory.

Limitations of the Study

This study may be limited by its size, duration, and sample diversity. The number of participants is between five and ten due to the time constraints of the research projects and the depth of analysis intended for the research data. This small sample size may limit the ability for thematic saturation to be reached. This may lead to issues in transferability of the connections made by this data regarding the presence and degree of negative and positive experiences with peers at school.

The interviews for the study have a maximum of four weeks within which to be conducted. This relatively short time period impacts the depth to which rapport may be built between the researcher and the participants. As each party is unfamiliar with the other at the outset of the research study, this limits the building of trust that may be possible between researcher and participant. The impact of this may be a reduction in the willingness of the participant to share vulnerable life experiences that may be relevant to the research project. As the topic of positive and negative experiences can be triggering, the best data would be produced through interviews with a foundation of trust and positive rapport. For this reason, the short period of time that the researcher will be in contact with the participants may be a limitation of this study.

This study attempts to replicate the diversity of the greater student population of the school. Nevertheless; it is likely that due to the small sample size the complex demographics of the queer population of the school or the greater population of the school may not be adequately

reflected. Weakness may be created by any lack of representation of students of color, various socio-economic statuses, religious beliefs, political stances, and family backgrounds.

As with any small-scale qualitative study, this study is only able to speak to the experiences of the specific students interviewed and must be considered within their unique identities, sexualities, gender identities and expressions, cultural, political, racial, and socioeconomic, contexts.

Significance of the Study

Research must disaggregate in queer studies in order to understand the unique experiences of queer people with particular intersectional experiences. This study is significant in its sole focus upon queer female youth. Theoretical and evidence-based exploration of non-male queer youth experiences with peers at their high school is an emergent field. With comparatively little peer-reviewed research that focuses to the degree of specificity that this study does, this research significantly contributes to exploring categories of positive and negative experiences that queer female youth have with their peers. These data should be compared with current data on male queer youth and gender aggregated data on queer youth in order to highlight possible differences in experiences based on the impacts of the intersectionality of individuals' existences.

Data from this research should be engaged by policy makers, including politicians and school administrators at both the district and school-site level. These data may contribute to determining strategies to implement which augment existing sources of support from peers and work to limit the negative experiences perceived by queer female youth. Application of this

study in this manner would support goals of improving educational and health outcomes for queer versus heterosexual, and female versus male, youth.

CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Queer female youth's experiences with peers at school are a dynamic intersection of positive, negative, and perceivably neutral, interactions. While limited research currently exists on the experiences of specifically female populations of non-heterosexual youth, there are useful aggregated data on queer youth populations of all genders. Some of this research is more limited in its applicability due to varying degrees of inclusion of female participants, such as studies with 70% male participants, yet these are included due to the possibility of some experiences of queer youth being common across genders. Additional published pieces on queer theory, feminist theory, a combination of the two into a queer feminist theory, and resilience theory, is provided for context to the later analysis of this study's research data.

Queer Feminist Theory

Theory as Framework

The best of feminism and the best of queer theory can be combined into queer feminist theory. The key tenets of feminist theory which are to be engaged as an analytical lens for this research include suspicion of dichotomies, engagement with dynamic relationships, and a context of the political and academic battlefields. Queer theory, however, engages foundationally with issues of intersectionality through processes of critical reflection primarily focused upon dominant and systemic constructs within ideology and socio-cultural contexts. An aim of queer theory is to engage with the spectrum of queer identities, experiences and performances of those identities through an intersectional lens which acknowledges and engages the many other

identities which impact a queer person's lived and felt experiences. Together queer theory and feminist theory are able to destabilize heteronormative and gendernormative constructs directly relevant to the lived experiences of queer females. This combined queer feminist theory was not engaged explicitly in the studies on queer youth that are referenced in this review of literature, despite its usefulness when exploring intersectional issues of gender and sexuality.

There are three key tenets of feminist theory which will be synthesized with queer theory to create the queer feminist theory engaged in this text. The first is feminist theory's general suspicion of dichotomies, within which a concept of only two genders ("male" and "female") is an example, highlights the similarity of queer theory and feminist theory in questioning normalized beliefs and practices (Ferguson, 2017). Secondly, feminist theory investigates from a "process thinking" background, which engages dynamic rather than static relationships (Ferguson, 2017). Finally, feminist theory is grounded as a political and academic activity, one which aims to recognize intersectional issues connected to the overarching goal of equity for people of all genders (Ferguson, 2017). Often feminist theory becomes limited, despite attempts at recognizing intersectionality, through exclusion of the impact of sexuality and gender identity (beyond sex assigned at birth) upon gendered experiences tackled by feminist theory (Jagose, 1996).

As asserted by Butler, "any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (2007, p. viii). This is where queer theory picks up the slack, claiming that gender and sexuality are unstable as categories, instead existing upon shifting spectrums allowing for gender identities and expressions typically not associated with a particular sex assigned at birth, and for fluid understandings of sexuality shifting in time and

context (Jagose, 1996). As cited in Hall and Jagose's 2013 research on intersectionality, Quilty explains that queer theory has developed with an intersectional focus, acknowledging the ways that various "axes of social difference – race, class, gender, nationality and so on" interconnect and transform each other (2017, p. 111). Critical reflection calls dominant ideology into question and challenges traditionally accepted knowledge-making processes by drawing on the disruptive potential offered by queer theory (Quilty, 2017, p. 114-115). McCann describes queer theory as concentrating on "radically unfixing normative subject positions" (McCann, 2016, p. 224). This reinforces the expansive inclusion of all "queer" female youth as my research population, as queer deconstructs normative constructions of sexuality which attempt to place all people into one of three categories ("gay, straight, or bi") rather than moving with the fluidity of the spectrum of sexualities that exist within people's lived realities. Each focus point of queer theory, gender and sexuality, is constructed as unstable and in conflict with normative understandings and limiting socio-political constructs and institutions (Jagose, 1996). In conflicting with normativity, queer theory maintains questions of intersectionality as foundational to the problematization of heteronormativity across all facets of society (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016, p. 2358-2359). Heteronormativity is "the institutions, structures of understandings, and practice orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organised as a sexuality—but also privileged" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, cited in Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016, p. 2361). Due to the far reach of heteronormativity throughout the structures of society, queer theory engages such an intersectional approach to trouble marginalizing structures and dominant social thought.

The expression of one's gender, regardless of adherence to gender norms, occurs through "gender performativity". In understanding the context of gender within the queer feminist theory

constructed within this piece, it is essential to frame gender in its experienced context of performativity. Butler asserts gender as inherently performative (2007, p. 34).

“...gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche’s claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effective, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.” (Butler, 2007, p. 34)

With the destabilization of notions of “female” and “woman”, gender performativity sheds light on the active existence of genders within performativity (Butler, 2007, p. xxiv). Gender performativity, as an “enactment that performatively constitutes the appearance of its own interior fixity”, is vital in understanding the experiences of queer youth who exist as gendered beings whose sexuality is interpreted by others in consideration of the normative or non-normativeness of their gender performativity (Butler, 2007, p. 95).

McCann agrees with my assertion that queer theory and feminism are often considered to be at fundamental odds, yet moves in a positive direction attempting to forge a cohesive feminist and queer outlook (2016, p. 224). The combined theoretical approach of queer feminist theory provides the shifting concepts of sexuality and gender within an intersectional lens of critical analysis provided by queer theory alongside the challenging of inequities within gendernormative constructs provided by feminist theory.

Queer feminist theory is a natural progression of theoretical frameworks through which to critically analyze the world, and specifically, my research. Each is deeply intertwined with the other (Marinucci 2010, cited in Quilty, 2017, p. 111), born from the oppressions of both women and LGBTQ people, feminism and queer theory share a history of struggle and a commitment to the destabilization of the socio-cultural norms which guide and oppress peoples within intersectional systems of oppression. Jagose highlights common ground between feminism and queer theory through interpretation as “a broad heterogeneous project of social critique that works itself out across provisional, contingent and non-unitary grounds unconstrained by a pre-defined field of inquiry and unanchored to the perspective of any specifiable demographic population” (2009, p. 172). They each “fight against the whole ideology and practice of domination constituted by the interlocking systems of sexism, racism and classism” (Brookfield, 2005, cited in Quilty 2017). Together Quilty (2017) connects the ideas of Jagose (2009) and of Brookfield (2005) with feminism and queer theory co-existing as “intersectional projects” of analysis founded within ideological critique. Quilty considers “both feminism and queer as discomforting forces of disruption within our norm-limiting educational worlds” (2017, p. 111).

Key Studies

In creating a picture for the relevance of queer feminist theory to my research study, it is pertinent to highlight studies that engage this theoretical framework. Studies discussed here have engaged queer theory, feminist theory, or a version of queer feminist theory. These studies each focus on a population whose experiences may be relevant to those of queer female youths, such as queer female adults, or queer male adults. By highlighting the ways relevant studies use these theories, the purpose and value of queer feminist theory in analyzing the data from my study will be reinforced.

Within the construct of a queer feminist theory engaged in my study, it is vital to encourage the disruption of conventional beliefs, knowledge and perspectives on feminism, queer theory, and the lived experiences of those persons whose existence and surroundings connect personally with the concepts of queer feminist theory. Encouraged disruptions should include consideration of the foundations of the definitions of “woman” and the experience or value of coming out. Kotze and Bowman (2018) have deconstructed “woman” due to its reliance upon misogynistic discourse which subjectifies female behavior, and so are left with an identity crisis of defining “woman” through the “undetermining – undefining, delineating, and uncapturing” of female behavior (p. 4-5). Considering the tensions between definitions of “woman”, Kotze and Bowman (2018) continue to disrupt conventional understandings through an interrogation of the implications of “coming-out”. The purpose of their study was to “critically interrogate lesbians’ coming-out stories to challenge several popular and academic assumptions underpinning coming out as a valuable and liberating developmental process for lesbians” (Kotze & Bowman, 2018, p. 5). In this study, the application of feminist theory highlighted the incompleteness of liberatory identity politics as an explanation for “coming out”. This application of feminist theory interpreting coming out as a liberatory practice is relevant to my study due to the likelihood that the queer female youths will reference their coming out as part of their reflection upon the way that their peers treat them.

In analysis of a queer film, the rift between feminism and “queer politics/theory” is revealed as a reason for the rendering of those existing at the intersection of gender and sexuality as “absent, effaced and silenced from representation” (Izharuddin, 2015). Intersectionality is therefore essential to a feminism which engages multi-dimensional thinking recognizing the “overlapping forms of discrimination and oppression experienced by singular individuals”

(Izharuddin, 2015). In my study, it is essential that the lived experiences of the queer female youths interviews are considered within an intersectional context of queer feminist theory, recognizing the interconnectedness between their experiences as women, as young women, as non-white young women, as non-white young (in some cases) immigrant women, as non-white young immigrant women existing within families with strong religious and cultural ties.

Engaging directly with both queer theory and feminist theory is Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir's (2015) study on the experiences of 5 non-straight male and female students. This study engages Judith Butler's queer theory and radical feminist theory as two of three theoretical frameworks through which they analyze their data. Their study's population of male and female participants were current students at different upper high schools in Iceland, and the research method was semi-structured interviews. Queer theory and radical feminist theory were used in order to provide a "queer-feminist perspective" to their research, as it aids in understanding the intersection of gender and sexuality (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2015, p. 5). This involved application of "Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix" upon the school settings of the participants' lived experiences (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2015, p. 5). This "heterosexual matrix" was used to analyze how the participants were coded as not "normative" by their surrounds due to their not being "agreement" between their biological sex and heterosexuality. This lack of being coded as normative by their surrounds leads them into a category of "other". Concepts of otherness, are grounded in understandings of the heteromisogynistic sociocultural space which queer feminist theory engages with critically. In this way, my study will explore queer female youths' experience of otherness created by the intersection of heteronormativity and misogyny, as well as their coming out experiences, and the intersectional identities which impact their lived experiences, through a lens of queer feminist theory.

Resilience Theory

Theory as Framework

Resilience theory is essential as a lens for analysis of the patterns within the queer female youths' perceptions of their school experiences. Meyer (2015) defines resilience as "the quality of being able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity" (p. 210). While resilience is similar to coping, they differ in two key ways. Firstly, coping may or may not be a successful adaptation to a stressor, whereas resilience indicates success. And secondly, coping refers to the efforts made by an individual to attempt to adapt to a stressor, whereas resilience refers to the successful withstanding of an individual, or community, to a stressor (Meyer, 2015, p. 210). Literature identifies four patterns, or sources, of resilience within the application of resilience theory to individuals. First, the dispositional pattern of "physical and ego-related psychosocial attributes" is a source of resilience. An example of this is the resilient disposition that an individual may have due to their having "a sense of autonomy or self-reliance, a sense of basic self-worth, good physical health and good physical appearance" (Polk 1997, cited in Van Breda, 2001, p. 4). Second, the relational pattern of "roles and relationships" is a source of resilience that can exist due to an individual having "close and intimate relationships to those within the broader societal system" (Polk, 1997, cited in Van Breda, 2001, p. 4). Third, the situational pattern of the individuals abilities which link them to taking action in a stressful situation can support resilience through an individual having strong "problem solving ability, the ability to evaluate situations and responses, and the capacity to take action in response to a situation" (Polk, 1997, cited in Van Breda, 2001, p. 5). Finally, the philosophical pattern of "an individual's worldview or life paradigm" which underpins resilience through the "belief that positive meaning can be found in all experiences, the belief that self-development is important, [and] the belief that life is

purposeful” (Polk, 1997, cited in Van Breda, 2001, p. 4-5). These four patterns work to highlight the overlapping and interconnected realms within which the experiences of queer youth can be explored. As this research study examines the positive and negative experiences of queer female youth with their peers, sources of resilience are vital in understanding the youths’ perceptions of what constitutes a negative experience or interaction.

Key Studies

Studies which explore resilience theory in the context of queer females provides context and a roadmap to possibilities for the application of this theory to my study. While limited research exists on resilience in specifically queer female youth, there do exist studies in related populations. These studies, despite the differences, highlight the successes of resilience in response to experiences relating to similar categories of marginalization.

In a study on the intersectional lived experience of stressors and resilience in black lesbian women, resilience is applied to the qualitative data collected (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003). In this study, resilience data was collected through qualitative interviews which were a voluntary option following a demographics-focused questionnaire which invited participants through signs posted at a black lesbian retreat in Southern California. While the interview participants in this were 26-68 years old, their demonstrations of resilience may be relevant to the resilience of queer female youth in my study. Participants of Bowleg et al.’s (2003) study described resilience through their ability to “self-define”, to actively and directly confront oppression, in assessing the degree to which they have power to change situations, not allowing others to define their reality, and choosing to remove themselves from “bear[ing] the burden of other people’s bigotry” (p. 100).

A study on the health of gay and bisexual males by Herrick et al. (2014) uses a dominant lens of resilience theory to frame the need for more research and in analysis of the study's data. This study echoes the need for research that focuses upon the positives, such a favorable experiences and resilience, rather than the usual focus on the negatives experienced by queer communities (Herrick et al., 2014, p. 3). Essential questions posed by this study include: "does the process of coming out and the skills built as that process unfolds contribute to subsequent successful health behaviors?", "Does the process of homophobia management (the social understanding of when and where it is safe to be open about one's sexuality) promote safety in otherwise unsafe situations?", and "Does the ability to form affirming social structures like families and religious institutions help us to secure the resources that support health across the life course?" (Herrick et al., 2014, p. 3). These questions are essential to the application of resilience theory in my study through highlighting the underlying theme of questions which may be utilized in analysis of my study's data. In this way, analysis of my study's data will include looking at the participants' statements about the sphere of people to whom they are out, and whether they perceive there to be affirming social structures in the form of their supportive friends.

