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AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG GAY MEN WHO HAVE ATTENDED A POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTION

BY

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MASTER OF COUNSELLING

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my best friend Brenda Hoddinott. For without your ongoing love, support, compassion, and superior editing skills, I would not have completed this degree program. We have proven that on both individual and partner levels, that we can truly accomplish the unreachable. With all my love and admiration, thank you.
CAMPUS ALBERTA APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY:
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SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE PAGE

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certifies that she or he has read and recommends to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a final project entitled An Exploratory Investigation into the Experiences of Young Gay Men Who Have Attended a Post-Secondary Institution submitted by Robert A. Roughley in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Counselling.

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The undersigned certifies that she or he has read and recommends to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a final project entitled \textit{An Exploratory Investigation into the Experiences of Young Gay Men Who Have Attended a Post-Secondary Institution} submitted by Robert A. Roughley in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of \textit{Master of Counselling}.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study into the diverse mental health experiences of four gay men studying at the post-secondary level utilized semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into the phenomena being explored. The journey into post-secondary education encompasses life-altering experiences with opportunities for self-discovery and the development of a positive gay identity. The psychosocial realities of young gay men have been well documented from numerous perspectives. Meeting the mental health concerns of gay men in post-secondary settings within a uniquely Canadian multicultural milieu is essential to seal the pedagogical gaps surrounding queer issues within a culturally infused context. Hence, the findings of this research present implications for future multicultural counselling practices based on the unique and celebrated experiences of each participant in this exploratory initiative.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This qualitative research project is a celebration and acknowledgement of the diverse mental health and identity development experiences of four young gay men studying at the post-secondary level. The central goal of this paper is to view the life experiences and self-identity journeys of each participant within the unique context known as culture-infused counselling “the conscious and purposeful infusion of cultural awareness and sensitivity into all aspects of the counselling process and all other roles assumed by the counsellor or psychologist” (Arthur & Collins, 2005, p. 16). Through the use of semi-structured interviews, this study delves into the individual counselling experiences of young gay men in higher education, the cultural implications of being gay in a heterosexist society, and the subsequent mental health concerns pertaining to the development and maintenance of positive gay identities.

For many young gay men, the journey into post-secondary education represents a time for self-discovery and identity formation (D’Augelli, 1993; Eardly, 2002; Rogers, Harb, Lappin, & Colbert, 2000). The literature related to gay male identity development, and the psychosocial realities that arise with their coming of age, has been well documented (Bohan, 1996; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Vinke, DeRycke, & Boulton, 1999). With this in mind, this study is about the individual experiences of the participants, their personal cultural identities and worldviews, and the implications of their eclectic needs on current and future multicultural practices in the field of counselling psychology.
Research Rationale

Even though the social and political climates are shifting toward positively addressing the cultural identities of Canada’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirited communities, the scholarly literature within a Canadian context is limited in this area. The works of Alderson (2000, 2002, 2005) and Roughley (2000) discuss current, critical issues faced by gay men within a uniquely Canadian context. A cyclical pattern of identifying and evaluating intervention strategies is evolving within the health professions. However, accessibility to these complete services appears to be inadequate for many individuals, including those in higher education (McKee, Hayes, & Axiotis, 1994). Young gay men are still at risk for self-sabotage and negative gay identity development (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000; Roughley, 2000). Counselling psychologists are in an ideal position to assist in the promotion, development, and maintenance of healthy gay identities through the practice of gay affirmative therapy (Alderson, 2002, 2005; Barrett & McWhirter, 2002).

This research project is essential to the field of counselling psychology for three specific reasons. First and foremost, this study will provide a voice to the experiences of young gay men, who have often been alienated and silenced by cultural hegemonies (Chen-Hayes, 2000, 2001; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Secondly, the expressed experiences of participants may offer insights into the working alliances between the therapists and their gay male clients. Finally, as Arthur and Stewart (2001) state, counsellors must adopt “culture-centred counselling competencies in the domains of self-awareness, knowledge, skills, and organizational competencies” (p. 3). Hence, this investigation will expand on the current literature surrounding the development of queer positive multicultural competencies. While this study focuses on the implications of the data for the post-secondary counselling
profession, the results offer significant insights related to service provision to practitioners within all allied health professions in medical and educational sectors.

Research Questions

Although dialogue related to the mental health concerns of young gay men has been evolving for only a decade, very little literature addressing this specific population within the post-secondary health context has been published. As wisely stated by Davies et al. (2000), “College [university] men’s emotional health and physical health increasingly concern university student service professionals” (p. 259). In addition, the complexities of identifying, establishing, and maintaining a healthy self-concept as a gay male further places into context the nature of this exploratory study. Historically speaking, research and professional practices have been highly dependent on theoretical models of gay identity development when attempting to understand the needs of young gay men (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2005; Troiden, 1979). This research turns to the participants for guidance and understanding. The research seeks to gain insights into the following queries:

- What are the current mental health experiences and challenges of young gay men in Canadian universities?
- What similarities and differences exist in the coming out and mental health experiences of young gay men in post-secondary educational settings?
- What aspects of therapeutic processes in post-secondary counselling services have assisted these young gay men to develop healthier functioning or detracted them from it?
- What aspects of the counselling relationship have positively or negatively impacted
the well-being of young gay men?

- What should counselling practitioners within higher learning institutions understand about the unique and diverse needs of young gay men studying at the post-secondary level?
- What systemic factors serve as barriers to or facilitators of effective counselling services for young gay men?

Overview of the Research

This paper is divided into five chapters. Chapter One outlines the study by providing a foundation for the practical and theoretical pillars of this research. Chapter Two addresses the theoretical foundations in four specific areas: (a) gay identity development, (b) psychosocial realities of being gay in a heterosexist world, (c) the unique needs of gay men in post-secondary settings, and (d) queer affirmative therapy and multicultural counselling. Chapter Three provides a detailed explanation of the procedures used in this study. It will include: (a) participant selection and profiles, (b) role of the researcher, (c) data collection, (d) considerations of reliability and validity, and (e) analysis of data. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, linking the central themes that emerged from the data with theoretical interpretations stemming from the literature. The final section, Chapter Five, provides an evaluation of both the strengths and limitations of the study, while synthesizing the overall implications and providing recommendations emerging from this research.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Lewis once said, “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides” (as cited in Frank, 2001, p. 318). This section of the study provides the reader with a detailed overview of the literature, including: (a) definitions of key concepts and terms, (b) gay identity development, (c) psychosocial realities of being gay in a heterosexist world, (d) multicultural counselling and queer affirmative therapy, (e) unique needs and experiences of young gay men studying at the post-secondary level, and (f) summary and conclusion.

Definitions of Key Concepts and Terms

Section one of Chapter Two offers the reader an opportunity to gain insight into the definitions of key concepts and terms used throughout this study. This foundation provides the necessary grounding and detail for this study. In order to adequately present accurate and thought provoking definitions, the author turns to the literature for support and authenticity.

Young Gay Men

The term young gay men typically makes reference to self-identified gay men in adolescence and early adult-hood (Graber & Archibald, 2001, p. 3). Also referred to as queer youth, this study identifies young gay men as being between the ages of 18-25.

Coming Out

Defining the term coming out is not always an easy process. For many people it is the self-identification as gay that represents the core of the coming out process. This being said, it is essential to note that coming out to others represents a life-long journey (Rhoads, 1995). Numerous existing theoretical frameworks attempt to address the coming out process
(Alderson, 2003; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981; Troiden, 1979). This developmental process involves numerous internal psychosocial challenges and external societal realities (Dubé, Savin-Williams, & Diamond, 2001; Rotherman-Borus & Langabeer, 2001; Schneider, 2001). Despite the numerous academic models detailing the coming out process, it is essential to note that each experience is unique in nature and should be celebrated as such.

**Homophobia and Heterosexism**

Two significantly relevant aspects that impact the well-being of young gay men and their subsequent coming out processes include homophobia and heterosexism. Anderson (1995) defines *homophobia* as “the fear, dislike, or intolerance of gay individuals” (p. 3). In contrast, *heterosexism* represents “the belief that heterosexual identity and behaviour are normal and legitimate, whereas any other sexual orientation is deviant, perverse, abnormal” (Bohan, 1996, p. xiii). In essence, both homophobia and heterosexism work interchangeably at all levels of society and are highly influenced by both internal and external factors.

**Counselling**

The act of *counselling* represents a collaborative (Horvath, 2000), goal-oriented working relationship, wherein all parties work together to form an alliance that seeks a more enlightened and balanced approach to living (Roughley, 2003, 2004). Arthur and Collins (2005) define counselling as “a purposeful and collaborative relationship in which the counsellor draws on psychological, health promotion, development, and educational process to facilitate wellness, personal growth, healing, problem solving, and healthy personal and interpersonal development with individuals, groups, and communities” (p. 16).
Gay/Queer-Affirmative Therapy

Gay-affirmative therapy makes reference to the creation of welcoming and accepting therapeutic alliances with gay men. In contrast, while viewing all sexual orientations as equal, the author suggests that the use of queer-affirmative therapy is more encompassing to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirited (GLBTT) cultures and communities that fall beneath the queer umbrella (Alderson, 2005; Collins & Oxenbury, 2005; Roughley, 2005). Queer affirmative therapeutic practice “is not a technique but a frame of reference...[it] reinforces the naturalness of living with the sexual orientation or sex-gender expression that clients identify with on their own” (Hunter & Hickerson, 2002, p. 1999).

Culture

Woolfolk as cited in Mathison (1998) defines culture as “The knowledge, values, attitudes, and traditions that guide the behaviour of a group of people and allow them to solve the problems of living in their environment” (p. 151). Hence for the purpose of this study, culture will be used to define uniquely shared experiences. According to Arthur and Collins (2005), culture can be viewed from an inclusive perspective “to include other variables [beyond ethnicity], such as gender, sexual orientation, ability” (p. 12).