Lack of Literature

Far less research focuses on the experiences of queer women as compared to queer men. Unfortunately, even queer studies which elect to include female participants often do not do so at an equal rate to male participation. A relevant research study by Robinson (2010) represents this imbalance, with 12 out of 17 participants being male and 5 out of 17 being female. In response to this bias of research towards males, some research, including this proposed study and that by

Jordan, Vaughan and Woodworth (1997), have sought an intentionally singular focus upon female participants in attempts to illuminate and rebalance the historical implicit misogyny in queer research. Imbalances such as these reduce the ability for queer women to have a voice within the growing research on non-heterosexual people. Malinsky (1997) identifies this gender-based bias of research, and engages it as justification for their study focusing solely upon lesbian and bisexual women, quoting: “Young lesbians are subject to triple invisibility: as children, they are invisible in the adult world; as women, they are invisible in a male-dominated work; and as lesbians they are invisible in a gay world” (Rodgers, 1994, cited in Malinsky, 1997). While this quote highlights the intersectional marginalization experienced by young queer females, it does not give voice to the penetration of additional sources of marginalization caused by racism, ableism, islamophobia, and xenophobia, which contribute to unique experiences of the world.

Negative experiences and statistics for queer youth form the most common basis for research. This negatively-focused research bends thinking towards a one-dimensional concept of queer youth as without positive experiences and successes built through resilience during their high school careers (Craig et al., 2015). This is wildly inaccurate, with many queer youth struggling through adversity to reach success, and others receiving various degrees of support and acceptance from friends, peers, family and teachers surrounding them. Resilience theory provides for addressing negative aspects of queer youth’s high school experience, while focusing primarily on the protective factors that may contribute to experiences of success and positive outcomes (Craig et al., 2015).

Positive Experiences

Despite most academic attention focusing squarely upon the victimization and marginalization of queer youth in high school, many also have positive experiences of support and acceptance with their peers. These include receiving positive reactions after coming out to friends, having peers stand up for them when homophobic language is used, and building stronger friendships through shared identities as queer youth. In some cases, experiences that would commonly be considered negative were, with hindsight, perceived in a more positive light. The consistent perception of positive experiences with peers being a part of high school life for queer youth is essential in understanding the dynamics of social interactions in high schools, as well as providing examples of ways that queer youth experience success and perceive being well supported by their peers.

Peer Reactions

The process of coming “out” as non-heterosexual can be fraught with relief and newfound support, or may be a painful process of rejection and rebuilding. Robinson’s study of homosexual youth’s school experiences suggested a connection between receiving positive reactions from peers, both friends and other classmates, and feeling happy in school (2010, p. 340). The more strongly positive descriptions participants provided about their friends’ reactions included: “really supportive”, “a world of strength”, and “on your side and say well done for coming out” (Robinson, 2010, p. 340). These statements reinforce my study’s focus upon the support that peers can provide their queer female friends upon coming out and in the time beyond the act of coming out. One participant described their friends reaction as “fine with it and all my mates were fine with it”, which Robinson coded as positive (2010, p. 340). This is a

questionable coding which implies that the absence of a negative reaction is to be interpreted as being therefore a positive reaction. These subtle experiences which have the possibility to fall into categories of subtle homophobia will be explored further in the sub-section *Homophobia* within *Negative Experiences*. In my study it is essential that descriptions of peer actions which imply neutral reactions or treatment are analyzed in terms of whether there are microaggressive assertions of heteronormativity embedded in statements of neutral, rather than explicitly positive, reactions and experiences.

Affirmation, as a reaction experienced after coming out to friends and peers, can encourage positive self-esteem through scaffolding increased confidence and supporting the development of one's identity (Murphy, 2014, p. 22). These, and other, impacts of social support were investigated in Murphy's retrospective study in connection to student perceptions of their experience of being out in high school (2014). When reflecting upon their experience of being out in high school some participants identified developing new friendships as the best part of being out (Murphy, 2014, p. 24). One participant explained their personal journey of coming out as a shift from being emotionally shut off from peers, angry, and unable to make friends, to feeling less angry inside and this being evident to those around him, which allowed him to make social connections that he had never been able to develop previously (Murphy, 2014, p. 24-25). This highlights the sense of being in the closet extending beyond simply hiding one's sexuality but being unable to build friendships due to a compounding of the products of keeping one's identity hidden, and brings about a clarity of the impact of coming out extending beyond a public or semi-public acknowledgement of one's sexuality but as a "coming into" themselves, with all the social, identity, and confidence building experiences that may come with this.

The friendships existing at the time of coming out impact whether the queer person's experience is positive, negative, or possessing aspects of each. Some participants in Murphy's study stated that they had not felt concerned coming out to their friends about their sexuality because they were sure they would be supported, accepted, and even defended, by their friends (2014, p. 22). Many identified feeling nervous about the process of coming out to friends, but the majority of friendships were perceived as unaffected, or even strengthened, by their sexuality becoming known (Murphy, 2014, p. 22). This highlights a support network present in these queer students' lives which facilitated their experience of being queer in high school as positive in terms of their friendships.

Building new friendships is usually labeled "positive", yet when one's friendship is grounded in having a "token" friend from a marginalized group it may be perceived as less positive. This may be based upon the friendship being, or being implied to be, a less meaningful friendship due to its development through the motive of attaining friends who tick the boxes of particular people groups, rather than a friendship grounded in a mutual connection or common interests. Some participants in Murphy's study identified this phenomenon; that some heterosexual peers wanted to be their friend because they had never previously had a non-heterosexual friend (2014, p. 24). Experiences are varying, with it possible that some queer youth may find it positive to have become the "gay friend" of a straight person, while others may find the label or introduction as someone's "gay friend" to belittle the friendship itself.

Peer reactions to discovering a student is queer, and their subsequent acceptance or rejection of that student, appears to be influenced by LGBT-inclusive curriculum. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that LGBT-affirming curriculum promoted respect and understanding of queer people by the general student body (Kosciw et al.,

2016, p. 68). Queer students at schools with such curriculum were also more likely to report that their peers were “very” or “somewhat” accepting of LGBT people, with 75% at schools with LGBT-inclusive curriculum versus 40% at schools without LGBT-inclusive curriculum reporting their peers to be “somewhat” or “very” accepting of LGBT people (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 68-69).

Queer Friendships

Research shows that many queer youth find support and friendship with other queer peers at their school. Robinson (2010) notes the function of queer youth building friendships with each other as aiding these youth to realize that they are not alone in their experiences, struggles, successes, and development of identity through sexuality (p. 340).

Often these new friendships with other queer youth form without knowing each other on a personal level prior to learning their shared queer identity (Murphy, 2014, p. 23). It is upon discovering the shared queer identity that a support system builds with roles of “support provider” and “support seeker” (Murphy, 2014, p. 23). These relationships highlight a desire and need for unity within the queer community, with understandings of confidentiality of shared information and a shared appreciation for a support system to develop (Murphy, 2014, p. 23).

Murphy identifies that some youth are facilitated in making new friendships and connections with other queer students through shared participation in their school’s gay straight alliance (GSA) (2014, p. 24). GSAs can provide queer students with a safe space in which community, support and activism can be built while embracing and celebrating diverse sexualities. Participation in a GSA was seen to result in students meeting people at their school that they otherwise may not have (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 63), and many authentic and supportive

friendships were noted as developing through having met at their school's GSA (Murphy, 2014, p. 24). Queer students who develop friendships through their GSA connect with others sharing similar interests, identities, or issues which facilitates the development of supportive friendships. These friendships are vital in bettering queer students' experiences of high school.

Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs)

GSAs can provide opportunities for queer students to build positive social connections, to develop a support network, to experience a safe space on their school campus, and to engage in LGBT activism within their school community. GLSEN has conducted national school campus climate surveys since 1999 which provide a quantitative outlook on the experiences and issues facing queer youth in high schools within the United States. GLSEN is a national organization that facilitates and supports the creation of GSAs within schools nationwide. The most recent National School Climate Survey by GLSEN states that GSAs can provide a "safe and affirming space" within a school where queer students may otherwise experience hostility (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 54). In engaging activism, some GSAs build the visibility of LGBTQ issues to classmates through running activities surrounding the Day of Silence, Harvey Milk's birthday, or Pride Month, just to name a few examples (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 63). Based on students who completed the National School Climate Survey, those who attended a school with a GSA were more likely to report that their peers were accepting of their sexuality, with 61% at schools with GSAs reporting that their peers accept them versus 35% of students at schools without GSAs reporting that their peers accept them (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 63).

Protection

When homosexual students, studied by Robinson, experienced prejudice and homophobic bullying at school, they seemed to be buffered by the strength they had sourced through their peers' support and acceptance of their sexuality (2010, p. 340). Rates of students intervening in incidents of homophobic bullying and harassment are low across the board, though the presence of a GSA at a school appears to make a marked difference in these rates. GLSEN reports that 8% of students at schools without GSAs stated that peers "intervene most of the time or always", whereas 11% of students at schools with GSAs reported this frequency of intervention by their peers (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 64). According to this report, more important for increasing rates of intervention in anti-LGBT remarks is LGBT-inclusive curriculum, with queer students at schools with inclusive curriculum reporting 19% of students intervene most or all of the time, whereas only 7% of queer students at schools lacking inclusive education reported their peers intervening most or all of the time (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 69).

Filtering Friends

Some students perceived the negative action of losing friends due to their sexuality as a hidden positive where they were in fact about to determine which of their friendships were valuable and worthy of retaining (Murphy, 2014, p. 21). This discovery of who is supportive and who is not supportive of a youth's sexuality was reported as the "best aspect" of being out as non-heterosexual during high school by 24% of participants in Murphy's study (2014, p. 21). While it was recognized as a painful process to realize that a friend was not supportive of one's sexual orientation or identity, Murphy notes "many" participants identifying this process as important for finding out who their "true friends" were, as the queer youth were often not wanting to remain friends with those who were a negative or unsupportive force in their lives (2014, p. 21). This filtering out of friends who are not supportive of a queer youth's sexuality can

be an important process, despite being painful, in building a support network of meaningful friendships committed to providing true support, connection, and a willingness to intervene in anti-LGBTQ harassment.

Negative Experiences

Intersectional sources of discrimination face queer female youth who often experience marginalization, harassment and violence on the basis of their sexuality and their gender. Beyond the impacts of heterosexism, sexism and transphobia, some queer female youth face additional discrimination due to racism, ableism, xenophobia, and islamophobia. This section will delve specifically into research upon experiences of homophobia, sexism, transphobia and gender normative harassment, and overarching changes in school climate that are evident in the school climate for queer youth.

Homophobia

Negative reactions from friends and classmates about a student's sexuality has been shown to have a "significantly damaging effect on mental affect" (Coyle, 1998, cited in Robinson, 2010, p. 338). Mental health impacts for queer youth that are correlated with negative experiences with peers include higher rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety. The significance of this effect holds a great deal of importance when compared to the current reactions of queer youth. With 57.6% of LGBTQ students feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 71.5% of these students avoiding school functions (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvi), there is a great need for a change in school culture. Queer youth often feel incapable of functioning freely and authentically within the realm of school because of their

sexual orientations and the pain of negative interactions of bullying and harassment that stem from peer judgement and abuse grounded in homophobia.

The mental state of fear and discomfort of queer youth is not misplaced, but instead is a reaction to harassment and violence. The majority of LGBTQ students (85.2%) reported experiencing verbal harassment at school which targeted personal characteristics, often sexual orientation and over half of this group also experienced sexual harassment within the past year of school (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvi). Malinsky's qualitative study of lesbian and bisexual female youth corroborates this data with 25/27 students recounting personal experiences of verbal and/or physical abuse (1997, p. 39). In this hostile environment students struggle to maintain regular schedules, 31.8% of whom reported missing at least one day of school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvi). This atmosphere impedes student ability to be open about their sexualities at school. This hostility is pervasive in different realms of youth life as well, exiting the school atmosphere and entering student homes through technology. Nearly half of LGBTQ students experience cyberbullying through Facebook and text messaging (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvi). For many queer youth, the isolation resulting from repeated marginalization based on their sexuality is repeated in their homes (Malinsky, 1997, p. 44), which reinforces the need for schools to be safe havens for queer youth.

Acts of homophobia in schools can escalate from verbal or cyber harassment to physical violence. 27% of students experience physical harassment in the form of being pushed or shoved at school and another 13% report being physically assaulted, which consists of being punched, kicked or even attacked with a weapon (Kosciw et al., 2016, p.xvi). As is expected, queer female students in the Peter, Taylor, Ristock and Edkins 2015 study reported higher rates of verbal harassment based upon their sexuality than heterosexual female peers (p. 261). For bisexual

students, the top three predictors of low school attachment were, respectively, missing school due to feeling unsafe when at school, high levels of homo-negative and homophobic language at their school, experiencing anti-LGBTQ-based verbal harassment, experiencing general sexual harassment, and being the victim of harassment based upon sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (Peter et al. 2015, p. 265). The difference between the experiences of various subsets of the LGB student population is notable, with the top predictors of low school attachment in lesbian students being far fewer than for bisexual female students. Specifically, the top factors for lesbian students to feel lower school attachment were, respectively, their school not having an anti-homophobic policy, and the ability to identify “many” places where LGBTQ students were unsafe at their school (Peter et al., 2015, p. 263).

According to research by Aerts et al., LGB girls have lower levels of feeling that they “belong” at school compared to heterosexual girls and GB boys (2012, cited in Peter et al., 2015, p. 252). In comparison to their heterosexual counterparts, LGB girls reported less attachment to their school environment (Peter et al., 2015, p. 258). Peter et al. conclude that the results suggest “homo-negative and homophobic comments [to be] extremely prevalent in Canadian schools” (2015, p. 258). One study showed lesbians and bisexual females reporting feeling unsafe at school due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation 71.8% and 62.1% of the time, respectively (Peter et al., 2015, p. 260). In contrast, heterosexual females only felt unsafe at school for this reason 5.2% of the time (Peter et al., 2015, p. 260).

Peter et al. (2015) draws a strong connection between unsafe places and school attachment, with the higher the perceived number of unsafe places for LGBTQ students, the lower the level of school attachment felt by all female students regardless of sexuality (p. 260-261). Furthermore, research suggests a moderate connection between lower school attachment

and higher delinquency in youth (Liska & Reed, 1985, p. 548). Towards a goal of equitable education for queer youth, school attachment is significant in its role as a protective factor (Henry & Slater 2007, p. 68). Lower levels of school attachment are consistently linked to higher rates of youth delinquency, lower grades, lower aspirations for higher education, lower school attendance, and less enjoyment of school (Liska & Reed, 1985, p. 548). Furthermore, failing classes at high school is predictive of delinquency regardless of the youth's socio-economic status (Siegel & Senna, 1988, p. 305).

The language of homophobia saturates the language of insult in youth culture, making non-heterosexuality the choice insult applied to any members of society or actions by members who are deemed outside of gender norms. Sexuality-based derogatory language is widely used across this section of society. Students grow up in an atmosphere where almost all LGBTQ students (98.1%) hear the word “gay” used to connote negative behaviors or attributes (Kosciw et al., 2016, p.xvi). This is the setting in which queer youth are building their notions of self, a setting which teaches very quickly the fundamentals of heterosexism. Nearly all queer students also reported hearing other types of homophobic remarks such as “dyke” and “faggot” used as insults and half of the population heard it frequently (Kosciw et al., 2016, p.xvi). This is a widespread issue that cannot be condensed to a single community or area of fault, but is part of a broad method of setting youth norms. It is this language which contributes to a little over a third of queer students feeling unsafe in gender-segregated spaces such as bathrooms and lockers (Kosciw et al., 2016, p.xvi). Homophobic language is the smoke to a fire burning to eliminate sexual identity freedom.

Sexism

In exploring the experiences of sexism by queer female youth participating in this study, it is essential to explicitly engage with the intersection of negative anti-queer experiences and sexism. Sexism can be used as a vehicle for anti-queer rhetoric, such as through belittling the sexuality of non-heterosexual females through objectification which implies the insignificance of their sexuality beyond the pleasure it brings to heterosexual men.

A Canadian study by Peter et al. (2015) shows a bivariate relationship was significant for bisexual girls in the study, between negative gender-specific language about girls, including accusing girls of not “acting “feminine” enough”, and school attachment (2015, p. 259). As in the studies mentioned in the *Homophobia* section, the impact of marginalizing language is more profound for some or all LGB populations. Sexual harassment that appeared unrelated to the sexual orientation of the victim was reported at far higher rates by queer than heterosexual female participants, with 40.4% of bisexual, 34% of lesbian, and 16.4% of heterosexual participants reported having experienced one or more incidents of “general” sexual harassment (Peter et al., 2015, p. 262). In the study, the lesbian participants who had experienced sexual harassment has the lowest school attachment score (Peter et al., 2015, p. 262). This suggests lesbian youth may be at high risk of dropping out of school, earning low and failing grades, and drug use (Henry & Slater, 2007, p. 68). These risks associated with sexism, as well as the actual incidents of sexism themselves, highlight the importance of understanding the current negative experiences of queer female youth in a qualitative manner in order to allow light to be shone on the intersectional marginalizations facing queer female youth.

Transphobia/Gender Normative Harassment

Transgender students face intense issues of marginalization by their peers who often do not understand the experience of gender dysphoria experienced by transgender students and prompts transgender students to “transition” publicly. In response to transgender students often wearing clothing traditionally restricted to persons assigned the opposite sex at birth, they face harassment, violence and exclusion by peers within the school context. While transphobia affects transgender students acutely, these bases for discrimination can be applied upon other categories of youth through gender normative harassment based upon perceived or actual gender identity or expression, or upon perceived or actual sexuality due to the common conflation of sexuality and gender expression. In my study, it is gender normative harassment which is most relevant, as all the participants identify as cisgender though express their gender through performativity that is varying degrees of masculine/feminine and may serve, with or without connection to their sexuality, to result in experiences of harassment or microaggressions which attempt to reinforce gender normative standards.

Queer female, both cisgender and trans*, students reported higher rates of verbal harassment based on their gender identity or expression than their heterosexual female peers (Peter et al., 2015, p. 261). Negative comments about not being masculine enough or feminine enough, in comparison to traditional representations of gender in alignment with assigned sex at birth, were heard at school by 95.7% of LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvii). Many of these comments heard at school were specifically transphobic, with 85.7% of LGBTQ students reporting hearing words like “tranny” or “he/she” at school (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvii).

Schools often feel an unsafe place due to transphobic or gender-based harassment and violence. Over half of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment due to their gender expression, with 20.3% having been pushed or shoved and 9.4% having been punched, kicked or

injured with a weapon within one year of the survey date due to their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvi). These awful experiences are shown to be pervasive in high schools in the United States, and are a contributing factor for 43.3% of LGBTQ students feeling unsafe at their school due to their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xvi). While a school climate may feel supportive for some queer female youth, it could be expected that within the participants experiences in this study they feel supported in some areas of their identities and not supported in other aspects of their identity. This was evidenced in Bowleg et al.'s (2003) study of Black lesbians which showed that 74% of participants felt supported by at least one of their family members, yet the majority of whom said that this support did not always “encompass their identities as Black lesbians”.

Improvements in School Climate for Queer Youth

According to the National School Climate Survey by GLSEN (Kosciw et al., 2016), there have been decreases in various indicators of hostility towards queer youth in high schools across the United States. Despite “that’s so gay” remaining the most commonly heard anti-LGBTQ remark, there has been some decrease in the frequency with which queer youth report hearing this phrase, along with other homophobic comments such as “fag” and “dyke” (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xxii). Unfortunately, the frequency of queer youth hearing transphobic remarks or remarks policing non-normative gender expression has increased in 2015 compared to 2013 (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xxii). Reports of physical and verbal harassment and assault, based upon both sexual orientation and gender identity, have decreased (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. xxii).

Summary

This review of the literature highlighted the limited research on queer female youth's experiences with their peers at school. Despite limited explicit engagement with queer feminist theory and resilience theory in the reviewed research on queer youth, these theories are highly relevant to further development in this field through the combinations of strengths in acknowledging the spectrum of gender and sexual identities, the impacts of these onto experiences with peers, and the ways in which resilience is built through positive interactions with peers. Research on positive and negative experiences of queer youth highlights the many ways in which queer youth are marginalized by peers within their high schools, the resilience to homophobic interactions when queer youth have supportive friends, and the friendships which may develop once a youth is "out" as queer in their school community. This study aims to positively contribute to this limited body of research by focusing explicitly and singularly on queer female-identified youth.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Introduction

The following chapter will present key excerpts from the interview transcripts which represent the sentiments of participants within each theme. The data is organized first based upon the main theme to which it pertains. For example, when a participant speaks of their experience of coming out to their peers this excerpt of the transcript will be presented within the “Coming Out to Peers” section of this chapter. Secondly, the data retains its connection to the specific participant through maintaining the separation of data into subsections for each participant.

While the intersecting experiences and perspectives of the participants are evident through the primary presentation within theme-based sections, the authentic voice and continuity of thoughts are engaged through keeping the participants’ voices in distinct subsections of these theme-based categories. The theme-based sections each commence through a representative quote from one of the participant interviews. For example, the section engaging with the theme of “queer friends” begins with the quote “My People”. This retains participant voice as the focal point.

Simultaneously, it frontloads the section with the general sentiment of all participants on the topic, which in the example of “My People” highlights the positive sense of camaraderie felt by the participants with their fellow queer peers. This chapter presents the key experiences and perceptions, thematically presented, which participants chose to share during their individual semi-structured interviews. As each participant made different choices in their use of gendered language to refer to their peers, I will be using the same gendered terms for the presentation of each participants’ data in this results chapter. For example, if a participant referred to male-

presenting peers as “guys”, then the term guys will be used throughout their portions of the results chapter to refer to male-presenting peers.

The two core themes are: Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness, which focused upon coming out and daily life experiences as queer youth; and Heteromisogynistic Space, which focused on experiences grounded in gendernormativity, sexualization and homophobia. The eight sub-themes are: Coming Out To Peers, Peer Protection & Post-Coming Out Experiences, and Queer Friends, which fall into the core theme of Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness, Sexualized, Gender Normativity, Homophobic Language, and Educator Actions, which fall into the core theme of Heteromisogynistic Space. Coming Out To Peers focuses upon the experiences that participants described about the process of, and reaction to, their sexuality becoming known to their peers. The section, Sexualized, highlights the moments where participants have noticed non-heterosexual female sexualities being sexualized by their peers. Peer Protection & Post-Coming Out Experiences engages anecdotes focused upon the ways that their friends protect each of the participants from homophobic peers. Furthermore, these anecdotes bring up positive and negative experiences with peers that have been based upon their sexuality and have occurred at any point after their initial revealing of their sexuality to their peers. Gender Normativity refers to participant perspectives or experiences in which their gender presentation has been conflated with sexuality or has been a point of microaggression, harassment, or stereotyping. Educator Actions engages the ways that participants have noticed teachers dealing with homophobic language in their classrooms. It will also discuss the ways that queer-inclusive teaching has evident in their classes, and anything which the participants presented as related to the intersection of their educators and non-heterosexuality. Finally, Queer Friends presents the positivity that all participants felt in terms of the general and specific

benefits of having queer friends, particularly the higher immediate perception of connection and understanding between the participants and queer peers compared to heterosexual peers. Each of these sections provides a different insight into the lived experiences of these three queer female-identified youths with their peers at school.

Participants

Each participant in this study will be referred to by a pseudonym for the duration of the study, for the purposes of retaining their anonymity and privacy. Their pseudonyms are: Malena, Jacorrah, and Sarah. The three participants all identify as female, are in freshman (Jacorrah and Sarah) or sophomore (Malena) year at the same high school, and are all non-white. All three youth are acquaintances, though not friends, through their membership of the GSA through which the interview opportunity was presented. Malena is Mexican, having immigrated to America with her family when she was a young child. She currently lives with her elder brother, twin younger sisters, and both parents, who are a heterosexual married couple. Her other sibling is an adult female who has been estranged from the family by her father. There was an implication that he father is strict and that her sister rebelled, resulting in her moving out and Malena, her mother, her brother, and her twin younger sisters, only seeing her elder sister if her father is out of town. Jacorrah is a black American who lives with her mother, her gay uncle, and one sibling. She also has a sister that doesn't live at home and whom she described as a lesbian, despite clarifying that her sister dates men and women. Sarah is of mixed race and lives with her heterosexual married parents. She has a close relationship with her extended family, particularly her cousins and their parents. While Malena is out to all her immediate family except her father, the other two participants are out to all their immediate family. Despite general comments of

expected conflicts with parents, each participant conveyed a functional relationship with their family.

Securing Participants

Initially, this study intended to seek out 5-10 participants in order to increase the likelihood of reaching saturation of themes expressed through the interview data. I presented the research opportunity to the students at the GSA of the chosen school and it was met with much positivity. Approximately ten students expressed an interest in participating in the study. However, at the following GSA meeting one week later when students were presented with the IRB forms, only five students chose to take forms. Of these five students, one student's parent refused to give consent for their child to participate in the study, and another student cited a family holiday and a busy schedule as the reason why they were not able to participate. Ideally, this study would have benefitted from additional participants, however in the given circumstances it was not possible to seek additional participants due to the set time frame of the study.

Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness

“It was fine. They didn’t mind.”

Coming Out To Peers

“I’ve only come out to them because I knew them, because I started getting comfortable with them...they were really cool about it, like it was fine.” - Malena

Malena recounted her experience of coming out to her friends at her previous school which she attended in freshman year of high school. She represented the general sentiment of the students at her old school as everyone having known her sexuality and that “it was fine, they didn’t mind”. As she moved to this high school at the beginning of the current school year, she did not feel like she knew many people, but that if anyone asked she “won’t deny” her sexuality to them. At her previous school there were less students, and she represented that “they all knew me” and so “it’s not like anything’s gunna change”. However; she stated that many “playful jokes” were made about her sexuality by her friends. Malena reaffirmed to me that she “understood” that they were joking and not trying to be mean. Jokes usually focused upon a friend pointing out a usually straight object, like a tree or a pole, but that in this case was not straight, and then saying “oh look, Malena is as straight as that tree”. While she expressed that “it was fine” and that “it was funny”, after explaining these jokes to me she then stated that she “never really...like had bullying face-to-face”.

In terms of her non-queer friends at her current high school, their reactions were categorized as “fine” and “really cool about it”, interchangeably. “I’ve only come out to them because I knew them, because I started getting comfortable with them...they were really cool about it, like it was fine.” Malena highlighted that she has never been “outed”, had her sexuality revealed, without her permission. She did not identify any difference in the reaction she’s received upon coming out as bi to peers who were Juniors versus Sophomores. In the case of her Junior friends whom she described as all “guys”, she decided to come out in response to a conversation that was about their girlfriends. This is her explanation of the conversation: “They were like ‘oh, do you have a boyfriend Maggy?’ And I was like, ‘nah, and I don’t really want one’ and they were like, ‘why?’, and I was like ‘oh I’m bi’. They took it totally fine.”

The first person that she came out to was a friend. "...She was totally fine with it, she was like, 'oh, that's really cool', so we'd talk about our crushes and everything, and she'd be like 'oh really?'" Malena excitedly recounted the comfortability that she felt with this friend, which was expressed through the fun of being able to talk about people that she had crushes on. Apart from people she is newly meeting, she came out to everyone important in her life when she was 14, which is the year before this interview took place.

"Like, why can't straight people come out?" – Jacorrah

Jacorrah realized that she was not heterosexual when she was in 6th grade. She explained this as coming to the "realization" that "Oh my gosh, I'm not straight!". The first person she came out to was when she was 7th grade, she came out to a friend who identified as a lesbian. Even though there was a year of self-processing between realization of her sexuality and telling someone about her sexuality, she explained that she "wasn't upset about it" and was "just like figuring things out".

Jacorrah confidently talked about being "out" as pansexual to all her friends and to anyone else who cares to know. She displayed a pride in her sexuality when she explained that "my friend had a mini pride flag and I was just like this [gestures holding the flag close to her chest waving it rapidly] with it all day [at school]". Jacorrah laughed while she explained that she says "weird things", in terms of making gay jokes with her friends where she draws attention to her sexuality. For example: "I was talking to my friend about something that I did over the weekend, and I was like, "for a long time I literally just sat in my closet"...and I was like "hah that's a gay joke"."

When she spoke about how her friends reacted to her being pan, she highlighted that they don't have much of a reaction. Jacorrah said, "pretty much all of my friends are part of the LGBTQ community". When she told of the reaction that her couple of non-queer friends had to her coming out as pan to them, she said "Lots of times they get confused [when I come out], because pansexual isn't really like a 'main' kind of [sexuality], it's usually like gay, straight or bi. So they really think of this and they're like 'oh what does that mean?'".

Speaking in general, rather than about herself, Jacorrah explained that when some people come out as "something that's not straight" then rumors "float around saying like 'oh, this person's sexuality is this'". In reflecting upon the reality of "coming out" being a part of the process of being non-heterosexual, she talked about having seen the movie Love Simon.

...he said "why is straight the default?". And I've been thinking about that a lot. Like, why is straight just the default. Like, I understand where he was coming from, and like, I just kind of agree with him now, basically. Like, why can't straight people come out? Because you never know their sexuality until they actually come out to you, right. Like, [everyone just assumes] "oh you're a girl so you like guys, or oh you're a boy so you like girls".

"I wanted to cry but I didn't...she like fully supported me" – Sarah

Sarah came out as bisexual in 7th grade to her then-friend group, which were "thankfully...really accepting...kind of just really chill with it". However; despite feeling accepted by her friends, because none of them were queer she also felt like there was no one that she could "talk to about it, and like relate to".