Queer Culture

The GLBTT communities that define queer culture are rich and diverse in nature. Mathison (1998) suggests that through history “Gay men and lesbians [and other queer individuals] [have] not [been] identified by their sex, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, socioeconomic or ability level but by their [sexual] orientation” (p. 151). Western culture has long been responsible for the perpetuation of stereotypes about members of the queer culture. By focusing on the sexual acts and societal stigma, the dominant culture, through time, has
attempted to strip queer culture of both its individual and collective identities. Queer culture represents a bridging of sexual orientation with the unique celebration of self.

**Diversity and Multiculturalism**

Within the literature, the terms multiculturalism and diversity have been used interchangeably as cultural issues within the profession of counselling psychology (Arthur & Collins, 2005). Hall (1997) and Arredondo and Toporek (1996) offer a long awaited comparison between diversity and multiculturalism in an attempt to detach their meanings from overuse by the affirmative action and political correctness movements. According to Hall, *diversity* “encompasses difference in age, color, ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical and mental ability, emotional ability, race, religion, language, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, or unique individual style” (p. 642). In contrast, *multiculturalism* makes reference to only “ethnicity, race, and culture” (Arredondo & Toporek, 1996, p. 39). Hence, for the purpose of clarity, the term diversity will be used to embrace the numerous individual components of identity that exist within queer culture, while multiculturalism will be used as a modifier to review and acknowledge individual and group collective needs within queer culture.

**Working and Therapeutic Alliances**

The terms working and therapeutic alliances are used interchangeably throughout this research study. Greenson (1967) first used the words *working alliance* as a means of identifying the unique relationship that occurs between a counsellor and the client. Cormier and Nurius (2003) refer to this rapport as “a sense in which both counsellor and client are working together in a joint fashion” (p. 74). Traced to the roots of psychodynamic therapy (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993), *the therapeutic alliance* represents an ongoing negotiated
process between the client and therapist (Safran & Muran, 2000a, 2000b). The dual use of working and therapeutic alliances in this study represents the formation, implementation, and maintenance of the relationship between counsellor and client throughout the helping process (Bender, 2005; Roughley, 2003).

Gay Identity Development

As stated in Broderick and Blewitt (2003), “The study of human development over the life span reveals the fascinating story of human beings and how they change over time” (p. v). The discussion of selecting a framework that represents an adequate, socially relevant, and all encompassing model for the process of developing a gay identity has existed in the literature for the past six decades (Perrin, 2002). Placed within the context of a modular format, numerous theorists attempted to place regulations on the coming out experience; thereby unintentionally removing the truly unique context of coming out to self and others (Hunter, Shannon, Knox, & Martin, 1998). While gay men often embark on journeys toward similar destinations present in dominant culture discourse, the field of counselling psychology cannot deny the necessity to view the gay male client from an ecological framework (Alderson, 2003, 2005).

Young gay men are present in every sector of society including all religions, socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, abilities, and nationalities (Roughley, 1998). Many gay men, especially in culturally undernourished academic environments, find themselves in multi-marginalized situations wherein they occupy numerous cultural identities (Roughley, 2000). For example, Aster (2005) discussed the elements of multiple oppression and the stressors associated with combating both racism and homophobia while attempting to establish a sense of self that encompasses numerous identity formations. Each gay male
youth’s journey into self-discovery is unique and should be celebrated and acknowledged. However, sadly, this is not always the case. This is one of the central difficulties in attempting to establish a pre-existing model for the coming out process. Savin-Williams (1998a) outlines the essence of self-labelling as *gay* for young gay men:

> Labeling one’s sexuality is generally a process unknown to heterosexual youths, who appear to flow naturally into the abyss of ‘normal sexuality’ – that is heterosexuality. For sexual-minority youths, however, the means by which they come to realize that their sexuality has been named by their culture as an ‘other’ is a vivid, memorable process that can never be forgotten. It alters interpretations of the past, current conceptions of the self, and future life trajectories. (p. 121)

Visibility of young gay men is limited in most sectors of society, and the development of a positive gay identity can be extremely difficult without culturally specific education and counselling interventions (Alderson, 2002, 2005; Roughley, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2003). However, there appears to be a growing trend for young gay men to come out at very young ages (Savin-Williams, 1998a; 1998b). Savin-Williams (1998a) found the following:

> The internal process of identifying as gay or bisexual is a very personal, private affair. As opposed to other developmental milestones, such as the first gay or heterosexual sexual experience or disclosure of this experience to another, in which an identifiable event marks the occasion, many youths consider the identity process itself to be an abstraction that is difficult to specify as an exact moment in time. However, some youths recall a very specific instant in which they said clearly and discretely, “I’m gay”. (p. 123)

Schneider (1991), a revolutionary of her time, commended services that welcomed and
celebrated gay individuality for disseminating positive, informed, and balanced information, critical to the acceptance of a queer identity. After more than a decade since Schneider’s initial work within a Canadian context, why are we still having the discussion about meeting the eclectic needs of young gay men? A dialogue pertaining to the psychosocial experiences and challenges faced by young gay men, may offer insights into this question.

Psychosocial Realities of Being Gay in a Heterosexist World

Steinem once stated, “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn” (as cited in Frank, 2001, p. 641). The social erudition process impacts all members of society, and the subsequent prejudices and social injustices resulting from these lessons impact the mental health well being of young gay men (Meyer, 2003). This section of the literature review discusses the psychosocial realities of being gay in a heterosexist world. Three areas are discussed: (a) roles of homophobia and heterosexism, (b) STDs, HIV, and AIDS, and (c) self-harm and suicide.

Roles of Homophobia and Heterosexism

An individual’s cultural perspectives are important in understanding the sources and results of homophobia and heterosexism (Jennings, 1998). Roughley (2000) suggests that societal prejudice and discrimination, including racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and classism, pre-define gay people into social categories, often resulting in multiple marginalization and stigmatization. The literature cites numerous presenting problems of young gay men that result of homophobia and heterosexism, including but not limited to: (a) development of a social identity (Harley, Nowak, Gassay, & Savage, 2002), (b) isolation (Flowers & Buston, 2001), (c) educational issues (Roughley, 2000), (d) family issues (Hart & Heimberg, 2001), and (e) health risks (Cheng, 2003; Low-Beer et al., 2002).
Many educational and mental-health based institutions still exhibit extreme examples of homophobia and heterosexism (Banks, 2003; Woog, 1995). Limitations and accessibility issues can have serious and often deadly consequences (Hartstein, 1996). Homophobia and heterosexism often take place on intrapersonal, interpersonal, social and cultural, and institutional and organizational levels (Blumenfeld, 1992; British Medical Association, 2005). The consequences of homophobia and heterosexism on physical, emotional, and economic well-being have been well documented within a Canadian context (Banks, 2001). Specific results found include: (a) inadequate support, (b) internalized homophobia, (c) stress associated to coming out, (d) multiple risk-taking behaviours, (e) poor life management skills, and (f) external homophobia (Banks, 2003).

**STDs, HIV, and AIDS**

Consider the following question: Why, after almost two decades of HIV/AIDS education and prevention efforts, are young gay men still succumbing to infection in increasing numbers? Literature in the areas of education, psychology, sociology, and social work point the finger at social and institutional discrimination against queer individuals (Gay and Lesbian Health Services Saskatoon, 2000). As a result, young gay men have often fallen victim to the social ignorance of homophobia and heterosexism and have subsequently been denied adequate access to culturally sensitive sexual health education (Meyer & Dean, 1998). According to Sarafino (2002), the fundamental purpose of health psychology is “to examine the causes of illnesses and to study ways to promote and maintain health, prevent and treat illness, and improve the health care system” (p. 481). However, within the large scope of current education and health-based initiatives related to the issues of high-risk sexual behaviour amoung young gay men, the central focus appears to be on treatment of HIV and
Sexually transmitted diseases, most notably HIV and AIDS, are at the centre of concern within the theoretical and practical discussions pertaining to positive gay identity development and coming out (Stine, 1996).

Feeling different and alienated, having to integrate and develop one’s sense of identity in a hostile environment, constantly fearing exposure of one’s innermost secret, and experiencing ridicule from peers for being effeminate or masculine may enhance one’s susceptibility to AIDS. (Savin-Williams & Lenhart, 1990, p. 85)

Young gay men, struggling with their sexual identities, are likely to engage in dangerous sexual activities that place them at risk for HIV infection (Perrin, 2002). Inherent in these unsafe health-related behaviours are psychosocial stresses related to identity, coming out, and social environments (DeWit, Hospers, Jansen, Stroebe, & Kok, 1996). Martin and Knox (1995) identified low self-esteem as a predictor of the increased risk of gay males becoming HIV positive.

Collins (1997) suggests that factors contributing to the increase of HIV and AIDS infections in young gay men, include: (a) socially based vulnerability, (b) power dynamics, (c) the discovery phase of sex, (d) need to find acceptance, (e) difficulties with communication, (f) coercion and force, and (g) prostitution. Hospers & Kok (1995) identified self-efficacy, misinformation, substance abuse, and personality traits as possible factors in the spread of HIV and AIDS amongst this young population. Identifying these issues has become central in understanding the rapid spread of HIV within the gay community, especially amongst those below the age of twenty-five (Perrin, 2002).

Due to inexperience and lack of educational resources, young gay men may be less
competent in negotiating low-risk sexual activities (Perrin, 2002; Roughley, 2000). Coming out as a gay male can involve a period of emotional turbulence, resulting in low self-esteem and depression, which may reduce the desire and motivation to engage in safer sex practices (Lindley, Nicholson, Kerby, & Lu, 2003; Roughley, 1999). Environments that promote and celebrate gay male youths are needed to help individuals who are struggling to find themselves and to develop a positive gay identity (Alderson, 2000; Roughley, 2000).