When Sarah came out it was prompted by a conversation where she was talking about how she didn't like a particular girl because she was talking behind someone's back about a girl having a girlfriend. As Sarah had a "full on rant about like what's so wrong about like being gay, being who you are, she needs to like chill". The conversation shifted to being about how there are other bisexual people at their school, and then one of her friends asked her if she is bisexual. Sarah described it like this:

And then I wanted to cry but I didn't, because there was a whole bunch of people. And then she was like oh ok, and she like fully supported me, and she gave me a hug and everything. And then, after that school ended, so like 6th period. And I went to, like, my bestest friend since third grade, and I was so nervous to tell her even though she has a gay brother. And I like pulled her to the side, she was talking to someone else, and I was like, I'm bi. She was like I don't care, I was like alright.

After this, she went home and was in an online group chat with approximately ten friends. One of the friends that she had told earlier in the day asked Sarah whether she had permission to tell everyone in the group chat. Sarah gave her permission, and so her friend told the whole group that Sarah had come out as bisexual today to her. The next day at lunch those friends clarified in person, asking "'so you're bi', I'm like 'yeah', and they're like 'Do you like anybody?', I was like 'Kind of, but they go to [a nearby middle school]'. Sarah summarized the response of her friends to her coming out as "they were like fully supportive...thankfully everyone has been supportive throughout like everything". All the people that Sarah came out to in those first few days were heterosexual, but this year she has met and come out to "a lot" of people that aren't heterosexual. Sarah described the reaction as "everybody was kind of just like "cool"".

When asked whether there is anything else that I should know about “what it's like to be a queer girl” at her high school, she explained:

“...it's not really like a big deal, or where I'm like flaunting it or telling everyone. And I don't think that anybody really cares, not like "oh, yeah, whatever", but like, they're just kind of okay with it. So, like, now it's like everyone is more accepting now. And people are starting to think that being queer is like a trend, when really it's not, it's just that like people are feeling more comfortable, like, coming out, and being themselves and stuff. And I feel like at San Leandro High it's like...really accepting, and like, they really emphasize on people being themselves and being safe and having this safe space.

As evidenced in this quote, she expressed positive impressions of her peers’ acceptance of non-heterosexual identities.

“I wasn’t sure if they were going to stand back or...like protect me. And they did!”

Peer Protection & Post-Coming Out Experiences

“If someone would say something then all my friends would be behind me, like "What did you say?”” - Malena

Malena was pleased to tell me about how her friends at her previous school had always stood up for her “if someone [said] something”. For this reason, she stated that she “was never really confronted with” homophobia from her peers at her previous school. Malena was “happy” that her friends stood up for her because she “wasn't sure if they were just gunna like stand back or like actually go up...like protect me...and they did!”. She explained that this was particularly

important and beneficial to her because she described herself as “not the best at speaking up” as she felt herself to be a “quiet” person.

Malena expressed that she has “some guy friends” that “appreciate” her sexuality because they are able to bond over their shared attraction to girls. Conversations that displayed this benefit for straight male-identified youth to have queer female-identified friends were explained by Malena through the question she gets asked by these friends: “oh like what do you think about this girl?”. Malena perceived that while she felt a benefit from sharing this connection with heterosexual male-identified friends, that “it’s mostly [heterosexual] girls wanting a gay best friend than guys wanting a gay best friend”. She did not think heterosexual people “mean any harm” by wanting to have a “gay best friend”. Rather, she saw it as being “different” because in friendships between a heterosexual person and a queer person of a different gender they are able to “talk about guys/girls together” in a way that they may not be able to with their same-sex heterosexual friends.

“[I]t's just that I'm joking around with my friends” - Jacorrah

Laughing, Jacorrah recounted saying and doing “weird things”. Her examples of these were various incidents of “joking around with [her] friends” in ways that drew attention to her sexuality in a proud, confident manner. In one instance with her friends, in fact earlier the day of the interview, she “as a joke, pushed them aside and was like ‘move, I'm gay’”. She laughed throughout talking about doing “little things like that”. She seemed to thrive within being “confident in” her sexuality amongst her friend group.

In terms of other notable aspects of “gay related” life at her school, she highlighted the “whole thing about hitting on people”. Jacorrah explained that she’s “even seen it with girls too,

where it's like, "you're gay, like, stop...Don't try to hit on me". She stated that it "makes [her] feel so uncomfortable" when she knew that someone was ostracizing their gay friend through comments and behaviors that reinforce a "you can stay over there" notion grounded in a fear of being hit on by queer friends "of the same sex". Jacorrah expressed that she wishes her peers would "be nice about it" by kindly stating that they "don't identify like that" and that "they are straight" if their queer friends take a real interest in them and "start doing little things that imply that they feel that way about" them. Summarizing, she stated that "just because I like the same sex doesn't mean I'm going to be flying around, being like "oh, hey, you're cute" to everyone...like, let me actually say that I like you first, and then you can just be like, "oh, okay, I'm straight"". While she stated that she has not actually observed such interactions or had happen to her, she asserted with certainty that "it definitely does happen".

In a tangent, Jacorrah mentioned that when "people hear" that someone is queer "rumors spread around". When she further explained this, she stated that "somebody could say something along the lines of "oh, I'm gay", like something that's not straight...and then rumors would float around saying like "oh, this person's sexuality is this". Jacorrah expressed that this occurs in an absence of any "actual teaching about" sexuality that she has experienced at her school.

Once Jacorrah was introduced to someone by a friend as their "gay friend". As she explained this, she used her facial expression to show how she felt about that interaction, saying "I was like..." and then showing her awkwardness with her face. On a surface level, Jacorrah commented that it is "half true", because she does not identify as gay, rather she identifies as pansexual. On a deeper analysis, Jacorrah explained her awkwardness with this introduction, stating that she did not "really have a title", that they "could just say my name", and wondered "why does [my sexuality] matter exactly?", "why does it matter...to introduce me as your "gay

friend”?”. In the moment of being introduced in this way, Jacorrah did not say anything to her friend about it because “it doesn’t happen often...it only happened, like, once”.

“They have seen that I was more happy being myself” - Sarah

Beyond the initial process of revealing her sexuality to her peers, Sarah expressed that “nobody’s really changed” in the way that they behave around her. She speculated that it might be that her friends saw that she was “more happy being [her]self” and that as a result “they’re more happy” for her.

“My people”

Queer Friends

“...they know you, like they know who you are” – Malena

As Malena is new to the school this year, she does not perceive herself as having many friends. Many of the queer friends that she’s made have been through the GSA. Some students that she’d met in classes she did not know were queer until then seeing them at the GSA meetings. Malena conveyed her excitement through her tone of voice while describing finding out that peers from her classes are queer. She began attending the GSA after seeing a poster in the bathroom, hearing her friend talk about it in class, and asking if she could go along with her friend, who was going as an ally.

She conveyed appreciation for how the queer students “try to involve you as much as they can” at the GSA. She describes these queer students as “really nice”, and that their confidence in approaching her and including her is helpful as she’s “not really...a confident

person”. The primary benefit that Malena perceived about having friends at school who are queer is that “you can relate to them more” because “they know you, like they know who you are” through their shared non-heterosexuality. Additionally, she conveyed that “[i]t's just nice having someone...that [you know will] stand up for you...just knowing that they're going to have your back”.

“...we were all like, finding ourselves...together, as friends” – Jacorrah

Jacorrah sought out the GSA, asking “ooo do they have a GSA club here?” and upon hearing that there was one, she reacted with a sentiment of solidarity, “okay, my people”. While “[p]retty much all of [her] friends are part of the LGBTQ community”, she did not meet them at the GSA. They have almost all been friends since middle school and she describes them as having gone through the journey of “finding ourselves...together...as friends”. The GSA that she was a part of at her middle school took the members on a field trip to the Castro. This included learning about Harvey Milk and going to “an actual pride store” where “they had a bunch of pride flags” and her friend purchased her one which is still hanging on her wall.

“I made a lot of friends because of [the GSA]” – Sarah

Sarah expressed that she “made a lot of [queer] friends” because of the GSA in 8th grade at her middle school. In 6th and 7th grade she attended a different middle school in the same district and did not have queer friends at this school. Sarah expressed that she “didn’t really have a lot of interests” in common with the non-queer friends that she had at her first middle school, and after leaving that school “honestly didn’t want to talk to [them] ever again”. This summarized the great value that she implied is held in having queer friends.

Heteromisogynistic Space

“Guys...straight guys...think it’s really hot to see two girls make out”

Sexualized

“I just ignored it” - Malena

Very few incidents of sexualization of female non-heterosexual sexuality could be recollected by Malena. Initially she asserted that she hadn’t “really experienced any of that”, yet within a few moments she remembered that a few weeks earlier during a school lock down there was an incident of the sexualization of non-heterosexual female sexuality. During the lockdown classes did not run as per usual, and so everyone was simply on their phones and talking. Malena stated that “there were some kids in front of me talking about lesbian porn...and how like, that’s a great thing”. The conversation was amongst three “guys”, one of whom was leading the conversation and the other two Malena perceived as behaving “awkward” and simply as having been “brought...into the conversation...like [they] didn’t really care”. She expressed an awkwardness about overhearing this type of conversation, saying that she “tried to ignore them” and stumbling to explain her sentiments of uncomfortability through phrases such as “I dunno”, “I don’t really know how to feel about it”, that she felt “disturbed”, and concluding that she didn’t know what to do about it apart from having “ignored it”. As she “wasn’t out to anyone in that class” and “it’s not like they knew” her sexuality, she perceived that they were not targeting her with the conversation. Malena could not recall any other specific acts of the sexualization of female non-heterosexuality that she has witnessed, nor has ever recognized being the target of such sexualization.

“It makes me so mad.” - Jacorrah

When asked whether she has noticed subtle homophobia through the sexualization of female non-heterosexuality, Jacorrah immediately launched into an anecdote. Beginning with “[i]t makes me so mad”, she explained how she has “a strong hatred” for a dude in her French class because of his evaluation of females being non-heterosexual as “fine” but that when a dude is non-heterosexual that it renders them “a fag”. Jacorrah’s frustration and anger was evident through her tone as she recalled this interaction. “It irritated” her, and so she responded to his assertion of different degrees of acceptability for “dude” versus “girl” homosexuality with a statement of equality for queerness in people of different genders. She stated to him, “it's the same thing, just different genders, but it's the same thing”. He responded to this by highlighting through his choice of tone of voice that his issue is with flamboyance in “gay guys” and agreement that he has a dislikes “gay guys” hitting on him. This is the only interaction that Jacorrah could recall from her time in high school.

In middle school, Jacorrah remembered that “guys would be like ‘lesbians are hot’ but then they'd like use the word fag and stuff like that”. She conveyed a sense of confusion as how it is “just so weird how you can just be like, ‘oh since it's two girls it's okay, but once it's two guys it's not’”. She surmised that it might be that it is more okay for girls to be queer because “guys, straight guys, just like girls...So think it's really hot to see two girls make out, or whatever, and then they don't like it when guys [do] because it's like...oh, no, no, that's gay, don't hit on me, or whatever...That's always the one remark, it's like ‘oh, if you're gay that's fine, but don't hit on me’”. She pondered that the reason that the “don’t hit on me” seems to be expressed by many peers could be that they are fearful “because there's a lot of closeted guys that act that they're straight and put on this facade of being straight but really they do like guys”.

The repeated sentiment that Jacorrah had towards conversations that objectify female non-heterosexuality through sexualization was that they make her feel irritated. She expressed sensitivity to these types of conversations, stating that “I haven't heard it too much, but whenever I do hear it, I'm just like, [raises her hand] ‘hi, can you not? because what's the difference between a girl and a guy doing it?’”. As she raised her hand she appeared to be implying that she wishes to highlight her presence in the sexualizing conversation to show that there is a queer person present and for those making her feel uncomfortable to reconsider saying what they are saying. It was unclear whether she was hoping that their awareness of her sexuality would make them simply not say those things around her, or to realize that their words impact real people and to reconsider saying such things at all. Jacorrah concluded this portion of the interview by restating that this is “one of the main things that irritates” her, and that it is “annoying”.

“I told him about my girlfriend and he was like, “y'all rub coochies?”” - Sarah

Sarah immediately recollected an incident of being sexualized for her bisexuality. It was an interaction with a friend she made in one of her new classes. Upon coming out to the whole class, “they were supportive”. However, she recollected one peer reacting differently:

“this one kid, I told him about my girlfriend and he was like ‘y'all rub coochies?’...like ‘what??’...he's like, ‘y'all scissor or something?’, I'm like, ‘noo...’. He was just...I don't even know. Ugh. That's not all we do.”.

Her “ugh” noise seemed to express her frustration with such a sexualization of her having a girlfriend. This student, additionally, over the course of an unspecified number of days or weeks, repeatedly asked her whether she “liked” various girls. Sarah described this as him asking, “oh, do you like them?...or them?...or them?” and her as responding with, “nooo...I'm

faithful". She stated that this "kinda makes me feel a little uncomfortable that people just think that I like hoe around or something, or that I just go with like every single person that I see, when really that's not the case...I just like both genders". While at the time of the interview she considered him an acquaintance, she stated that they were "kind of friends" at the time of these interactions because they would "sit at the same table" in that class. Now that they do not have that class together, she does not see him besides in passing "in the hallways".

When speaking about other "guy people" that she has made aware of her sexuality, she expressed that "they're just okay with it, they don't sexualize it, beside that one specific guy". However, she expressed an impression that "guys" in general "kind of might sexualize it" if she "does tell them". This is further explained by Sarah as being connected to the notion that these people may react to if "another guy is gay" being "like "Woahhhh, step back" due to their feeling "that he's gunna like hit on them or something like that...Just because he's gay and he's a guy and stuff". Potentially countering her assertion of the likelihood of "them...sexualiz[ing] it", she said that she "feel[s] like most of them would be okay about [a girl being gay], I guess". Then added a further qualifier that those peers "be[ing] okay" might be more "on the surface" and that she believed "guys" to be "more okay with girls being gay than with guys being gay". When asked why she believed this to be the case, she surmised that it might be "because of them sexualizing it", though expressed her doubt through following this up with "I guess...but I'm not sure". Despite beginning by slowly stating "honestly, I don't know" while appearing to think, an additional reason that Sarah presented for "it [being] more okay for a girl to be gay" was that in the case of female non-heterosexuality there is no reason for males to fear being hit on, whereas male peers to fear being hit on by "gay guys".

“Everyone’s always considered me a tomboy...I think that’s where they got the idea that maybe I wasn’t into guys that much”

Gender Normativity

“I don’t wear makeup or put on dresses” - Malena

Gender normativity was expressed by Malena in a variety of forms. Initially it was alluded to in her reference to a friend of hers that came out as a gay male. Prior to him coming out her friend group referred to him as their “gay best friend”, and post-coming out they said “okay, great, you can help us with shopping and all that”. He responded that “just coz I’m gay doesn’t mean I have good fashion sense and everything”. Malena did not analyze this scenario in terms of its connection to gender norms and their conflation with sexuality.

Speaking about herself, Malena explained that she has “always been more friends with guys than girls” and have been considered a “tomboy”. She stated that her brother “always considers me more a little brother than sister” because, as she phrases it, she doesn’t “do feminine things, like I don’t wear makeup or put on dresses”. Malena connected this perception of her gender presentation to her sexuality through the comment, “I think that’s where they got the idea that maybe I wasn’t into guys that much”, in reference to her style of clothes. Expanding upon this, she explained how her father attempted to persuade her to wear dresses and in response to her expression of disinterest has, in an accusatory tone, asked her, “what, do you like girls?”. Malena did not agree with this conflation of gender presentation and sexuality, stating:

“I just dress how I want...I just don’t like dresses, like just because I dress that way doesn’t mean that I’m gay or whatever. That’s just how I like to dress. Like, I know a lot

of girls who just don't like to wear dresses, and they're like totally straight. That's just how I prefer to dress and it just happens to be that I am also gay, so. Yeah, but there's also some guys that dress totally normal and girls that dress totally normal, and they could be gay. It's just how you want to...how you prefer to dress. And I honestly don't think it has anything to do with your sexuality. But a lot of people assume that it does.”

“I don't like when gay guys are like "heyyy"” – Jacorrah (repeating what a male student said to her)

Jacorrah did not reference gender norms directly in her interview. However, concepts of gender normativity were connected to a number of her statements. Each of these focuses upon the assumed heterosexuality of guys, which falls within understandings of heteronormativity. The first of which is conveyed through her assessment of the attitude of some peers that if a male “doesn't like a certain girl he's gay”. The second engaged concepts of normative masculinity which resulted in non-heterosexual male-presenting people being considered “a fag” due to their assumed effeminateness. This was reinforced by the fear and dislike represented by heterosexual-identified males who have an aversion to queer males due to their perception of these males as having reduced masculinity due to their sexuality.

“...nobody really likes gender roles” – Sarah

Sarah experienced stereotyping based on gender normative standards of dress, specifically by her father. Prior to her coming out, she described herself as having “really wanted to dress like really, really masculine and stuff...I really wanted to cut my hair, and just like wear all black”. She described her parents as rejecting this, saying “No!”, and her father eventually

asking her “Are you gay or something? You always wear like basketball shorts and stuff like that”. In contrast, she could not recollect a similar experience ever occurring with her peers. Instead she described her peers in terms of “everybody” not “really lik[ing] gender roles” and instead liking to “do whatever they want”. Sarah summarized this as her perception of “everyone” being “accepting...and woke, basically”. However, she clarified that she did think that “maybe a few people...were, I guess, kind of homophobic”.

“You’re a fag”

Homophobic Language

“...kids just throw [the word fag] around” – Malena

The earliest mention of homophobic language was through the “playful jokes” that Malena insisted she “understood”, and were “fine” and “funny”. She explained that her friends and herself “all understood and everything”, which she implied made it okay for the jokes to be made and these jokes to be taken in good humor by her. While she had not experienced any explicitly homophobic language directed towards her at school, she does hear it occurring around her and feels compelled to “try to...tell the teacher...to like, ‘fix this’”. Malena states that usually when a teacher hears homophobic language the teacher will say to the student, “don’t say that”. As stated in the section on Educator Actions, this verbal reprimand typically resulted in an apology from the student yet no authentic change in behavior, with students “doing it again when they’re not listening”. The respect that students have for the particular teacher impacted the effectiveness of the reprimand. Malena recommended that “a more serious consequence...not just like a warning” would be more effective in tackling the saturation of casually homophobic language at her school.

The word that Malena specifically reinforced a hatred of is “fag”. She stated:

“I just hate it. I don't know why, I just hate it so much”. “[K]ids just throw it around for fun...friends are roasting each other, saying bad things about each other, they'll like throw that out, and they'll be like "ohhhhh" and everyone freaks out”.

Calling someone a fag was considered “the meanest comment”, so it would be said “to win” when attempting to outdo a peer during an exchange of insults. While Malena expressed her hatred of the word fag, she diluted her emotional response to homophobic language in terms of the “meme that’s going around...’yo momma’s gay””, which she represented as “annoying but...just a joke” which could nevertheless “hurt someone”. Despite these homophobic words and phrases being heard by Malena at school, she stated that she has not “really seen anyone [queer] get specifically targeted” by the language. Rather, what she noticed is homophobic language being used amongst friends. Malena asserted that despite not witnessing homophobic language being used against queer students, that its use still “gets to” her. The language itself was represented as inherently offensive to Malena, irrespective of whether it is being used to directly target queer students or not.

“...I hear...the word “faggot” a lot” – Jacorrah

Jacorrah stated that the “only” negative thing she hears at school is the word “faggot”. She heard it used “a lot” and that the individuals using the word faggot “won't even be talking about like sexuality or anything”. She conveyed that it is used between guys that are friends. The example of a context within which she has observed the word faggot used is in a conversation between “two guys...like, ‘oh hey do you think this girl is cute?’ and then the other guy will be like ‘mmm nah she's not really my type’, and then they'll call them” a faggot. Jacorrah surmised

that in this example the use of the word faggot suggested that “because he doesn’t like a certain girl [that] he’s gay”. She expressed that the students using the word faggot “might not be homophobic” but that they do not “understand how much that word can actually hurt somebody”. She expressed being fortunate for having not been the direct target of any such homophobic language.

As stated in the section Educator Actions, Jacorrah had not heard any teachers at her high school correct or challenge the use of the word faggot in their classroom. She found this an inappropriate lack of response, and suggested that if a teacher overheard the word faggot being used that they should “definitely at least say something about it”. Furthermore, as “there’s really no good way to use” to word faggot, Jacorrah believed a referral is appropriate due to the negative way that the word is being used. When no action is the consistent reaction of teachers who have overheard the word faggot used, it lead Jacorrah to wonder whether her teachers do not care about homophobic language or are homophobic themselves.

“...that’s fruity” – Sarah

Sarah experienced homophobic attitudes at the hands of her step-father and aunt, though not directly by any peers at school. However, similar to Malena and Jacorrah, Sarah heard homophobic language at school used by, and directed towards, “almost all of the boys”. The three main words that she heard used in a negative manner were “gay”, “fruity”, and “the ‘F’ word”, which refers to fag or faggot. Sarah explained that she hears “that’s gay” and “that’s fruity” used almost interchangeably to mean “weird” and “stupid”. She expressed that she perceives hearing “that’s fruity” more often than “that’s gay” at school.

Sarah expressed that she believes there has been a decrease in the use of such homophobic language, and that this has occurred for three main reasons. Firstly, she has changed friendship groups, and so her exposure to homophobic language used by friends has decreased. Secondly, that a recent school lockdown resulted in the student body feeling “more together” and henceforth homophobic language had been engaged less frequently as an insult. Finally, “the principals and all the teachers and everything have been kind of addressing it more” in class and around the school. This last reason is expanded into three main aspects. The assertions that student behavior changes when teachers identify and call out homophobic language through phrases such as “don't say that, use a different word”. The displaying of signs such as those saying “we do not condone homophobic language, racist language...”. And the knowing that “you're going to be in trouble if you say” homophobic things, which she reinforced through an anecdote that “one kid yelled to another kid, "oh, you fag!" and my teacher got really mad, and he sent them out with a detention”.

While she believed that teaching explicitly queer inclusive curriculum makes a difference in the use of homophobic language at school, she identified that “guys, in my class, [still] use the terms “gay” and “fruity””. Sarah partially defended the implication that her peers who use homophobic language are therefore homophobic people. She stated that due to the teaching about queerness at school these students were “kind of okay with it”, and “understand more” about non-heterosexuality, despite their continued negative use of the words gay, fag/faggot, and fruity. Nonetheless, she believed “it's good to have people like educated on the terms and stuff”, even if it did not change their use of homophobic language.

Sarah explained that she thought the reason male-identified students were using homophobic language was due to “society and how they like have to be all tough” because of

perceived gender roles. She stated that it only took one action that was not normatively considered masculine for a male-identified student to be “instantly [labelled] gay!”. Sarah believed that people are “just” themselves, rather than deserving a negatively constructed label for existing outside of normative gender roles. This strict construct of gender that lead to the frequent engagement of homophobic language between male-identified students was not represented by Sarah as extending to female-identified students in the same manner. She stated that while she knows “some girls who say” homophobic things, she did not know many or overhear it much, and asserted “never” having heard “any girls say” fag or faggot. She reinforced that she perceived male-identified students as being more likely “low key homophobic” and as using explicitly homophobic language of words such as gay, fag, faggot, and fruity. Sarah’s one example of a female-identified student using homophobic language was about a girl who was speaking negatively about “another girl who had a girlfriend”.

“If you hear it, you should definitely at least say something about it”

Educator Actions

“They usually talk to students...like “don’t say that”” – Malena

Malena conveyed a mixed perception of the actions that educators take in response to overheard homophobic language by peers. In her opinion, she believed that teachers “usually talk to students” by identifying to the student that the language used was hateful and stating for the student to not “say that”. While students respond with phrases like “oh, I’m sorry”, Malena represented that these students “do it again when [the teacher is] not listening”. The effectiveness of the teacher in cracking down on homophobic language was perceived to be correlated to the respect which the teacher has garnered from students. Thusly, students listen to teachers that

were “very respected”, whereas students “don’t really care” about what is said by teachers that were “new and young”. As advice, Malena suggested that a “more serious consequence” might be more effective in reducing homophobic language at her school, rather than “just...a warning”.

“I’ve never had a teacher correct them” – Jacorrah

At her current high school, Jacorrah had “never had a teacher correct” a student for saying “homophobic things”. While she thought that her peers who used homophobic language such as fag and faggot “might not be homophobic”, she portrayed a belief that the bigger issue was that they don’t “understand how much [those] word[s] can actually hurt somebody”. Jacorrah stated her opinion that if a teacher heard homophobic language, that they “should definitely at least say something about it”. Her recommendation for educator actions was that upon the first incident of homophobic language the teacher should say something as “simple” as “hey, that’s not cool, don’t use that word in my classroom”. Upon a second incident, Jacorrah suggested that a teacher could “give them a referral if [they] need to”. While she did not convey conviction through her inclusion of teacher discretion as to the appropriateness of a referral through her phrasing “if” they need to, she did believe that homophobic language deserved a referral when used “in a negative way” and that there was not really any “good way to use [the] word” fag or faggot.

In middle school, Jacorrah recollected one occasion where her English teacher gave a punishment to a student for saying the word faggot. She stated that the punishment was “very weird”, as it was to do pushups. After this punishment, she said that the student did not say the word faggot again in that class. Jacorrah described this teacher as “the best teacher [she’s] ever had”. She explained that the negative environment created by teachers not cracking down on

homophobic language includes it making her feel like the teacher doesn't "care" about it, and so "might be homophobic". Jacorrah said that she "overthink[s] a lot of the time" about, "what if this teacher is homophobic or what if they just don't care?".

While Jacorrah could not recall any explicit teaching on queer topics in her high school classes, she did highlight that her biology teacher is "out". She had a positive tone of voice while explaining that this teacher has "a big pride flag covering one of her windows". When asked about the student reaction to this teacher coming out to her class "in the very beginning of the year", Jacorrah had trouble remembering and so implied that there "wasn't really any reaction" by her peers to this revealing of their teacher's sexuality. Upon further explanation of the question that was trying to determine if there is explicitly queer inclusive curriculum being taught at her school, Jacorrah expressed high levels of enthusiasm at the notion of a school offering queer-focused classes, such as LGBT History or drag performances as a whole school assembly.

"I don't know like, every single thing, but I know enough to tell them" – Sarah

Through Sarah's explanation of the GSA that she attended in middle school, she identified that the club worked to education the student body about the Day of Silence. Sarah stated that the club "handed out...little slips" that explained what the Day of Silence was about, and why people celebrate it, including some statistics on the lack of safety and support felt by many queer youth.

Teacher actions that Sarah perceived to have made a positive difference included "when the teacher says, like "don't say that, use a different word"" when students use "the "f" word, or "that's gay" or "that's fruity"". A science teacher that Sarah had previously made a positive

impression upon her through his displaying of a sign that said “we do not condone homophobic language, racist language...”. She expressed an appreciation for this teacher explicitly taking the time to say “you're going to be in trouble if you say these things, so don't say that”, in terms of homophobic language. This teacher followed through on that, as Sarah stated that on one occasion “one kid yelled to another kid, ‘oh, you fag!’ and the teacher got really mad, and he sent them out with a detention and everything”. She perceived that this improved the conduct of all students in this teacher’s class.

Sarah was able to state a few instances of experiences explicitly queer inclusive teaching. In her 8th grade Sex Ed class, Sarah stated that her teacher “kinda briefly” taught that “there’s more than just a guy and a girl together”. In her Health and Safety class “LGBT terms” like “gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual...non-binary, cisgender, [and] transgender” were taught explicitly. Sarah conveyed that she believed these classes “made people...understand more how there's not just like gay and bi and stuff”, instead understanding the wider diversity of sexualities. Additionally, she represented that knowledge is beneficial even if it does not render her peers celebrators of diverse sexualities. As “it's good to have people...educated on the terms and stuff, and even if they're not like super okay with it or like understand it, [at least] they just know something about it...and [might] not just be totally like, ‘no, I don't understand this, get this away from me’”.

Sarah explained the pride that she felt in having the opportunity to aid in the education of heterosexual friends and cousins since coming out as bisexual. When her cousins, to whom she is “really, really, really close”, asked her questions, they mostly focused upon “LGBTQ...terms, pronouns to use, and stuff like that”. Sarah felt that these questions from her close friends and

cousins showed that “they’re more accepting”. She expressed that through her opportunity to educate them on “LGBTQ-related” topics, she had felt safer and more herself “feel more...[her]self, [and] to feel safer” as she now felt more certainty that “they’ll be there no matter what”. Sarah stated that “[t]he more people know about it [the better]...representation is really like important”. When she was little she did not feel like she had representation, beyond “maybe...a few characters in adult shows that were like queer, but like not many”. While in the past couple of years Sarah was able to identify two limited experiences of queer inclusive teaching, she overall perceived that prior to this she “was never taught like, educated...and there wasn't really anything there besides BuzzFeed”.

Summary

The interviews with Malena, Jacorrah, and Sarah, reveal an array of experiences ranging from the supportive and accepting to the uncomfortable and angering. Overall, the participants expressed positive perceptions of the way their peers have received the news of their queerness. However, each participant expressed the room for improvement in the dialogue about sexuality that occurs at their school and desired their teachers to take a more active role in responding to homophobic language. Each of the eight key themes revealed by the interviews are interrelated and intersectional experiences, and perspectives, which molded their unique feelings of support and marginalization as queer, female-identified, youth of color.

CHAPTER IV DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Malena, Jacorrah and Sarah have distinct experiences as queer, female-identifying youth at their San Francisco Bay Area high school. The experiences of queer youth in schools is often flavored negatively. The focus is commonly placed upon discrimination, at-risk status for poor mental and physical health (Kosciw et al., 2016), and higher dropout and failure rates than their non-queer peers (Liska & Reed, 1985). Nonetheless, resilience can enable marginalized populations to flourish in circumstances which are less than ideal (Bowleg et al., 2003). Such inequitable education-based scenes often exist within a heteromisogynistic framework. This structure guides the acts of sexualization, homophobia and social and curriculum-based exclusion of queer youth, as well as the relevance of queer identities within each subject area.