A recent Ontario-based study examining sexual risk behaviour revealed the alarming statistic that over 40% of the youth respondents between the ages of 17 and 25 had reported at least one act of unprotected receptive anal intercourse within the past twelve months (Myers et al., 2004). According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (2004), men who have sex with men (MSM), between the ages of 10 to 19 years of age represent 9 percent of the cases of AIDS in Canada, while MSM between the ages of 20 to 24 are amongst the highest rate for AIDS cases at 51 percent. The publications of this recent phenomenon confirm that current educational efforts and strategies surrounding HIV prevention are limited in their scope and accessibility (Ryan & Chervin, 2000). Without culturally competent health and education practitioners, our efforts may continue to neglect the precious and vulnerable members of the gay male youth population in Canada. With trepidation rather than optimism, the literature speaks volumes on simply charting a course toward healthier mental and physical choices for young gay men.

*Self-Harm and Suicide*

Findings of other studies indicate that many young gay men have succumbed to self-harming (Cheng, 2003) and suicidal behaviours (Dorais, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Participants in several studies reflected on their fears of verbal,
mental, physical, and sexual abuse, harassment, and the lack of adult role models (Otis & Akinner, 1996; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1994) in their struggles toward self-acceptance and acculturation from the hegemony into queer culture. For many, the most viable belief is that they are “better dead than queer” (Butter, 2005, p. 8).

DeAngelis (2002) argues that “a new study of gay and lesbian youth finds that they are only slightly more likely than heterosexual youth to attempt suicide, refuting previous research that suggested much higher rates” (p. 1). Ironically, she also reports higher levels of addiction and anxiety-based disorders among queer youth. DeAngelis (2002) may not fully comprehend the sexual risk behaviours of gay male youths. Her study neglected to address low self-esteem as a passive suicidal behaviour, with the weapon being HIV. DeAngelis (2002) demonstrates the dangers of presuming that an adolescent’s perceived sexual orientation is straight. Some gay men choose to live their lives as straight, making it quite possible that many perceived heterosexual male suicides could in fact represent the gay male population. Therefore her conclusions may reveal the ultimate in heterosexist assumptions. Numerous studies counteract the findings of the study by DeAngelis (e.g., Garofalo, Wolf, Lawrence, & Wissow, 1999; Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001).

Multicultural Counselling and Queer Affirmative Therapy

There are consistent and recurring themes that exist in the multicultural counselling literature pertaining to barriers that hinder effective and inclusive cross-cultural counselling and therapy. With adequate edification of diversity issues in the education and professional awareness of counselling practitioners, the essential design and implementation of culturally appropriate assessment and intervention strategies can be established (Sue & Sue, 2003). How prepared are we for the multicultural millennium? Arthur and Stewart (2001) addressed
the importance of on-going training: “Canada’s population is changing in ways that emphasize the need for counsellors to be prepared for multicultural counselling” (p. 3). The recognition of Canada’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirited communities is essential in providing the groundwork for competency development in this area.

A decade and a half ago, Pederson (1990) called upon practitioners to recognize the importance of placing into practice multicultural counselling perspectives, which are considered the fourth force of counselling because this initiative “tolerates and encourages a more diverse and complex perspective” (p. 93). The strong cultural roots of Western culture require ongoing re-visitation and investigation as the mental health needs of the cultural diverse evolve. In attempting to meet this central objective, counselling practitioners must put forth the effort to remain “culturally sensitive and relevant” (Jewel, 2002, p. 262). The literature, calls upon practitioners to gain cultural knowledge, consciousness, and sensitivity that results in a culturally-centred counselling approach (Collins & Arthur, 2005; Pederson, 1994). Where do counselling practitioners begin in reaching this goal? First and foremost, it is essential to acknowledge, identify, and subsequently deconstruct the social and cultural obstacles that exist in offering inclusive multicultural counselling. Pederson’s (1990) notion of forbearance is in need of re-visitation. A paradigm shift beyond mere leniency should encourage counselling practitioners to explore and celebrate a multicultural awareness beyond the mere indifference of tolerance.

Through the historical socialization in the dominant culture, issues such as racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and heterosexism have found their way into the helping professions (Eubanks-Carter, Burckell, & Goldfried, 2005). Fernando (1995) stated that as “psychology confronted other cultures and races, ideologies within the disciplines reflected
to a greater or lesser extent Western thinking” (p. 39). With this in mind, is it any surprise that mental health practitioners are trained to use Anglo-centric tools for counselling?

Counsellors must develop the necessary competencies to meet the needs of culturally diverse clients through pedagogical renewal in the fields of counselling and the allied health professions (Ferns & Madden, 1995; McDougall & Arthur, 2001).

Feminist psychology offers significant leadership in the merging of counselling with cross-cultural issues through an appreciation of the unique experiences that individuals bring to the egalitarian-based therapeutic alliance (Lalande & Laverty, 2005). Brabec and Brown (1997) suggested, “Feminists struggle to achieve a better world that reflects the lived realities and truths of the diversity of people that inhabit the world” (p. 28). In the establishment of effective working alliances, both the counsellor and client, as co-participants in the therapeutic process, bring past experiences and teachings into the present, which often follow them into the future unless some intervention occurs (Roughley, 2004). Individuals’ personal and cultural senses of self, in the forms of beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours, play significant roles in their perception of mental well-being (Aponte, Rivers, & Wohl, 1995). Toporek (2001) stated that aptitude requires a balance or “an awareness and examination of one’s own personal growth, concerns, and biases on personal, professional, and institutional levels when delivering multicultural competence” (pp. 16-17). Competent counselling practitioners consistently safeguard their clients from their own perceived truths and cultural biases (Safran, 2005).

Queer Affirmative Therapy

It is the position of this study that responding to the experiences and concerns of gay men requires a deep-rooted compassion for human dignity and an empathetic understanding
and recognition of queer identity, as important components in the cultural mosaic of Canada. As already noted, the literature clearly demonstrates the historical and current social and psychological stressors that are placed on young gay men to succumb to the pressures of dominant culture discourse. Baruth and Manning (1999) provided the roots of this section of the paper:

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual [transsexual and two-spirited] have a culture of their own and experience many of the same problems that are experienced by other[s]…sexual orientation should be perceived as a difference, just as gender and ethnicity are considered differences. (p. 12)

As counselling practitioners working within a cultural framework, multicultural competencies that reflect inclusive and non-discriminatory practices must be identified, explored, and addressed. The rationale for needing to address the issue of queer culture and multicultural counselling is quite clear. As helping professionals, counselling practitioners have the opportunity to remove the culture-centric lenses of the past and present and seek renewal through the implementation of culturally sensitive practices.

Merging the literature on gay identity development and queer affirmative therapy is essential in revisiting the core research questions of this study. In psychosocial terms, the identity formation of young gay men normally consists of a process of self-recognition, self-perception, and a personal sense of community, all of which define individual development (Anderson, 1995; Kroger, 1996). According Alderson (2005),

Before a gay male self-identifies as gay, he experiences intrapsychic conflict between catalysts, which serve to inform him that he may have a homosexual orientation, and hindrances, which serve to either suppress or repress a his homoerotic and
homoaffirmative feelings. (p. 458)

Once again, in practicing queer affirmative therapy, practitioners are called upon to appreciate that coming out, to self and others, represents either an orientation or reorientation that evolves across the lifespan (Roughley, 2005).

The literature in the area of psychological assessment and intervention calls on practitioners to build their therapeutic alliances with gay men through the use of non-heterosexist and gay affirmative language. Chen, Stracuzzi, and Ruckdeschel (2004) call upon practitioners working with gay men to adopt an intentional-reflective stance. In essence, when considering “the diversity among the gay male clientele, intentional-reflective counsellors are careful in their exploration of the client’s presenting concerns, respectful of his reactions, while examining the basis of their own assumptions about the client and the counselling process” (Chen, et al., 2004, p. 398). Through awareness and self-reflective practices, counselling practitioners can competently assist young gay men through the myriad of change (Schope, 2004).

The appreciation of meaning that exists in the understanding of identity offers a fruitful application to working with young gay men studying in post-secondary learning environments. Calling upon the work of Budegeon (2003), it is essential to note that what is “Often lacking within debates about theorizing identity is a more grounded understanding of the relationship between choice and identity within contemporary social and cultural conditions” (p. 3). Reynolds and Anderson (1999) called upon practitioners to identify, isolate, and deconstruct the numerous elements of discourse that exist at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and community levels of the dominant culture. Hunter and Hickerson (2002) encouraged practitioners to use alternative theoretical frameworks for
alliance building with gay male clients: (a) empowerment, (b) ecological, and (c) feminist approaches. By implementing such strategies, Hunter and Hickerson asserted that the ultimate goal is to “establish practice relationships based on equal power between practitioners and clients in contrast to traditional practice relationships based on inequitable power arrangement… [wherein] the practitioner attempts to equalize the link with the client through forming a collaborative or partnership interaction” (p. 201).

Sue and Sue (1999, 2003) call upon counsellors and psychologists to consider suitable applications when addressing the presenting concerns and goals of working alliances with young gay men. By not assuming the role of queer affirmative practitioner, the gay male client may be further disempowered, marginalized, and pathologized (Roughley, 2005). Noted in the literature as conversion and reparative therapies (Haldeman, 1991, 1994, 2001), the history of psychological and psychiatric processes reveals previous attempts to minimize and change one’s non-heterosexual identity in order to fit the mold of dominant culture expectation. While the American Psychiatric Association (1999, 2000) has established clear guidelines against such practices, the truth remains that such practices may still be active (Hunter & Hickerson, 2002). Could it not be argued that the denial of queer affirmative therapy and multicultural competent practitioners could represent yet another form of denying gay male clients the ability to form positive gay identities? Ethically, Canadian counsellors and psychologists must move in the direction of identifying queer culture as another area of exploration in the establishment of awareness, knowledge, and skills. As stated by Dupont-Joshua (2002), “As counsellors we are mirrors to our clients and to keep our mirrors clear we have to continually work on ourselves and our attitudes” (p. 21).
Unique Needs and Experiences of Young Gay Men Studying at the Post-Secondary Level

Laurence Peter once said, “Education is a method whereby one acquires a higher grade of prejudices” (as cited in Frank, 2001, p. 231). The intent of this section of the chapter is to present the reader with a glimpse into the literature that discusses the unique needs and experiences of young gay men in post-secondary learning environments. Aberson, Swan, and Emerson (1999) and Graziano (2005) offer a cross-cultural comparison between covert discrimination in American colleges and the reflections of university students in a South African gay and lesbian study. While a six-year difference exists between these two studies, each found that homophobia, heterosexism, counselling services for queer individuals, and cultural norms represent barriers to sexual minority identity formation. This section of the literature review is organized in the following fashion: (a) gay male realities within post-secondary learning environments and (b) perceived barriers and supports in the establishment of healthy gay identities.

Gay Male Realities within Post-Secondary Learning Environments

The post-secondary experience can be the first opportunity for young gay men to focus on their gay identity development. Evans (2001) stated,

The college years are a time of self-exploration, personal growth, and determination of the roles on will assume in society. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students face the added challenge of resolving issues related to their sexual orientation. Until students develop a sense of themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual people, addressing the other developmental tasks is difficult…without support, the development of a healthy identity is particularly challenging. (p. 181)

Alderson (2005) asserts that presenting concerns related to positive gay identity development
stem from “having deeply entrenched internalized homophobia and witnessing how gay people are both minimized and denigrated in society” (p. 458). Combined with the varying elements of harassment, discrimination, and lack of support that occurs within higher learning environments, this often results in further struggles with individual self-concept and identity (Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000). The theme of searching for a cultural or group identity is one that can be observed throughout the literature (Schneider, 2001; Welch, 1997). A study by Rhoads (1995) found eight central themes in the experiences of young gay men in post-secondary learning environments: (a) personal struggles and social expectations, (b) self-acknowledgement, (c) self-disclosure, (d) disclosure to the queer community, (e) disclosure to others, (f) establishment of group and cultural memberships, and (g) the seeking of balance between individual and group identity maintenance.

Welch (1997) stated that his research illustrated the “salient issues regarding the need for family support, peer socialization, and interaction with positive role models” (p. 27). The need for this support is clearly outlined in Bowen and Bourgeois (2001), “Negative attitudes toward minority groups, including LGB students, may result in these individuals’ experiencing limited identity development, low self-esteem, mental health problems, violence, and death” (p. 91). Social support often plays a significant role in the wellness process of individuals experiencing life stressors (Sarafino, 2002). A strong correlation between sexual orientation and depression, loneliness, and suicide has been identified in gay male college students (Westefeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001). In addition, studies have suggested that young gay men in college and university are more likely than young heterosexual men to exhibit substance abuse behaviours (DeBord, Wood, Sher, & Glenn, 1998; McCabe, Boyd, Hughes, & d’Arcy, 2003)
The establishment of queer friendly support networks is essential in the development of a positive gay identity and sense of community (Dietz & Dettlaff, 1997; Welch, 1997). The literature is clear; despite ongoing efforts throughout North America, young gay men in post-secondary learning environments are still in positions of increased vulnerability (Harley et al., 2002). Evans and D’Augelli (1996) found that gay students face numerous personal and interpersonal struggles resulting from: (a) campus climate, (b) developmental issues, (c) environmental issues, and (d) access to services. These four themes appear prevalent within residence living environments (Evans & Broido, 2002). Watkins (1998) asserts that “the university environment is neither consistently safe for, nor tolerant of, nor academically inclusive of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals” (p. 271). Sherrill and Hardesty (1994) and Rankin (2003) found factors such as stress and harassment rendered GLBT students at-risk for early withdrawal from post-secondary studies. Clearly, despite numerous efforts to improve and support the individual and group experiences of gay men in university and college settings, numerous barriers still exist in the establishment and maintenance of a positive gay identity.

**Perceived Barriers and Supports**

The identification of perceived barriers and supports for young gay men, as well as other sexual minorities in higher learning, is essential to gain more meaningful insights into the identity formation and maintenance process. Accessibility and research of a scholarly nature surrounding services that address the unique experiences and issues of young gay men in post-secondary learning is limited (Eardley, 2002). Rhoads (1995) stated, “Student affairs professionals should develop strategies to raise issues that affect the lives of gay and bisexual students in order to bring the underlying tensions to the surface” (p. 67). Clearly, homophobia and heterosexism must be addressed at all levels within post-secondary
institutions (Evans, 2001; Evans & Broido, 1999, 2002). Attitudes, acceptance, and alienation of heterosexual peers toward their non-heterosexual counterparts have been noted as both social and academic barriers (Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2003; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Hogan & Rentz, 1996; Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999). Heterosexism and homophobia impact post-secondary campus communities by discouraging the expression of non-heterosexual identities thereby limiting the overall multicultural experience of all community members (Watkins, 1998).

Murphy (1992) argued that many mental health professionals are unable to serve the needs of gay and lesbian clients, pointing to poor education and social biases as the definitive culprits. Robertson (1998) reported that internalized homophobia, social difficulties, and fear of being viewed as abnormal, resulted in limited access to adequate mental health services. Homophobia and heterosexism are present in all aspects of health care (Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition, 2004; Ryan, 2003; Ryan & Chervin, 2000). As stated by McKee and colleagues (1994), college health services “must expand their scope and practice and assume a leadership role in combating all forms of oppression by actively incorporating and addressing the unique health issues and needs of the lesbian, bisexual, and gay population” (p. 211). In order to be truly humane and effective in meeting the mental health needs of young gay men, campus health services must move beyond mere tolerance (Wall & Evans, 2000) and build confirmatory alliances with queer communities (Keeling, 1998; Lee, 2000; Scarce, 1999; Van Den Broek, 2005).

The establishment of queer visibility on campus and affirmative leadership are essential components in creating positive supports for young gay men in post-secondary learning environments (Bauder, 1998; Matheney, 1998; Porter, 1998). Evans (2002) found
that the creation of queer friendly zones, enabling students and faculty to visibly
“demonstrate their acceptance of LGBT people via a sticker, button, or sign…raising
awareness of LGBT issues and in encouraging allies to become more active in their support
of LGBT students” (p. 522). The research by Evans (2002) found numerous positive
outcomes: (a) increased visibility, (b) improved support, (c) changed image, (d) attitudinal
shifts, (e) affirmation and support, (f) honest and open communication, and (g) validation.
Through the creation of welcoming and affirming environments, Stevens (2004) found that
young gay men experienced increased levels of empowerment on both intrapersonal and
interpersonal levels. Multicultural post-secondary learning environments that recognize and
celebrate the young gay male experience “will help to create educational environments in
which everyone thrives” (Sanlo, 2005, p. 3).

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter reviewed several key areas of the literature that corroborate the scholarly
importance of this qualitative research study. Gay male students in post-secondary learning
environments are presented with numerous challenges in the psychosocial development of
positive gay identities. While a summary of the literature leads to numerous observations and
suggestions for meeting the overall needs of young gay men in post-secondary learning
environments, very little research of a qualitative nature offers insights into the unique
experiences of such individuals. One central conclusion suggests that despite the numerous
efforts that exist across North America, access to multiculturally relevant services still
remains a central barrier to academic, social, and mental health wellness for young gay men
engaged in post-secondary studies. As asserted by Sanlo (1998), “It is no longer a matter of
whether to provide services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students; it is
a matter of when” (p. xvii). In order to meet the mental health needs of young gay men in college and university settings, we must turn to their individual experiences to gain rich and culturally relevant perspectives for change.
CHAPTER III

Procedures

Rousseau once stated, “She had some experience of the world, and the capacity for reflection that makes such experience profitable” (as cited in Frank, 2001, p. 260). In this chapter, I present the methodology I used in this study to allow participants to share their personal life experiences and self-reflections in a manner that benefits the field of counselling psychology. As stated in Smith (2003a), “Qualitative approaches in psychology are generally engaged with exploring, describing and interpreting the personal and social experiences of participants” (p. 2). The presentation and organization of methodological perspectives are often the pillars of strength to the overall organization and carrying out of research (McLeod, 2003). Sandelowski and Barroso (2004) suggested specified headings for organizing the methodology section of a qualitative study. Hence, I used the following headings to outline the procedures used: (a) participant recruitment; (b) role of the participants; (c) role of the researcher; (d) data collection and management; (e) considerations of reliability and validity; and (f) analysis of data. This section will lay the groundwork for Chapters Four and Five of this study.

Participant Recruitment

In the initial stages of planning this research initiative, I hoped to have access to numerous counselling settings in post-secondary institutions as a means of recruiting potential participants for this study. This idea proved to be far more difficult than I had anticipated, as each college and university that I was prepared to approach had their own individual requirements for accessing potential participants within their counselling settings. Hence, for the purpose of this study, with the guidance of my supervisor, I decided to focus
on one specific location for recruiting purposes. After receiving written approval to recruit participants from this setting, I placed a poster (Appendix A) in three highly visible locations within this setting.

In my previous research (Roughley, 1998, 1999, 2000) I used a purposeful sampling technique known as criterion sampling, to attract potential participants. Patton (1990) defined criterion sampling as the “picking of all cases that meet some criterion” (p. 183). As this method proved to be highly successful in my previous work, I decided to use it again in this study. The explicit criterion for participation in this study was threefold. First, participants were to be self-identified gay men between the ages of 18 and 25. Second, each participant was required to have a history of at least five mental health counselling sessions within a post-secondary learning environment. Finally, each participant was required to have been a self-identified gay man and open about his sexual orientation with others for a period of at least one-year.