Below, I will discuss the data from Chapter III through a lens of queer feminist theory and resilience theory. Within the two overarching themes of Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness and Heteromisogynistic Space, I will engage the relevance of queer feminist theory and resilience theory in analyzing the experiences of these queer female-identified youths. Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness focuses upon the more positive daily experiences of the participants, despite their position as implicitly and/or explicitly othered by their peers. While Heteromisogynistic Space focuses upon the more negative experiences connected to heteronormativity, heterosexism, and misogyny with their peers at school. It is essential to acknowledge that even though differences are likely to exist between the experiences of female-identified, versus male-identified queer youth at this particular high school, the focus of this

analysis will be upon the similarities and differences between the three participants' experiences. Despite varying experiences of participants, queer feminist theory and resilience theory will have applications across common elements of positive and negative experiences of the participants, whether shared or unique. As such, my analysis aims to weave together an understanding of the ways in which students treat their queer, female-identified peers.

Discussion

Commitment Issues

The number of participants in this study shifted throughout the research process. While ten students initially indicated interest in participation, there was a transition from five students who requested the IRB paperwork, to having three students who would follow through with the entire process. The students who withdrew from the study each provided a different reason for their withdrawal. One of the students withdrew by reason of family commitments. The other student scheduled an interview time, but withdrew last minute, due to their guardian changing their mind about her participation in the study. This rendered permission withdrawn for the student. While these are the reasons that the students provided to me as the researcher, it is possible that various factors effected their decision to withdraw from the study. One possibility is that the guardians of prospective participants were discouraged from providing consent to participate. This could be due to stigma surrounding the recording and publishing of lived experiences. The guardian may be cautious of the interview reflecting poorly on them as a parent, or pertain to some other aspect of the child's life that the parent would prefer remain private. This reluctance in combination with the difficulty of sourcing participants – despite the

initial interest of many queer female students – may additionally be a factor for why there is an extreme lack of literature on queer female youths.

Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness

The focus of this section is upon the experiences that participants reflected as unsurprising experiences that occur frequently or which they perceive as common. These experiences are predominantly expressed as positive, with participants wearing rose colored glasses to engage with those experiences that may be construed as marginalizing through the implicit othering occurring.

Queer Feminist Theory. The data showed intersectional experiences and the need, experience of, and explicit engagement with concepts of normativity through sexuality and gender. Though not directly stated, all three participants identified heteronormativity through their experiences. This dynamic was evident in the tone of voice and gestures which indicated an anxiety and awkwardness about their interactions where peers assumed their heterosexuality. Throughout the interviews, queer feminist theory was invaluable in analysis of participant experiences, particularly for the instances of sexualization. Each participants expressed a different type of exposure to sexualization, either through first hand interactions with their peers, through overhearing peer conversation, or by way of critical analysis of their perception of peers' perspectives. These experiences of the sexualization of queer female sexuality, necessitated queer feminist theory's lens for understanding the impact of misogyny and heterosexism in the sexualization of queer females (Quilty, 2017).

Othering experiences. When Jacorrah recounted the confusion of her non-queer friends upon her coming out as pansexual. She explained that this confusion was caused by the

normative understanding of sexuality as three categories: heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Queer feminist theory engages critically with this normative “trichotomy” understanding of sexuality. Jacorrah’s experiences highlights that her queer friends likely have a queer feminist view of sexuality, which constructs sexuality as unstable, fluid spectrums upon which one may or may not place themselves. In comparison, Jacorrah’s non-queer friends were described as having views which fall within normative trichotomy-based understandings of sexuality. This understanding of sexuality as three categories (heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual) may be grounded in lack of queer-inclusive education in both formal and informal educational settings. Limited queer-inclusive education is evident within heteronormative settings. The marginalizing structures and dominant social thought within heteronormative society are disrupted by queer feminist theory.

Jacorrah engaged in disruption of normative understandings of the coming out process as necessary and liberating for queer people, and irrelevant and unheard of for heterosexual people. Through connection to *Love Simon*, a queer coming of age film, Jacorrah reflected upon the heteronormative expectation that heterosexuality is the default sexuality, as well as the connected lack of expectation for heterosexual people to come out as heterosexual. Jacorrah’s critical reflection on the position of heterosexuality as the default sexuality, unless stated otherwise, complicated the construct of coming out as solely for queer people. By engaging critically with the societal expectation that only queer people come out, Jacorrah demonstrated opinions aligned with the framework of queer feminist theory in this research. This emphasizes the need for dominant constructs such as heteronormativity to be a focus of critical reflection. The ultimate goal would be the deconstruction of heteronormativity due to it being an inequitable construct.

Malena accepted jokes about her sexuality as lighthearted and not mean-spirited when made by her non-queer friends. However, the act of being positioned by one's friends as the butt of "lighthearted" joking, renders that person as othered into a category of non-normative. This act of othering is one of marginalization, one which engages heteronormativity to code non-heterosexual sexualities as non-normative. This reinforcement of heteronormativity is not altered by Malena's consideration of these jokes as humorous. In fact, this may suggest the presence of internalized heteronormativity and homophobia within Malena's world view, despite her perceived self-acceptance in terms of her sexuality. In contrast, Jacorrah was the leading force in incorporating jokes about her own sexuality with her friends. Despite similarities to representations of internalized heteronormativity, Jacorrah's jokes are delivered to a majority-queer friend group with non-queer bystanders. These jokes act to focus confidence surrounding her sexuality, as core within her construct of self-identity amongst her friends. Through centralization of her sexuality as a positive aspect of herself, Jacorrah engaged a queer feminist concept of challenging the assumed heterosexuality that would otherwise be placed upon her. She did this through aiming to render queerness normalized through exposure of her surrounding peers and teachers to her "gay jokes".

Sarah expressed that the general opinion of the student body at her high school is becoming increasingly favorable towards non-heterosexuality. However, she described a perceived correlation between more favorable peer/social conditions towards queer students and more students coming out as non-heterosexual. She made a final connection between more students coming out and the perception by some students that being queer is in fact simply a trend. Queer feminist theory connects heteronormativity to this notion of queerness as a trend rather than an entirely natural, authentic and normal sexuality (Quilty, 2017). In turn, the

heteronormativity implicit in the consideration of non-heterosexuality as a trend, renders students who are queer being coded as other, despite the expressed acceptance of their sexuality by their peers.

Coming out. The process of coming out to peers was varied for each participant. Malena recounted one particular occurrence of coming out to peers as a conversation that led to a friend asking if she had a boyfriend, with her providing a response inferring a lack of interest in a boyfriend. As Malena identifies as bisexual, she could have retained the presumption of heterosexuality that is placed upon most people prior to their coming out as non-heterosexual. However, she instead chose a pointed response of disinterest in the possibility of a boyfriend, a response which would likely be surprising and prompt follow up questioning to determine the reason for her disinterest. It is through understanding the heteronormativity that was placed upon her, that she engaged in a leading response to break down that misconception regarding her sexuality. This style of Malena's coming out to peers through providing responses to questions about herself, will prompt specific follow up questions, connecting to the problematic nature of heteronormativity encouraged through queer feminist theory.

Jacorrah's experience of coming out was glossed over during her interview. She stated that the first person she came out to was a friend who identified as a lesbian when she was in seventh grade. Beyond that, Jacorrah spoke confidently about how she is loud and proud about her pansexuality and how the vast majority of her friends are queer. Coming out as pansexual to her friends may have been less notable an experience for Jacorrah, than coming out as bisexual was for Malena or Sarah. This is due to the majority of Jacorrah's friends being part of the queer community. When coming out to queer peers, the constructs of heteronormativity are less prominent a hurdle to overcome. Queer youth are less likely to have deeply entrenched

assumptions of their peers' heterosexuality and are far more likely to respond supportively or without notable reaction, than to respond with sentiments of homophobia (Murphy, 2014). Fear of a generally unsupportive or explicitly homophobic reaction to ones coming out is a concern for most queer people, considering and actualizing the coming out process to heterosexual people (Robinson, 2010).

Sarah's coming out as bisexual to her friends was in response to a direct question inquiring if she was bisexual. This was prompted by Sarah ranting to a friend about how she did not like a particular girl at school, because that girl had been saying unkind things about another girl at school for having a girlfriend. In this conversation, Sarah defended homosexuality and the right of people to live authentically in terms of their sexuality. Implied is the idea that a heterosexual person would not have so passionately defended the rights of queer people. The degree to which heteronormativity exists is evidenced simply, by Sarah's defense of homosexuality as reason enough for a peer to ask whether she is in fact not heterosexual. This highlights the assumption that a person is heterosexual until otherwise suggested. Queer feminist theory challenges normative assumptions, including that of heterosexuality (Quilty, 2017). This suspicion and critical approach of queer feminist theory towards intersectional normativities, highlights that despite the subtle nature of the heteronormativity experienced in Sarah's coming out story, heteronormativity is the foundation in guiding the reaction and response of the person to whom Sarah came out. This person's reaction and response to Sarah's coming out, while supportive, immediately connected positivity towards and in defense of queer sexualities, as a sign or symptom of queerness. In this way, Sarah's rant rendered her as othered within the heterosexual matrix of her surrounds.

All three participants received very similar reactions from their friends when they came out. Malena represented her friends' reactions as neutral, "it's fine"-style responses or positive, "that's cool"-style responses. Her male-identified friends that are a year older than her found their common interest in girls to be a point over which they could further bond as friends. Malena identified that she believed the lack of negative response that she receives when coming out to peers, was due to her waiting to come out until she knows them well and feels comfortable with them. Under the surface of perceived comfortability, it may be that Malena was gauging, consciously or not, the likelihood that the person will have a homophobic reaction and therefore waits until she feels sure that the reaction will be neutral at worst. Malena's positive perspective on her neutral coming out experience is unsurprising for queer people interacting within spaces governed by heteronormativity, where being positive and tentative can be vital for avoiding situations of explicit homophobia. As previously discussed, Jacorrah's social sphere is heavily dominated by queer friends. Due to lower chance of receiving a homophobic response when coming out to queer friends, she did not express feeling nervous about coming out. In fact, she expressed having received only positive reactions or her friends treating her coming out as not a big event, as heteronormativity does not dominate the makeup of their friend group. Sarah, however, felt such strong emotions upon coming out for the first time to a friend that she felt like she wanted to cry. She appreciated her friend for hugging and supporting her in that moment after having come out. Not one person in Sarah's friend group was queer, so her different emotional reaction could be related to her lower sense of security, in terms of whether her friends would react supportively or with any degree of homophobia. Without any of her friends at that time being queer, there was no evidence prior to coming out that her friends would be supportive of her bisexuality. This need for coming out, and the connected apprehension and fear when

coming out to a non-queer person, suggests the additional stressors existing in the lives of queer youth due to entrenched heteronormativity.

Queer friendships. Beyond queer friends being far easier to come out to for the reasons discussed above, all three participants perceived an unspoken bond as being instantly formed between queer friends, in contrast to the regular depth of friendship and understanding experienced in friendships between one queer and one non-queer person. Malena expressed this as relating to each other more. Sarah conveyed the same point through stating that she did not have queer friends in middle school, that she did not have any shared interests with her heterosexual friends, nor could they understand or relate to the issues she was facing as a queer female youth. Jacorrah expressed queer people as being “her people” and for this reason sought out the GSA at her high school, in order to surround herself with more people that she considered to whom she would feel a connection. The process of being othered by heterosexual people fosters solidarity and camaraderie to be developed almost instantaneously between those who have been categorized as other for reasons related to their sexuality (Robinson, 2010).

Despite the dominant and systemic constructs that entrench heterosexuality as the norm within American society, Malena experienced heterosexual friends defending her when comments were made by peers at her previous school during her freshman year. Despite the fact that this example shows that heterosexist remarks were made about or toward Malena due to her bisexuality, Malena did not perceive herself as having to confront homophobia from her peers. This distinction as to what it means to experience or confront homophobia is interesting, as Malena has made clear her exposure to homophobia. Still, she expressed that she was so protected by her friends during these instances that she felt completely buffered, as if she had not experienced homophobia directed towards her at all. Within a queer feminist framework, it is

vital that critical analysis of the impact of the many intersectional identities occur. In the case of Malena's experience of her friends protecting her from direct homophobia, and her expression of herself as quiet – and thus unable to stand up for herself – Malena may be impacted by her identity as a woman, as a Mexican immigrant and as a relatively gender conforming person. Socio-culturally desired actions in women can result from the marginalized gendered position as woman and can be grounded in part within conscious or subconscious fears of male violence towards them (Butler, 2007). Additionally marginalized within American society are Mexican immigrants. Malena's intersectional identities that are marginalized within our society, as a queer female Mexican immigrant youth, may through a queer feminist lens emphasizing intersectionality, together form a web of connections contributing to her apparent ignoring, forgiving, or excusing away the acts of homophobia directed towards her (Butler, 2007).

Even with a queer-saturated social sphere, awkward moments constituting microaggressions or implicit heterosexism may still occur. While Jacorrah had mostly queer friends, one of her heterosexual-identified friends once introduced her as their “gay friend”. From a queer feminist lens, this story is evidence of the saturation of heteronormativity within youth culture and wider American society. As such, Jacorrah felt this as a microaggression of heteronormativity. She wished that her friend had understood, without her having to explain, that her sexuality is not a title for her introduction. Engaging sexuality in introducing a friend to someone can render them as feeling tokenized as the singular representation of queerness. Labeling in this way concurrently others them, through highlighting them as distinct from the assumed heterosexuality of the general population.

Fear. Peers' fear of queer youth is a confronting issue that stereotypes and misunderstands the sexuality of non-heterosexual youth. While discussed by Jacorrah and not

Malena nor Sarah, Jacorrah expressed that witnessing or perceiving that your peers hold a particular belief can be damaging to one's own sense of queer safety at school. Her pet peeve in this area is the expression of fear by heterosexual people towards queer people of the same sex. This occurs under the justification that the queer person might flirt with or make sexual advances on the straight person. Using queer feminist theory (Quilty, 2017), this belief can be explained as one grounded in homophobia, as well as heterosexism and as constituting a belief which needs to be challenged and dismantled, in order to improve normative understandings of sexuality. This belief in the need to be fearful of the possibility of a queer person making sexual advances on you, engages fear grounded in homophobia and a misunderstanding of non-heterosexual sexualities as rendering a person inherently more sexual and less adept at following social cues and customs – rather than proceeding with unwelcome advances towards all the heterosexual same-sex friends that they have. As such, critical reflection is vital in order to focus upon the challenging of such an entrenched heteronormative, heterosexist and homophobic perspectives and/or actions in order to reduce the incidents of heterosexual people of any ages, figuratively or physically pushing away their same-sex queer friends, due to fear of the queer friend making sexual advances on or experiencing attraction towards them.

Resilience Theory. The ability of humans to build resilience is essential for the long term success and thriving of those with consistent stressors in their lives. Resilience is the successful adaptation to a stressor, such as the three participants of this study achieved through their deep connections to supportive peers and confidence within their own sense of self-worth and self-reliance (Meyer, 2015). In this section, the resilience of participants will be analyzed alongside the areas within which they have not developed resilience, despite a stressor's presence. These areas are organized into the following themes of dispositional resilience and relational resilience.