Role of the Participants

Participants are at the heart of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interested participants for this study contacted me by removing a tab containing my contact information from the advertisement poster. When each potential participant contacted me, I initiated a pre-screening telephone interview, lasting at most fifteen minutes, in order to: (a) discuss the proposed study in greater detail (including obtaining informed consent), (b) respond to any necessary questions that the potential participant had, and (c) schedule a time for his individual interview. Over the period of one month, six individuals contacted me about the study. A total of four chose to continue as participants. It was through an in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured interview, that each participant was asked to provide personal
insights into his past and current post-secondary counselling experiences and mental health concerns. Participant profiles can be found in Appendix B.

Each participant was asked to: (a) complete one semi-structured interview and (b) review interview transcripts for clarity and authenticity post-transcription. Each interview ranged from 90 to 120 minutes. Once I transcribed each interview, the documents were sent to each participant for his review. Upon approval and completion of this final task, the participants’ commitment to the data collection and analyses process was considered complete. The total time commitment for each participant was between three to six hours.

Role of the Researcher

According to McMillan and Schumacher (1997), the role of the qualitative researcher is to “become immersed in the situation and phenomenon being studied” (p. 392). Thus, in my role as the principle investigator, I was responsible for planning, recruiting, and moderating, as well as analyzing and reporting the data collected (Morse & Field, 1995). Furthermore, in protecting each participant’s well-being, my central role beyond the research process was to offer referral to local mental health services within their geographic locations, where appropriate. While participants were informed of my occupation, I clearly stipulated that our conversations would be for research purposes only and that counselling would not be offered (Robson, 2002). McLeod (2003) argued that:

Qualitative research is frequently criticized on the grounds of researchers using these methods merely find what they already know…the main investigative tool in qualitative research is the person of the researcher, and his or ability to form relationships with informants [participants] that encourage the disclosure and expression of relevant data (pp. 94-95).
According to Mason (2002), qualitative interviewing requires a process of asking, listening, and interpreting. At the core of the interview experience is a purpose that is “conversational, flexible and fluid, and the purpose is achieved through active engagement by interviewer and interviewee around relevant issues, topics and experiences during the interview itself” (p. 225). The establishment of trust between researcher and study participant was essential in meeting the research goals in this study.

After reviewing research on building a working alliance and establishing trustworthy relationships (Adkins, 2002; Coffey, 2002, Kleinman, 2002; Skeggs, 2002), I integrated my own self-reflexive process of journaling to engage in my own narration of the research experience. Haney (2002) offered a thought-provoking and convincing argument about the politics of reflexivity in feminist social science. She stated, “For many of them [feminist social scientists], reflexivity has served as a powerful methodological tool…[enabling] them to be more sensitive to the power relations embedded in the research process” (p. 297).

Gerson and Horowitz (2002) emphasized “qualitative researchers are routinely concerned not only with objective measurable facts or events, but also with ways that people construct, interpret and give meaning to these experiences” (p. 199). Through my own journaling process, I was able to explore my own meanings and the subsequent interpretations of the data collected. A sample journal entry can be found in Appendix C.

Significant care and social responsibility was taken in my role of researcher to ensure ethical treatment of all participants and a genuine respect for the research process (American Psychological Association, 2002; Schultz, 2000; Sinclair & Pettifor, 2001). Glesne (1999) and Patton (2002) discussed the professional issues surrounding ethical considerations within the context of the participant’s involvement in research. He divided his arguments into the
following categories: (a) consider the informants first, (b) safeguard informants’ rights and interests, (c) communicate research objectives, (d) protect the privacy of informants, (e) do not exploit informants, and (f) make reports available to informants. I took all of these considerations into account in this study. The consent form (Appendix D) for this study informed the participant of his rights and also guaranteed him confidentiality. Each participant was granted access to notes, transcripts, and audio recordings upon request. Kimmel (2004) reinforced the quintessence of ethical practice: “To ensure the protection and welfare of participants, review boards typically attempt to ascertain that the anticipated benefits of an investigation are greater than any risks posed and that informed consent procedures are adequate” (p. 63).

Data Collection and Management

Involvement for each participant in this study involved the following: (a) a pre-screening interview, (b) semi-structured interview, and (c) review of the interview transcripts. The data collection process began after each participant provided consent at the beginning of the in-person interview. Questions and areas for exploration for the semi-structured interview can be found in Appendix E. Semi-structured interviews are among the most widely used tools in qualitative research (Dearly, 2005). Williams (2002) and Miller (2004) suggested that paying close attention to the cultural relevance of the questions used in qualitative research is essential in capturing the true quintessence of individuality and worldview. I audio recorded and transcribed each interview in this study myself. Once transcribed, participants were sent copies of the interview to verify the overall accuracy of the discussion and to add any additional information to their responses that they deemed essential in offering clarity and authenticity to their stories. Each participant returned any corrections or
comments within a one to two week timeframe.

Throughout the data collection process, I maintained detailed field notes by documenting my ideas, further areas for potential exploration, and central assumptions related to the research questions. According to Glesne (1999),

After each day of participant observation, the qualitative researcher takes time for reflective and analytic noting. This is the time to write down feelings, work out problems, jot down ideas and impressions, clarify earlier interpretations, speculate about what is going on, and make flexible short- and long-term plans for the days to come. (p. 53)

The process of completing field documents proved beneficial in reflecting on question phrasing, clarification of data, and areas of exploration for future research endeavors. A sample field-note can be found in Appendix F.

Considerations of Reliability and Validity

According to Ely (1991), “the major purpose of the in-depth interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed” (p. 58). Since the central focus of my study is the individual’s self-perception, I believe that it is logical to assert that the use of a qualitative research methodology is the most effective method to gather and analyze data about self-awareness and personal life experiences. Addressing the importance of reliability and validity is essential in establishing the trustworthiness and integrity of the research process (Roughley, 2000; Smith 2003b). Several factors pertaining to reliability and validity apply to this study (Patton, 2002). I will discuss each of these constructs in turn.
Reliability

Reliability refers to “the degree to which repeated observation of a phenomenon – the same phenomenon at different times, or the same instance of the phenomenon by two different observers – yields similar results” (Palys, 1997, p. 424). In other words, is the data credible? According to McDougall (1993), two main threats to credibility exist with a qualitative research study: (a) subjectivity of the researcher and (b) the use of verbal reports as data. The research by Morse and Field (1985) acknowledges a certain level of risk that exists in using interviews as a data collection source. Specifically, the attention must be paid to participant trustworthiness and whether or not the participant will respond with complete authenticity to the questions being explored. In order to attempt to counteract these two central threats to reliability, I used field notes as a means of acknowledging and processing the biases, assumptions, and subjective factors that I brought to the research analysis process. As well, I called upon each participant to review their individual transcripts to further enhance the credibility of the data collected.

Validity

Validity refers to “whether research measures what the researcher thinks is being measured.” (Palys, 1997, p. 428). In other words, is the data trustworthy? As the researcher, I implemented three data collection strategies to enhance validity, including: (a) participant review, (b) mechanically recorded data, and (c) note-taking. As I am a gay man studying at the post-secondary level, researcher bias was a potential issue in the data collection and analyses (Mertens, 1998). In order to decrease this risk, I completed a field log and reflection journal following each interview, as well as throughout the data coding process, as a means of taking into account concerns related to the decision-making processes, suggestions for
alterations of future interview formats, and other issues pertaining to ethics, audibility, as well as emotional and personal responses to the data collection process. By employing these methods, the overall validity of the data gathered was strengthened. Such tools were essential for me, especially given my personal context and sensitivity related to the research topic. Patton (2002) provided an interesting thought when he asserted, “Validity is a property of knowledge, not methods. No matter whether knowledge comes from an ethnography or an experiment, we may still ask the same questions about the ways in which that knowledge is valid” (p. 587). Hence, the question remains: Does validity represent a scientific or social phenomenon?

Data Analyses

The major assumption driving the analysis of data is that inquiry is structured by discovery of social and or psychological processes (Patton, 2002). The nature of qualitative research brings into perspective the humanistic worth of both individual and group-based experiences (Roughley, 2000). According to Morrow, Rakhsha, and Castaneda (2001), qualitative research aims to contextualize, understand, and seek insights into each participant’s experiences and perspectives within a cultural framework. The cultural and contextual sensitivity of the method represented the central reasoning behind the use of semi-structured interviews and the subsequent data analysis process.

Qualitative research methods are widely used in diverse disciplines (Ashworth, 2003; King, 2004; McLeod, 1996). According to Sherman and Webb (as cited in Ely, 1991), qualitative research can be viewed as a “direct concern with experience as it is lived or felt or undergone…qualitative research then, has the aim of understanding [the experience] as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it” (p. 5). Through the careful review of the
narrative data collected, I analyzed each interview (each participant’s life experiences) for pertinent information related to the mental health experiences and challenges of young gay men studying at post-secondary institutions.

I used three forms of coding in the data analysis process: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. I will discuss each in turn. Patton (2002) argues, “Developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step in analysis” (p. 463). The first step that I used in the data analysis process is referred to as open-coding, or “the part of the analysis that pertains to naming and categorizing phenomena through the close examination of data” (Mertens, 1998, p. 352). The second step, axial coding plays the role of putting the data set “back together by making connections between a category and its sub-categories…[it is] the process of developing main categories and their sub-categories” (Pandit, 1996, p. 5). In the third and final stage of the coding process, I used selective coding, “the process of selecting one, main core theme and relating the other categories to it” (Mertens, 1998, p. 352). The results of this coding process are reflected in Chapter Five where the central themes and sub-themes that emerged are identified and discussed.