Dispositional resilience. The dispositional pattern of resilience exists within the experiences of acceptance described by the participants in spite of feeling othered. Within this study, the dispositional pattern refers to the resilience sourced from participants' sense of autonomy, self-reliance and self-worth. Anecdotes expressed as regular occurrences revolved dominantly around pride and self-acceptance in relation to their sexuality. Each participant expressed that they value the authenticity of being out as queer and that they were not intentionally hiding their sexuality from any peers at the time of the interview. A specific example of this was that Jacorrah, who asserted not feeling negatively about her sexuality when she first arrived at the realization that she was not heterosexual. She expressed pride about her pansexuality to the extent which she regularly draws attention to her sexuality through centralizing her sexuality in her jokes with her friends. The express statements of confidence in her sexuality and the anecdotes of sexuality-focused jokes that she fosters with her friends, highlights the degree to which Jacorrah exhibited her sense of self-worth and autonomy to engage in the manner which she chooses with her friends. Confidence in sexuality falls within the category of a dispositional pattern of resilience theory and exists through a context of the microsystem, as explained by the ecological theoretical approach of Jacorrah's high school.

Relational resilience. The relational pattern of resilience engaged within this study focuses upon the deep connections which the participants have with others within their school microsystem. Specifically, the relational pattern rests upon the support and solace found within friendships with queer peers and the manner in which these relationships foster resilience in the participants. Malena, Jacorrah and Sarah all referenced the unspoken bond that they perceive to exist between themselves and queer peers. Common experiences and perspectives, due to shared identities as queer youths, were cited by all three as the reason for the immediately deeper

connection that they experience with queer versus heterosexual peers. Sarah's focus upon having more in common with queer peers, and Jacorrah's anecdote of seeking out "my people" through the GSA, both speak to the deep connection that can exist between people in their wider social sphere at school due to sexuality. However, Malena took the analysis further, having expressed that part of why these feelings of support and connection to queer peers is important, is because of the value of perceiving that there are people at her school that would stand up for her if she was experiencing any degree of negativity due to her sexuality. I believe that Malena highlighted the value of being defended by ones friends, due to her prior experiences with friends at her previous school defending her in the face of homophobic comments by peers. During the discourse of the interviews, all three participants were very focused upon the benefits of having queer friends at school. Malena's experiences of having her friends act as a buffer between her and homophobia were with non-queer friends. While nearly all of Jacorrah's experiences were with queer friends, due to the queer-heavy composition of her friend group, Sarah's shared experiences with heterosexual identified friends were positive. Similarly to Malena, Sarah experienced support from her friends upon her coming out, despite her nervousness and fears during the coming out process. Since coming out, Sarah has gained much confidence in and about her sexuality. She now speaks confidently about her outness to peers beyond her friends. This includes the general school body being aware that she has a girlfriend. The value of the relational pattern in building resilience is evident through Sarah's chronosystem, which shows her progression from negative emotions to positive emotions of confidence and a secure sense of autonomy in her ability to make decisions, including to increase her outness through having a public girlfriend and the courage and self-reliance to come out to family.

The participants were exposed to stressors and expressed coping strategies that were not always satisfactorily effective. Each occurring within the school microsystem, these anecdotes highlighted instances where peers were not contributing to a relational pattern of resilience and instead were the source of stressors which the participants were struggling to cope with. For example, Malena expressed that her shyness prevents her from having the confidence to stand up for herself when she hears homophobic comments. In contrast, she repeatedly affirmed, to the point that it was less convincing each time, that the jokes her friends at her previous school made, were not homophobic due to them being funny and “just jokes”. Malena has provided an example of a setting where she has not felt comfortable enough to acknowledge that the reason she behaves uncomfortable when justifying the appropriateness of her friends’ jokes, is because the jokes themselves were a microaggression that she did not have the self-reliance, in the form of confidence, to defend herself from. This is an example of Malena coping, rather than exhibiting resilience (Meyer, 2015). Furthermore, it is possible that because these same friends would defend Malena from explicit forms of homophobic comments directed towards her, Malena may have felt that she should excuse the subtle heterosexism expressed by her friends through their jokes about her sexuality. This highlights the layered difficulties that can exist for a queer female youth in building resilience when the source of their relational pattern of resilience, their friends, can concurrently be a stressor to which they are attempting to cope. Meyer’s (2015) exploration of the connection between stressors and coping versus resilience highlights the key difference between coping and resilience as the successfulness of the adaptation to the stressor. The adaptations that Malena is making in response to difference aspects of the way her friends treat her allows for her to develop resilience through the experiences of support and to be coping, rather than successfully adapting, to the intermittent stressors inflicted by those same friends.

Heteromisogynistic Space

This section focuses upon the participants' experiences which relate implicitly or explicitly to the heteromisogynistic context with peers at their high school. These experiences relate to issues of sexualization, gender presentation, and homophobic language.

Queer Feminist Theory. Heteromisogynistic space proliferates American society. One manner through which this occurs is the objectifying sexualization of queer females. This sexualization belittles the authority and rights that females have over their bodies and their sexuality, reducing their queerness instead to an object of pleasure for heterosexual males.

Sexualization. Malena's limited identification of sexualization for her bisexuality could be explained by a number of factors. While she was unsure of the reason for her limited exposure to such objectification, it could be that as a new student to the school this year that she has not yet entered into a friend group where such sexualization of queer females is prominent. However, I believe that to be an unlikely reason for her lacking experience, as the objectification of female queerness is often not a hidden discourse amongst males and instead is something joked and bragged about. It could be that she has not been objectified by male peers that aren't friends, because only her friends know that she is bisexual. However, the dominant discourse of sexualization often breaches lines of requiring knowledge of a queer female being present, instead invoking heterosexual females through attempted coaxing of two females who are, or are not, queer to kiss each other. Queer feminist theory deconstructs normative understandings of sexuality. Through such a deconstruction of sexuality and experiences of sexuality, it may be that Malena was not interpreting interactions as sexualizing despite the sexualization occurring. Unconsciously assimilated into a heterosexual matrix (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2015), Malena

may not experience a cognitive red flag when confronted with analyzing her interactions with peers due to forgiveness, oversight, or intentional ignorance of sexualizing comments regarding queer females by heterosexual males. There is little possibility that significant progress has been made within school climate, to the extent that homophobia is now rarely expressed through heterosexual males demeaning and belittling female queer sexuality. As such, recent research by GLSEN states a negligible reduction in homophobia and increase in positive experiences within educational settings (Kosciw et al., 2016). Therefore, it could be concluded that some sexualization of female queerness is likely to be occurring under the radar to Malena.

The one experience that Malena identified as sexualizing female queer sexuality was a conversation she overheard about lesbian porn. This conversation revolved around one male student who led a conversation with two others on the attractiveness of lesbian porn. Queer feminist theory engages dynamic relationships to deconstruct normative interpretations of acceptable female practices. Instead, queer feminist theory moves towards understandings of the individual intersectional experiences of marginalization through gender and sexuality. Queer feminist theory furthermore engages with experiences of empowerment through autonomy to regulate one's own practices by valuing the unique lived experiences of females to determine their own truths in terms of what is empowering versus disempowering. Malena felt disturbed and was unsure how to handle the situation of overhearing a conversation about the appeal of lesbian porn for heterosexual males. This connects to the common experience of females as encouraged to be submissive, in order to be self-protective in their conduct to avoid threatening situations. Through an awkwardness that limited Malena's response to such situation, the inequity experienced by women is amplified through the intersectional experience of a young, shy, queer, female, immigrant youth. Malena experienced something interpreted as threatening

and uncomfortable, resulting in a socio-culturally learned response of self-protection through conscious ignoring of the situation. Queer feminist theory interprets this dynamic intersectional perception of a lived experience, as affected by the dominant and systemic constructs of heteronormativity. As such, Malena's withdrawn reaction to her singular acknowledged experience of the sexualization of queer female sexuality, is impacted by her marginalized status as a female, by her sexual identity. Her intersectionally othered status, particularly as queer and female, inextricably connected her to the actresses in lesbian porn and therefore reduces her power to protest the content of the conversation she overheard.

Jacorrah's experiences of the sexualization of queer females is centered around the evaluation, by males, that it is acceptable for a female to be queer, but not for a male to be queer. She expressed a belief that her male peers are fearful of queer males making sexual advances on them, thus treating them more negatively, whereas they find queer females to be an appealing concept, due to the commonly purported heterosexual male opinion that female-on-female sexual acts are attractive. Due to this perceived attractiveness, female-on-female sexual acts or acts of affection are sometimes construed by heterosexual males as not simply theoretically attractive, but as something which should be encouraged to occur in their presence in order to provide pleasure to the observing male. Jacorrah's categorization of the imbalance between perceptions of the acceptability of male versus female queerness can be understood through a queer feminist lens as being a critical analysis of the heterosexual matrix guiding misogynistic, phallic-centric representations and interpretations of female queer sexuality as objectifiable and without value (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2015). The discomfort created by witnessing or directly being involved in conversations, aiming to make distinctions between the acceptability of queer sexualities, based upon the gender of the particular person constitutes an example of microaggressions

experienced by queer youths. Sarah echoed this belief that her heterosexual male peers are likely sexualizing female queerness, even if the sexualization is not explicitly stated and that this sexualization can often be represented through more favorable consideration of female versus male queerness.

Sarah had one experience that she believed constitutes sexualization and therefore the intersectional experience of queerness, feminism, race, age and culture. Upon coming out to a particular male classmate, Sarah experienced an initial question about her sexual activities with her girlfriend, followed by weeks of repeated questions pushing to find out if she “liked” a long list of particular girls at school. These questions upheld a static construction of stereotyped sexuality, where bisexuality denotes a person being attracted to everyone and not desiring to choose one gender or person to be romantically engaged with. Queer feminist theory is suspicious of the dichotomy created between bisexuality as greedily and immorally desiring many romantic entanglements, without monogamy and heterosexuality as the sexuality supporting monogamous and committed – therefore morally upstanding – relationships.

Gender performance. Queer feminist theory contends that there is a multiplicity of gender performances that make up a fragment of the intersectional factors, contributing to lived experiences (Butler, 2007). Malena and Sarah both stated themselves as slightly masculine presenting female-identified people. In agreement, they all believed that their friends were less surprised about their sexuality due to the common conflation of gender presentation and sexuality. In this way, the friends of these participants are thought to have suspected that the participants were not heterosexual, due to their somewhat masculine gender performativity. Despite their impression that their friends conflate gender presentation and sexuality to some degree, the participants all asserted that the way they choose to dress is unrelated to their

sexuality, instead citing the higher comfortability of looser fitting clothes as a dominant rationale for their purportedly tomboy-ish gender presentation. In contrast, Jacorrah's interpretation of issues of gender normativity circumvented her own gender presentation and instead led directly to her witnessing male femininity being conflated with queerness through reinforced "fag" discourse.

Homophobic language. All three participants discussed homophobic language towards male students as homophobia impacting them the most – despite it being directed towards males and not themselves. It made all participants feel uncomfortable to hear their male peers limiting the gender expression and performativity of other males through frequent conflation of gender performance and sexuality, along with the following use of insults connected to sexuality. Queer feminist theory rejects the dichotomy engaged by the participants male peers, who reduce each other to gender-based stereotypes of non-heterosexual males whenever a male does not fulfil the sociocultural requirements, denoted by the heterosexual matrix within which they live.

While Malena and Sarah represented that teachers usually verbally reprimand students for use of homophobic language, Jacorrah could not recall ever hearing a teacher at her high school provide any severity of consequence to a student for use of such language. The resulting current fear of Jacorrah's, was that if her teachers do not respond to homophobic language at all, she is concerned as to whether the teachers are themselves homophobic or do not care about the wellbeing of their queer students. Jacorrah's negative perception of teachers' lack of appropriate management of the homophobic language used at school, connects to the queer feminist desire for critical analysis of practices and constructs, which reinforce dominant heteronormativity and misogyny. While queer feminist theory pushes for a strong position of dismantling the normativity of marginalizing attitudes, the participants all expressed that they would be more

pleased with teacher actions, even if punishments for use of homophobic language went only as far as verbal warnings.

Resilience Theory. Stressors to which queer female youths see themselves faced with include sexualization, imposed gender normativity, homophobic language and the insufficient actions of teachers. Through successful adaption to these stressors which are grounded in heteromisogynistic space, participants in this study exhibited both dispositional and relational patterns of resilience. As outlined in the Resilience Theory subsection of the discussion section entitled Quotidian Queerness as Accepted Otherness, the dispositional pattern of resilience refers to participants' sense of self-worth, autonomy and self-reliance, while the relational pattern of resilience focuses upon the positive role that meaningful relationships can have in developing resilience. Evidence of participants' resilience was present throughout the data and will be analyzed within the context of their experiences connected to heteromisogyny.

Participants in this study showed a determined sense of self and comfortability within their identity as non-heterosexual females. The confidence that they expressed in their sexuality relates to their sense of having the right to make their own choices and to live openly and authentically. This desire for openness surrounding their sexuality reaffirms the participants' positive psychosocial attributes, particularly their sense of self-reliance, autonomy, and foundationally their belief in the self-worth of themselves, in deserving to live authentically. Sarah engaged her dispositional resilience through having to stand up for the agency she believed she deserved in choosing to dress in clothing considered more stereotypically masculine. Ego-related psychosocial attributes were fine-tuned through this resilience-building experience of defending her gender presentation through clothing choices (Van Breda, 2001). Later these psychosocial attributes were engaged in the positive situations of educating close friends and

cousins that desired to learn more about LGBTQ issues and topics. As evidenced, dispositional resilience in these participants was developed via experiences within which stressors were overcome through the power of their ego-related psychosocial attributes.

Relational patterns of resilience talk about the impact of close relationships upon the ability of an individual to effectively combat stressors. Sarah, as stated in the previous paragraph, felt positively about grasping her opportunities to act as an informal educator for her close friends and cousins. This connects to Bowleg et al.'s (2003) study whose participants described their resilience in terms of engaging with the power that they have to confront oppression. Similarly, Sarah engaged her power to confront oppression, through educating heterosexual people of a similar age to her and with whom she has close relationships. For Sarah, this subset of the wider social sphere is approachable and manageable for attempting to battle oppression through relieving anti-queer ideologies grounded in misconceptions. The resilience described in that study is dispositional, as its power is sourced from within the individuals confidence, sense of autonomy, self-reliance and self-worth. However, in Sarah's role as an informal educator on queer issues, her resilience is built by these positive interactions with whom she has close relationships. Sarah's development of resilience through acting as educator constitutes a relational pattern of resilience (Van Breda, 2001). Within this social microsystem, Sarah's relational resilience is fostered through repeated positive interactions through which Sarah was able to build confidence in the genuine yearning by those close to her, wishing to better understand the queer community and their issues, likely due to their caring for Sarah. Additionally, Sarah's educator role scaffolded her personal journey by augmenting her perception of the validity of her experiences and knowledge as a queer person. This increase in perceived self-value draws attention to the simultaneous impact of these educator-role

experiences, as developing dispositional resilience through interactions also considered relational, due to their reliance upon the connections within meaningful relationships (Van Breda, 2001).

Furthermore, Sarah has built resilience through an increased sense of support in terms of her sexuality from her peers. In this instance, relational resilience was built by Sarah's friends being "woke". Woke, a term with African American Vernacular English origins, refers to a person's perceived awareness of social and racial justice issues. Sarah described this wokeness of her peers in three examples. Firstly, as the lack of assumptions that her peers placed upon her in terms of sexuality based upon her style of clothes. Secondly, as the sense of autonomy of youth to break away from normative gender performativity constructs and to instead encourage each other to dress in a manner that feels authentic to that individual. And thirdly, as the expressed support that she has received from all her friends and the vast majority of her peers upon their discovery of her sexuality. These positive characteristics and behaviors of Sarah's friends encouraged her resilience to be built through her awareness and appreciation of the close, supportive relationships surrounding her. However, Malena had a differing perspective on her peers in relation to challenging gender normative codes of dress. While Sarah considered her peers woke and therefore valuing authenticity, challenging norms and acceptance of difference, Malena perceives her peers as likely suspecting her queerness based upon their heteronormative analysis of her vaguely masculine style of dress. These differing perspectives of the participants highlight that within the same school, even with similar actual experiences, the perception of unspoken ideologies held by their peers can be different. It may be that Malena is a more skeptical, cynical or glass half empty person, or that Sarah is a more positive, glass half full person. Contrarily, it may be that their differing analysis of their same peers is due to differing

critical analytical skills, awareness of queer history or current issues, experiences in their home life, or cultural and/or religious upbringings.

Educator impact. While relationships between the participants and their teachers were not described as close, the responses of teachers to homophobic language that they overheard was spoken about by all three participants. Malena engaged with the responses of teachers to homophobic language in a factual manner, without highlighting the impact of the teachers' actions upon her. Resilience was unable to be built through the connection that Jacorrah has with her teachers and their reactions to homophobic language. The fear that the reason teachers did not crack down on homophobic language – or have any reaction whatsoever – was the possibility the teachers themselves are homophobic. The impact of perceiving that teachers do not care about protecting an individual due to their sexuality did not appear to aid development of resilience in Jacorrah. Instead, it was a disheartening recurring thought that she expressed experiencing. Sarah, however, has witnessed some teachers responding to homophobic language with minor punishments. Sarah perceived this as a positive impact and expressed views, similar to Malena, in terms of teachers being people that she still hoped to rely upon to appropriately handle this type of situation. While Sarah and Malena had more positive perceptions of teachers' decisions to act in response to homophobic language usage by students, there was no evidence of dispositional or relational patterns of resilience being developed by these experiences.

Coping. Numerous heterosexist and/or misogynistic experiences revealed by participants did not result in resilience, but rather strategies of varying levels of success being engaged. Based upon the tone of voice and words used by the participants when recalling these experiences, I base the following discussion of coping strategies not wholly successful. When Malena recalled overhearing the conversation about the enjoyment of lesbian porn by

heterosexual males, her tone of voice revealed her deep feelings of awkwardness. She did not seem to know how to manage the situation, except to ignore it. Despite her feeling disturbed by the conversation and being clearly upset that this rhetoric is socially acceptable amongst male students, she did not consider intervening in the conversation or other active courses of action. Instead, Malena was guided by a passivity and chose to ignore the conversation altogether. While Malena, with her self-professed shy personality, took the route of ignoring this heteromisogynistic conversation, Jacorrah expressed feelings of anger and frustration when confronted with a different expression of this same sexualization of female queerness. In this case, Jacorrah felt triggered by the distinction being made between the greater acceptability of female queerness, versus male queerness. The implied rationale for Jacorrah's anger is a connection between the greater acceptability of female queerness and the misogynistic role of female queerness as a source of entertainment or pleasure for heterosexual males. While anger could lead to developing resilience, in this case Jacorrah had not spent time reflecting upon and learning from her feelings of anger, nor had she rendered those feelings actionable. Therefore, Jacorrah's anger was not shown to be a source of resilience, instead it takes space as attempts to cope with the stressor of the sexualization of female queerness.

Interestingly, despite the negative emotions felt as a result of indirectly or directly experiencing homophobic actions or language, both Malena and Sarah made excuses for the peers making these choices. Excusing homophobia can be analyzed as an adaptation strategy for diluting the pain caused by homophobic actions and language. As confronting pain directly can be a difficult and draining process, a method of coping that Malena and Sarah both engaged in is to cognitively remove the stressor. In this case, removal of the stressor is occurring through reassigning value to the homophobic actions and language. When the actions and language are

interpreted as cold-hearted and homophobic, the participants are most upset, angered and unsure about how to manage their emotional and social reaction. However, when Malena and Sarah reassign these same incidents of actions and language as being misinformed, rather than cold-hearted and joking or homophobic, they are able to reduce the pain experienced within their emotional reaction to the incident. Incidents which have been reassigned as less offensive and upsetting, include Malena's experience of her friends joking about her sexuality and both Sarah and Malena's explanations of why the students using homophobic language should not be judged too harshly.

Conclusions

Queer female youth experience a range of interactions with and perceive various attitudes, expressed or subversive, from their peers. In the San Francisco Bay Area of California, there is an overarching presumption that queer people are benefiting from positive gay-friendly attitudes brought by the Bay Area bubble of liberalism. While the lived experiences of queer youth are impacted by the decades of progress made by queer and trans* activists, there remains a spectrum of experiences, some of which are told by the participants of this study. This study acknowledges the diversity of experiences and attitudes towards queer people in the San Francisco Bay Area and so was framed by the two research questions, (1) What do queer female students perceive to be the ways in which they are supported by non-queer peers? and (2) What do queer female students perceive to be the ways in which they are marginalized by non-queer peers? The participants' anecdotes and perspectives on their positive to negative spectrum of experiences with peers has been valuable in adding to the limited body of research on queer female experiences within the high school microsystem. In analysis of the many themes revealed by this study, two core theories have been engaged as a lens – queer feminist theory and

resilience theory. Through these lens', this study has shown the overarching experiences of queer female youth with their peers as positive and negatives as subverted and ignored or unacknowledged by participants. It has also shown those which are explicit and negatively impacting the participants on a surface and deeper level as being few and far between.

Perceptions of Support

In terms of the study's first research question – surrounding the perceptions that queer female youth perceive being supported by their peers – the message was overwhelmingly affirmative from all participants. All three participants reported an overall feeling of support, acceptance and in some cases protection by their friends, in terms of their sexuality. These facets of support were primarily interpreted by the participants through the neutral or positive receptions when coming out, as well as the normalcy with which their friends treated them since their coming out. This normalizing of their queerness included through friends being as willing to have dynamic, two-way conversations about crushes with the participant post-coming out. In these conversations, the participants felt supported and treated as equals despite their othered queer identities. This occurred through a process of their friends rendering their sexuality invisible or normalized, each of which facilitated regular interactions without necessitating confronting issues or conflicts related to their queer identities.

Perceptions of Marginalization

The participants seldom reported negativity directed towards them by their non-friend peers based on their sexuality. However, there appeared to be some coping mechanisms or naivety that resulted in microaggressive or subtly homophobic actions and comments by friends and other peers flying under the radar of the participants. This resulted in participants conveying subtly

heteronormative comments as jokes, rather than cognitively labeling them as inappropriate comments about which they feel negatively. More explicitly homophobic comments were sometimes excused by the participants due to a perception that the person did not understand the harm that they were causing, or that despite the comments the person was not homophobic and not intending to cause harm. Expressing allowances for subtly and explicitly homophobic and heteronormative comments is likely to be a coping strategy, to avoid taking on board all of the instances of heterosexism surrounding them (Bowleg, 2003). These instances of cutting slack to those who are being (subtly or explicitly) homophobic, is connected to the perception that these participants had about their peers marginalizing them. In these cases, while marginalization can objectively be acknowledged, the queer female youths themselves did not recognize the subtle instances of heterosexism by their friends as homophobic. Therefore, the perception of marginalization experienced at the hands of their peers, rests upon two types of experiences. Firstly, the participants' marginalization was perceived through their explicit experiences with the sexualization of female queerness. And secondly, they perceived their marginalization through the overhearing of anti-queer male homophobic language that each participant reported hearing on a daily basis at their school. While each participant had one anecdote about overhearing or being directly confronted with the sexualization of queer females, they all reported perceiving that they believed it likely that most of the male students at their school thought about queer females in a sexualized manner. However, they simultaneously asserted that they do not overall perceive being sexualized due to their sexuality. This low perception of being sexualized likely arises from the infrequent exposure that the participants had to negative experiences on the topic, as it does not appear that the participants are overwhelmingly

negatively affected by their perception of a heterosexist, misogynistic ideology towards queer female sexuality.

Theory Applications

This study expanded upon understandings of queer feminist theory and resilience theory through provided evidence of a new population for which these theories provide a useful lens for understanding their intersectional lived experiences. By engaging with the space allowed for an intersectionality of experiences, queer feminist theory was vital in this study to highlight the way participants process their experiences, through both their queerness and their female identity. Through participant attitudes while recounting their experiences, each participant exhibited a belief in their right to equality in the eyes of their peers and families based upon their sexuality, gender presentation as females that do not choose to dress in stereotypically feminine styles, together with their rights as youth to have autonomy over their bodies and their sexuality. In each of the participants' experiences, the queer feminist lens of this study provided an opportunity to explore the way in which their queerness and femaleness intersects. Including intersections of queerness and femaleness evident in particular treatment from peers and particular cognitive processes, and engaged by the participants to interpreting such treatment as supportive or marginalizing, by ways of implementing coping strategies, critical engagement, or resilience-building depending on the experience. Resilience theory was essential in highlighting the way that participants embrace their positive experiences to build resilience (Van Breda, 2001). When each participant recounted anecdotes of support from peers, the confidence, sense of self, autonomy and self-resilience was built towards patterns of dispositional and relational resilience (Van Breda, 2001). These participants have highlighted the many positive experiences through which they are building resilience in their current school experiences with peers.

Research Contribution

A focus on the positive experiences of queer populations is often lacking, with the focus soundly within areas of marginalization. However, this study contributes to the absurdly limited body of research on queer female youths in three key ways (Malinsky, 1997). Firstly, by balancing research questions between positive and negative experiences, resulting in data that has highlighted a wealth of positive experiences for these participants, in terms of support about their sexuality by their peers. Secondly, by engaging with current students, rather than graduates engaging retrospectively with their high school experiences. And thirdly, by undertaking this exploration of intersectional experiences of queer female youths. This intersectional focus has occurred through engaging three participants who each have complex and distinct identities, including all participants being non-white, one participant having immigrated as a child from Mexico, one participant being black, in one being mixed race, in all three presenting in less feminine garb, in one participant living in a single-parent household, in another living in a queer-dominant household with a two queer family members and her heterosexual mother. Each of these participants has contributed to the value of this study through their willingness to engage, confidence and resilience that they have built in their sexuality and their implicit commitment through their attitudes throughout the interview process to the agency. This was done through autonomy and sense of self, required for youth to live authentically regardless of their sexuality.

Summary

This study expresses that queer female youth have much to be proud of in their ability to develop resilience. When queer female youth are surrounded by supportive friends, they are able to build confidence, develop their sense of self and foster skills for self-reliance and autonomy.

These qualities are built through experiences that connect dynamically with the intersectional identities of the participants, therefore effectively analyzed through the lens of queer feminist theory. The findings clearly show that some peers are still having a marginalizing effect upon these queer female youth. Through lens of queer feminist theory and resilience theory, this study reveals the value of supportive peers throughout the coming out process, as active or perceived defenders in times of confronting homophobia and as allies through normalizing the participants' queerness by treating them equitably, post-coming out.

Recommendations

Research

Further research should be done upon the population of queer female youth. As explained within the literature review of this study, the amount of research currently existing on queer female populations is far lower than that on queer male populations. Furthermore, when exploring the issues of youth, queer females are allowed a horrifyingly small space within academia. The subset of queer females in our student populations, is estimated at approximately four percent of all students, based upon Gates' study (2017). This significant population, are often thought to experience significant negatives within the formal education system. While this study explored the perception of queer female youth on the ways that their peers support or marginalize them, it is essential that further research occur on the support and marginalization of queer female students, at the hands of their teachers, administrators, school policies and curriculum. In the context of the formal education system, it is essential that research exposes the ways in which the settings are supporting our students and are actively – whether intentionally or inadvertently – neglecting or harming our students.

Educators

According to the interviews undertaken in this study, I must recommend that all educators take action when they hear their students utilizing homophobic language. As evidenced through this study, when teachers take action queer students are more likely to feel supported and comfortable in their classes. However, when teachers ignored homophobic comments made by students, queer students in the classroom are likely to feel unsupported, uncomfortable and even fearful that their teachers may hold homophobic ideologies and so may not care about their queer students. Appropriate actions for educators to take to contribute to their queer students feeling supported in their classroom, would begin with consistently verbally addressing the use of homophobic language. At each occurrence of homophobic language being used, the teacher should explain why that language is inappropriate and harmful. Serious consequences such as detention or suspension should be given to reinforce to students the unacceptability of homophobic language, with the accompanying seriousness with which it is treated at school in order to provide a safe learning environment for all students.

Administrators and Policy Makers

In order for educators to consistently enact consequences for homophobic language, it is essential that administrators and politicians implement policies and pass laws drafted for the optimization of queer students access to equitable learning opportunities at school. As freedom from homophobia is vital for students to engage to their highest potential with their education, such laws and policies made by politicians and administrators would be protocols guiding consistent, serious consequences for homophobic language used by students at school. Through developing policies supporting and requiring all educators to enforce strict anti-homophobia

practices in their classrooms, administrators would begin effective engagement with issues of equitable education for queer students. Politically, actions to be taken would include proposing and passing laws which require administrators to complete the recommendations discussed. Politicians pledging support to human rights, equality and equitable education, should all be preparing and supporting laws which advocate for the rights of queer students, to flourish within our education system to the best of their abilities, through equitable access to learning opportunities.

Youth

Finally, my recommendation to our youth is to support, protect, and love. Allies to the queer community, it is your responsibility to check each other's privilege. Do not let heteromisogynistic and heteronormative comments pass you by without defending the queer community. Stand up for your queer peers when you see that they are experiencing or witnessing homophobic language or actions. Treat your queer peers' experiences as valuable and important, engage in educating yourself on queer issues and topics so that you are better able to support your queer friends, to avoid making the mistake of imposing heteronormative expectations, questions or statements upon your friends, due to your lack of education on queerness. Queer female youth reading this, know that you are not alone. Think critically about what you see and hear, apply intersectional concepts of queer feminist theory and believe in your own judgement. If you think something is implicitly or explicitly heterosexist, or imposing heteronormativity, or misogynistic, remember that you can take action. Find the educators and administrators who are taking queer issues at school seriously, that might be any teacher at your school, or it might be a specific person who you trust and is an ally or part of the queer community. They are part of your support network of adults who care about your wellbeing and the equitable experience of

education that queer students have the right to. Not all queer female youths have the same experiences as these three participants. Nonetheless, it is joyous to have heard about the overwhelming experiences of support and acceptance that these participants had at their school.

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Appendix A.
Interview Questions

1. How long have you been part of the Rainbow Club?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences with other students at your school?
 - a. What are your experiences with students who are not queer?
 - i. If you have had positive experiences with students who are not queer, could you tell me about these?
 - ii. If you have had negative experiences with students who are not queer, could you tell me about these?
 - b. What are your experiences with students who are queer?
 - i. If you have had positive experiences with students who are queer, could you tell me about these?
 - ii. If you have had negative experiences with students who are queer, could you tell me about these?