Throughout the analysis process, I employed a method of cross-referencing the study data with existing scholarly research. This allowed me to focus and shape the study and its emerging themes, patterns, and theoretical frameworks (Mertens, 1998). The process of analysis was accomplished according to the categories and themes that emerged from the interviews rather than being pre-imposed on the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Each statement in all of the interviews, fieldnotes, and memos was coded and numbered for classification purposes. For example, 1R28 refers to interview 1, participant Rob, and line 28 of the transcript (King, 2004). In this case, the research analysis sought to highlight both the
commonalities and unique experiences and concerns of young gay men in post-secondary educational settings and then to identify some of the implications of these issues for educational and counselling services.

The methodological procedures discussed throughout this chapter yielded data that were both rich and copious in nature. The interviews and the subsequent means of exploring and reflecting upon the conversations with each participant brought forth significant meaning and understanding to the mental health needs of young gay men in post-secondary education. The strengths and limitations of the procedures used in this study will be explored in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER IV

Findings

In this chapter, I outline the four core thematic areas and the subsequent sub-themes that emerged in my analysis of the interviews with the four participants in this study. First, I provide a brief introduction to each participant. Second, I discuss the four central themes: (a) identity development and maintenance; (b) higher learning and the academy: inside and out; (c) shared and individual experiences: young gay men and cultural expression; and (d) the counselling process: finding meaning. Each theme represents key milestones that describe the individual and collective experiences of each participant and the group as a whole. Within each theme, sub-themes exist that place into context the true qualitative nature of this study. Each theme and ensuing sub-themes will be explored using key excerpts from the data collection process. In the final section of this chapter, I summarize the findings of the data collection and analysis and link the core themes back to the research questions.

Introducing the Participants

In this section of the chapter, I offer a general introduction to the four participants whose individual stories and experiences are reflected through the qualitative nature of this study. The ages of the four men who participated in this study ranged from 21 to 25 years of age. While each of the participants had a history of counselling interventions, none were engaged in a therapeutic alliance at the time of my interview. The four participants represented a broad span of academic and cultural identities. Participants self-identified as belonging to the following ethnic groups and nationalities: (a) mixed ethnicity (Spanish, East Indian, and Chinese), (b) Asian, and (c) Caucasian. Pseudonyms are used below to protect the identity of the participants.
Charles

At the time of our interview, Charles was a 24-year-old gay man in a graduate studies program. Born in a major urban centre in central Canada, Charles came from a close-knit family that immigrated to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago. Charles stated that he came from a family that was rich in culture and ethnicity. Specifically, he commented, “I am mix ethnicity. I consider myself to be one-third Spanish, one-third Indian, and one-third Chinese” (1C6-7). His post-secondary experiences included both college and university studies. Throughout his higher learning years, Charles reported that he embarked on a journey into self-awareness and positive gay identity development. Part of his journey included approximately 28 sessions of counselling. As an active participant in the residence life movement at numerous post-secondary institutes, Charles has taken on a leadership and educational role in promoting awareness of the impacts of homophobia and heterosexism on the GLBTT and university communities as a whole.

David

At the time of our interview, David was a 25-year-old Caucasian gay man studying at the graduate level. Born in one of Canada’s prairie provinces, David was reared in a family with strong fundamentalist Evangelical Christian roots. In the early stages of our interview he reflected on his early and adolescent years:

I grew up in a heavily Christian environment. When I lived at home with my parents, we went to Church a number of times during the week. As a child we read the bible on a daily basis. I lived in a very sheltered environment. (1D41-43)

After leaving home for post-secondary studies, David explored studies in the fields of music therapy and psychology. David referred to himself as both a militant and advocate for queer
rights. Throughout his studies at universities in central Canada and Ontario, David turned to counselling services for assistance with his academic and identity concerns; he reported visiting two different therapists on approximately 12 occasions. He is currently one of the only openly gay men in his faculty and attributes his current studies to his own personal journey, as well as the influences of his two counselling practitioners.

_Ethan_

At the time of our interview, Ethan was a 21-year-old Caucasian gay male studying music and drama education at the undergraduate level. Born and raised in central Canada, David was raised primarily by his mother in what he referred to as a lovely and supportive home. David, like many other young gay man, explored his authentic sexual orientation during his first year in university. For David, part of coming out to himself and receiving the acceptance of others, stemmed from external support networks, as well as his own innate sense of social responsibility to educate and encourage others to create learning environments based on mutual respect and affirmative practices. David credits both his first year university residence don and the counselling services at his university for assisting him with his academic struggles and gay identity development endeavors. He reported using the counselling centre services at his university on approximately 13 occasions.

_Mack_

At the time of our interview, Mack was a 21-year-old gay man born in a large urban city in central Canada to first generation immigrant parents from Singapore. Unlike the other participants in this study, Mack first came out to himself and a friend at the young age of 15. For Mack, an undergraduate student, labeling himself as gay was only part of his identity formation struggles. His efforts to find balance between his numerous cultural identities and
worldviews have resulted in varying elements of marginalization. He stated that he often struggles to find his place in both the queer and Asian communities at his university; he simply does not fit in. Despite this reality, Mack is an active participant in educational undertakings to support the GLBTT communities at his university by facilitating discussion groups and training residence life staff members and first-year orientation leaders. Overall, he stated, “I think that I have a pretty positive view of myself as a gay person” (1M27). He reported attending approximately 8 counselling sessions throughout his second and third years of post-secondary studies.

Themes and Sub-themes

The analysis process of this study yielded four central themes, with numerous sub-themes in each category. By completing the analysis of the interviews, it quickly became apparent that within the unique perspectives of each participant existed a diverse echoing of the very phenomenon of being a young gay man in a post-secondary learning environment. I am drawn to the words of Patton (2002), who articulately stated:

Qualitative data describe. They take us, as readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to be there. They capture and communicate someone else’s experience of the world in his or her own words. Qualitative data tell a story. (p. 47).

It was through the sharing of each story and experience that the issues pertaining to gay identity development, marginalization, acceptance, meaning, and support were witnessed. In the discussion that follows, I will present four key themes and sub-themes that place into context the unique and collective experiences of the participants in this study. Each will be discussed in turn. For the purpose of ensuring faithfulness to the data collected, the interview
Theme One: Identity Development and Maintenance

As it is clearly documented in the literature, the process of identity development and maintenance for gay men often represents significant milestones in the establishment of a core sense of self (Stone & Harvey, 2005). When asked about their individual experiences in forming their gay identities, each participant provided a personalized interpretation of the meaning of identity. Within this theme exploration, three sub-themes emerged: (a) coming out to self, (b) coming out to friends and family, and (c) the establishment of a positive gay identity.

The discussion of identity, and its development and maintenance, brought forth some interesting interpretations and defining moments that led to each participant defining what it means to be a gay man. All of the participants identified with the element of process and the subsequent challenges and triumphs that resulted from their individual journeys. For instance, such experiences included appreciating the multi-faceted nature of being a gay man. Key areas included: (a) identifying and understanding the layers that exist in the establishment and preservation of identity, (b) challenging stereotypes and acceptance of self, (c) embracing the freedom that exists in living with an authentic sense of self, and (d) questioning the labels in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity formation.

Charles, for example, stated:

There are so many layers to being gay. Being gay means so many things from differing perspectives in society. Being gay to me means that I can love another guy. What it comes down to is the expression of this love through physical interaction, emotional attachment, and through so many other areas of whom I am. (1C15-18)
Being open about himself and being able to share his love for his male partner is essential for Charles in maintaining his positive gay identity.

When asked about his gay identity and its subsequent maintenance, David expressed that:

Being gay is something I think about a lot. I would say that it is part of my identity. But I think I sometimes struggle with how big a part of my identity it really should be… being gay I am immediately confronted by certain gay stereotypes and some of these influences how I think of myself and how I live my life. For example, I sense a certain amount of pressure as a young gay man to stay in good shape, to dress well, to cultivate a discriminating taste in food and wine, etc. To a certain degree I have incorporated these things into my identity, and they certainly influence how I live my life. (1D9-16)

The evaluation of gay stereotypes and the role that being a gay man played in David’s overall identity development appeared to be an ongoing issue in David’s life.

For Ethan, identity development represents a metamorphosis or sense of autonomy from the dominant culture expectations. Being mindful and accountable as an openly gay man was very importance to Ethan. He stated:

Being gay means being able to express yourself as an individual and to be free. To actually be able to tell yourself that this is who I am, to another person just like a straight person would. I also think that it does invoke a certain degree of responsibility; especially in today’s time to be proactive about it. I think that that is really important to me. (1E10-13)

As an openly gay man, Ethan felt it necessary to advocate on behalf of others and to take a proactive role in mentoring and supporting others in their exploration of sexual orientation.
Mack offered an eclectic perspective on his identity development and his attempt to manage societal labels. As a gay Chinese man, he has been confronted with numerous labels and societal stereotypes about both his ethnic origins and sexual orientation. For Mack, his use of labels is for the benefit of others.

I have never really liked labels or whatever. However, because I am attracted to other men, have sex with other men, and just for the sake of other people, I call myself gay. Just because it is easier and it is the most precise name tag that I can put on myself.

That is what I think of being gay. (1M7-10)

During our interview, it became very clear that Mack adopts one core identity - the self - and that his continuous challenging of societal labels is an act of advocacy in managing social stigmatization.

*Sub-theme A: Coming out to self.* Each participant’s journey into self-discovery included the processes of exploring previously learned social norms and expectations, challenging internalized homophobia, and struggling to meet and adhere to familial expectations. All four participants acknowledged the difficulties experienced during the initial stages of coming out to themselves and the developmental moments that marked this coming of age. Key areas that emerged from the interviews included: (a) making an informed choice to be true to self, (b) transitioning from bisexuality to identifying as a gay man, (c) needing support in the confrontation of peer pressure and self-acceptance, and (d) challenging internal and external messages surrounding dominant culture discourse.

During our interview, Charles reflected upon the decision he made to be open to himself and live his life as an openly gay man. After coming out to himself, Charles decided that in order to maintain his impetus, he needed to be openly gay with all of his co-workers.
and classmates. Charles reminisced:

The first day that I was there, I made a conscious decision that I was going to live my life openly regardless of what anyone else thought. The pivotal moment occurred during my staff training. We had to come up with a resume for our team members. Someone turned to me and asked me what is your favorite song? I lied and said, “It’s Raining Men” and everyone looked at me for a second and we moved on. We actually sang this song for a skit because we had to present it afterwards. So, from that day forward that was who I was and it was never questioned. (1C55-61)

Hence, for Charles, coming out to himself meant forging forward and being authentic and consistent in his workplace and learning environments.

For David, the process of coming out to himself required a reflective awareness that questioned the status quo and his strong religious upbringing. David, in the process of exploring his sexual orientation, identified as bisexual. He stated:

How did I come to define myself as gay? That was my ------ University stage when I first haphazardly identified with new people as initially bisexual, with my coming to eventually identify as gay, partly because people don’t believe you when you are a male who identifies as bisexual. Partly because I realized that my orientation is towards men, at least given where I’m at right now. That was it at ------. Then moving to ------ from the outset I was very open and then everybody knows and I discuss it freely. So I suppose you could say that I have come to identify myself as gay first through internally to myself, and then in a widening circle of friends. (1D62-69)

David’s exploration of his sexual orientation took place within two university environments, both with their own unique perspectives on sexuality. At his first university, David felt
elements of consternation about the response that he would receive from his peers and professors. The political climate of the second university he attended allowed him to explore his sexual orientation in an open and supportive environment. For David, this was the turning point in his coming out to himself as a gay man.

Ethan’s process of coming out to himself represented a difficult journey that impacted both his mental health well being and his academic achievements. For Ethan, exploring his sexual orientation and having a support network established took precedence over his university studies. Ethan turned to his residence don for support and affirmation, which assisted him in accepting himself as a gay man. Ethan remembered:

Support before I even came out was very important. The support was pretty constant for that year when I lived in residence. I think that support was almost fostered by my don. He knew that I needed the help, so he was there. He actively tried to be there; whereas, I don’t necessarily believe that that happens, where people look out for other people to that degree. It was very nice. It was very warm and caring. How often are you going to arrive to university, you aren’t even out and luck behold you have a gay don? Its luck! It was just a godsend! I really don’t know how I would have gotten through that year. (1E281-288)

For Ethan, having the support of others allowed him to be true to himself and to establish a future mentorship role in assisting others with their individual coming out processes.

Like the other three participants, Mack’s self-acknowledgment as a gay man represented a very demanding time in his life. For Mack, he was confronted with a history of dominant culture discourse surrounding Chinese and gay men, as well as his cultural perspectives surrounding what it meant to be gay. Mack spoke of the moment he first
acknowledged to himself that he may have been gay:

Coming out for me was very difficult. I remember the first time that I realized that I wasn’t regular…you know like the regular heterosexual. I think that I was watching television and then hearing about the topic of gay issues and something just clicked in my head. It was like, “Maybe I like men, and maybe I am gay?” That was probably the most impactful part of coming out…admitting it to myself. (1M15-19)

Admitting to himself that he was gay required Mack to negotiate essential boundaries with himself about his disclosure of his gay identity to others.

Sub-theme B: Coming out to friends and family. All four participants acknowledged distress and trepidation in their initial decisions to come out to their friends and families. Two of the participants took note of religious concerns that censored them from disclosing their gay identities. Two other participants disclosed that cultural expectations, in combination with other factors, had significant impacts on their abilities to communicate and assimilate their gay identities with their other worldviews. During the time of the data collection process, two participants (Charles and Ethan) were out to their families. For each participant, coming out to their family was or still remains a major hurdle in their identity formation. All four participants are out to their friends and colleagues.

Charles offered a poignant reflection of his feelings both before and after coming out to his family and friends:

I think that my family would have to be one of the most impactful elements in my identity development. Having the whole process of not being out to them and having to grow from that and subsequently coming out and having their support now. I believe that my family plays a huge role in my self-identity of how I formed over time. My
culture, earlier on when there was such self-hatred that came from my religion [being Roman Catholic]…all of theses things presented very challenging circumstances. All of these things lead me to eventually have to force myself to look inward and ask important questions and be realistic. (1C221-228)

The exploration of his cultural, religious, and family roots significantly impacted Charles’ ability to self-identify as a gay man to his family and ethnic community. His subsequent evaluation of his religious upbringing allowed Charles to make an informed decision to live a life of unconditional self-love instead of the self-hatred that he had previously felt in his life. By coming out to himself, Charles is now open with his family and has secured their acknowledgment and support of him as a gay man.

Like Charles, David’s ability to be open with his family has been censured by their strong religious roots. To be out to his family could mean numerous potential outcomes of a detrimental nature. David offered the following reflection of his childhood and adolescence:

My family is fundamentalist evangelical Christians and I grew up in a heavily Christian environment. I went to a Christian school since I was in grade three to grade twelve. When I lived at home with my parents, we went to church a number of times during the week. As a child we read the bible on a daily basis. Of course it is not a very queer positive environment to say the least. This of course is a conflict and a major family issue, my future coming out to them and stuff like that. (1D40-46)

For David, being away at university has allowed him the opportunity to be open about his sexual orientation with his peers, friends, and colleagues. In contrast, when he returns home for visits, he retreats into the closet as a means of preventing the outcomes that might exist if he were to be out as a gay man to his family.
Ethan’s experience coming out to his friends and family spanned three months during his first year of university studies. Ethan spoke of a mass of emotions that were building up inside of him, leaving him with what he referred to as no choice but to come out as an act of self-care. He stated:

I couldn’t handle it [the need to come out to everybody] was starting to drive me crazy. This grew all of the way until the end of the first semester. On December first, during the exam period, I completely lost it and came out to a friend in high school over the phone. I couldn’t study at all. So, that was rough. I simply didn’t care anymore because I had so much other stuff going on. I was coming out to my friends and in February I came out to my mother. It was just a really busy personal time for me. Hence, the academics suffered because I really needed to take care of myself. (1E247-254)

The fear that Ethan once felt about the potential reactions from his family and friends was quickly diminished by ongoing, unconditional love and support.

Mack’s experience of coming out to friends and family significantly mirrors David’s experience. Mack is completely open about his gay identity to his friends and fellow students at university; however, he is not out to his family. For Mack, doing so could have some severe consequences:

To other people it was difficult to get over the verbal barrier in terms of coming out. It was sort of uncomfortable saying it. After a while I just became used to it and now I am more or less ambivalent. I am out to everyone with the exception of my parents. My brother knows, and some of my extended family knows. All of my friends know…every Tom, Dick and Harry. Education wise, I am not out to my parents. This allows them to live in a happy denial. This way they fork over the money for my
education. I really hope that they would keep supporting me financially if I were openly gay to them. Part of the reason that I haven’t come out to them because of a fear that they would cut me off. (1M23-31)

For the time being, Mack has grown comfortable with the notion of retreating into an environment of “happy denial” when he returns home for visits and family functions. For Mack, this is an act of self-care and a means of survival. Being openly gay with his family could mean the end to his university career.

Sub-theme C: Positive gay identity: “Normalcy” versus “being queer.” In the process of establishing their positive gay identities, each participant brought forth individual experiences related to challenging the notion of what society deems as normal. All four participants reported that the messages and observations experienced throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, placed significant barriers in their coming out process. Each participant provided insights into the means by which the closet reinforces dominant culture expectations and further marginalizes individuals into categories. All four participants expressed a preference for individualism or queerness and being different, over returning to the talons of the closest. As Mack stated, “If there is an extra label of being strange or not normal, people feel further isolated and marginalized” (1M235). Clearly, for each participant, the transition from feeling the need to be normal to being exceptional and not subscribing to societal expectations represents a marked celebration in the development of a positive gay identity.

During our interview, Charles spent a significant portion of our discussion expressing the messages that he received as both a closeted and openly gay man. He recalled one specific situation in residence when he was not out as a gay man:
I once heard some say, “Gay people are freaks”! Another time I heard people say things like gay people shouldn’t be allowed in university. It was particularly interesting to see how they reacted to the people who were out. I remember that there was one guy in my residence in first year that was out. By not being out, I was in that buffer where I could hear what was going on behind the scenes. A lot of people made fun of him and made some really mean comments. He wanted to bring his partner to our formal…I thought that it was a fabulous idea! However, people thought that it was a horrible idea, followed by numerous snide comments. This made the environment very uncomfortable for those in the closet, to come out! (1C166-174)

Clearly for Charles, environments such as the one he discussed above were not conducive to the acknowledgment and celebration of a gay identity. None-the-less, having experiences such as this reinforced to him the importance of self-advocacy, esteem, and efficacy in the maintenance of a positive gay identity and the challenging of homophobia and heterosexism in college and university settings.

When asked about the establishment of a positive gay identity, David spoke candidly about his sense of loss of identity based on the messages and expectations that were placed upon him by his family and society as a whole.

I suppose that it is not looking at what you lose by being gay because clearly you lose some things. We lose the chance to be “normal” and marry a woman and have kids and live a very traditional lifestyle and go unquestioned in that aspect of your life. There is a level of comfort, a level of mainstream-ness that clearly a person loses. I think a positive gay identity is not looking at that but rather looking at what we gain. The unique aspects of gay culture, the fact that in this day and age we can realistically hope
to have a long-term partnership or marriage with a person of the same sex and establish a life together with another person and to be reasonably well accepted by a large part of society. This is a positive gay identity for me. (1D72-80)

In his transition from feeling the need to meet the expectations of others to focusing on the opportunities that exist within himself, David managed to find a sense of equilibrium in establishment of a positive gay identity.

Ethan’s expression of a positive gay identity represents an observance of his non-dominant sexual orientation. For him, being a gay male represents only a portion of what he deems as identity formation. According to Ethan, he can maintain numerous identities while being an active member in queer culture. He stated:

The fact that I am celebrating an alternative to heterosexuality defines my membership. I am celebrating the idea of ambiguity and individualism and not a label. I am exceptional in my own right. (1E478-480)

Ethan’s celebration of his gay identity has resulted from what he referred to as increased levels of self-esteem and self-concept.

Theme Two: Higher Learning and the Academy: Inside and Out

As stated in the literature, the transition from secondary to post-secondary learning offers many gay men unique opportunities to engage in self and cultural explorations (DeBord & Perez, 2000). When discussing their initial perceptions of attending university as gay men, either in or out of the closet, three sub-themes became apparent: (a) university and sexual identity exploration; (b) discovery of self within the academy: role models; and (c) homophobia and heterosexism: stigma versus affirmation. Each of these sub-themes will be explored and discussed in turn.
Each participant’s discussions about his initial perceptions of going to university and the subsequent journey thereafter reflected times of fear and anxiety, as well as cultural and academic misunderstandings. In order to be out of the closet, all four participants would have required a specific skills set for coping and self-affirmation. Each participant openly acknowledged and processed numerous situations on campus where they experienced homophobia and heterosexism firsthand. Charles spoke of his worry of being ex-communicated from his academic faculty and friends:

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One of the magnitude experiences I had was the fear of being rejected by the university society that I was in within the post-secondary environment. This includes the students, faculty, and even the people that were in the cafeteria. I remember one person in particular that just seemed to have negative views about gays. They would make comments that would make me feel uncomfortable and not safe in various environments. (1C132-137)
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Clearly for Charles, issues surrounding safety and wellness impacted his ability to feel at ease in specific settings where his sexual orientation would represent grounds for scrutiny. For Charles, this compromised his mental health because he learned that in order to be safe, he would have to retreat back into the closet or potentially suffer physical or mental consequences.

After years of reflection and speaking with other gay men from other universities and colleges across Canada, David came to the conclusion that the political climate and celebration of diversity on campuses often set the tone for being able to be an openly gay man, safe from persecution. David reflected on his years at a post-secondary institute in central Canada:
It [a specific university campus] was not the place where I would have felt comfortable being out…I wasn’t even out to myself really… Basically non-conventional expression of sexuality tended to stick out quite a lot. You would really be taking something on your shoulders to identify yourself. (1D95-100)

At the one specific learning institution, David learned that to be anything other than heterosexual would have potential consequences. While aware that he was not heterosexual, the fear that stemmed from the homophobia and heterosexism on campus impacted his own willingness to self-explore.

Finding a sense of community and other young gay men within his university setting was very important to Ethan. For Ethan, the challenged came in finding other queer people who shared in his educational and life philosophies. When asked about whether or not he found others who shared in his perspectives he stated:

Educational commonalities…I think that there is a great extreme there. In my small little experience there have not been a lot of gay men at the university level. I have found that when I have been going to date people who are at college or working in retail or just figuring out what they are doing. I appear to be at a different level in terms of where I am. For my age, I find that most people don’t have the same sort of mindset as I do. (1E260-264)

Ethan’s exploration of community membership left him feeling isolated and frustrated with the numerous members of the population who were gay and refused to acknowledge their sexual orientation in an open and authentic manner. For Ethan, this represented how openly gay men can feel isolated and marginalized by other gay men who are not open about their sexual orientation.
For Mack, adopting the roles of advocate and educator have provided him with insights into why many people remain in “the closet,” as opposed to being open about their sexual orientation. He has encouraged people from all sexual orientations and ethnic identities to explore the meanings behind labels. For him, acceptance goes beyond acknowledging and includes understanding.

It isn’t as though university is going to be a hotbed of homophobia. People, even though they accept for what you are, as a person, many still do not get some of the issues that you go through. I try not to be a militant gay man, however, sometimes that is the only way for me to get through to these people; you know, to individuals who do not understand the intricacies and subtle nuances of growing up as a gay racial minority. (1M99-108)

Acting in the roles of advocate and educator has been a twofold experience for Mack. First, he remains true to himself and educates others on queer issues. Second, he acts as a role model and paves the way for others to follow in his lead.

All four participants acknowledged that their decisions to be openly gay within their academic environments reflected a conscious awareness of the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. For each participant, through the gift of hindsight and awareness, the choice to be authentic in their gay identity development outweighed the potential negative consequences of being queer.

Sub-theme A: University and sexual identity exploration. Retreating from their families of origin, long-term friends, and communities offered eclectic opportunities for each of the four participants in this study to explore their concepts of self, culture, and community. Each participant spoke of post-secondary learning as an opportunity to place pieces of their
individual life puzzles into perspective. As the four participants spoke of the establishment of safety and awareness, they further recognized that actual physical space from their “other lives” assisted with the establishment of their gay identities.

For Charles, the first three years he spent in university presented the chance to investigate and build the necessary valor to branch out into the queer community in a larger metropolitan area.

I think that I was really working through my gay identity development. I knew that I wanted to come out and that I wanted to live my life openly. So, I guess if we are looking at it from a successful point of view, I used my university time to establish the courage to explore and make a decision to move to ------. (1C257-260)

For David, his sexual identity exploration within post-secondary studies represented an intellectualized perspective on the need for the creation of discourse surrounding heternormative perspectives and the queer notions of identity and celebration. He reflected:

I think that – this is speaking certainly in a really big picture, if people in the university environment can start to think more about sexuality in dimensional rather than categorical terms that boundaries will become more poorly defined, boundaries between gay, bi and straight and it will become less of an issue for example for questioning young men who want to explore these sexual activities and explore these sexual identities … it won’t become such a big scary thing because there is no big boundary to cross. (1D316-322)

For Ethan and Mack, sexual identity exploration occurred through more corporeal means. During his second year of university, Ethan had his first sexual experience with a man, which solidified his notion that he was in fact a gay man. He exuded pride in his belief
that one can self-identity as queer before engaging in sexual behaviour.

I would say that one is having my first sexual experience in university after I had come out. I had never had any prior sexual experiences with another man before I had come out. It occurred about 10 months after I had come out. So I had really established myself in saying that I am gay before I had even bothered to consider anybody else. I felt that that was most likely one of the biggest things for me. When I tell that to other people, I get very strange and surprised reactions because it seems almost unheard of. (1E149-154)

Ethan’s awakening allowed him to realize that being a gay man extends far beyond the sexual nature of a positive gay identity. Conversely, when Mack attempted to reach out to other Chinese born Canadians for support and role modeling, he discovered that:

Being openly gay is sort of a barrier to being any part of the Asian community as well. There is a hetero norm among other Canadian born Chinese men. I understand this because I grew up with the same kind of parents. I don’t know if it was any conscious decision to add homophobia on the part of the male Chinese born Canadians in particular. I get the feeling that they are not that comfortable around me. They have sort of excluded me from their little Asian community. (1M72-79)

Mack’s attempts to merge his Asian and gay identities resulted in further exclusion and marginalization from both his cultural and academic communities. Despite the outcomes, each of the four participants acknowledged that without an engagement in university studies the exploration of their gay identities would not have been feasible.

Sub-theme B: Finding self within the academy: Role models. The idea of role models was very important for all four participants. Ironically, each participant had unique
perspectives on this concept. For instance, they all spoke of their attempts to seek appropriate role models in their pre and post coming out experiences. Charles spoke of the conflicting messages that he received from gay men who were living both in and out of the closet. He stated:

I think that the most negative factor at university was the fact that I did not feel comfortable at any point with the people who were around me. I feel that even the people, who were out, were living closed lives. (1C265-267)

With visibility being a factor, Charles spoke of the inability to feel safe without appropriate role models to support him on his coming out journey. Each participant, through an introspective awareness, discussed the finding of role models within their university communities. For Charles, David, Ethan, and Mack, becoming role models themselves assisted in fostering the limited exposure they had to such examples of what it meant to be a gay man in post-secondary learning environments.

For David, being openly gay in his faculty and clinical practice places him in the position of student and health practitioner leadership.

A really positive space for people to explore sexual identity. I believe that leaders in the university community can really capitalize on that. Perhaps in doing so, people will be better able to access open, non-judgmental health services without feeling uncomfortable. Also, I believe in doing so, this will help people to resolve mental health issues independently, by seeking support from queer role-models and engaging in new experiences. (1D828-831)

For David, providing the service to others that was not always available to him was in itself an act of role-modeling.
Ethan’s exploration and search for appropriate role-models began in the residence life system at his university. As stated earlier, Ethan’s residence don played a pivotal role in provided him with insight into what it might mean to be a gay man. Ethan attributes the support that he received from his residence don as the foundation for him surviving his first-year of university studies.

Academically in making the transition, my residence don [who did happen to be gay] was basically my pillar in first year. I would not have…I really cannot even speculate where I would be today if I didn’t have him as my don in first year. The relationship did always remain on a friendship level and he still remains to this day as a very close friend. He really helped me realize that being different was okay and that not being afraid to defend one’s self or to speak up for others when necessary. (1E93-97)

For Ethan, the realization that gay men could be role models, platonic friends, and supports allowed him to challenge societal stereotypes and redefine for himself what it meant for him to be gay.

While in search of culturally appropriate role models, Mack quickly learned that finding other gay Chinese men on his university campus would be a challenge, to say the least. Hence, in the spirit of meeting the needs of others when a gap in services exists, Mack decided to take on a leadership role for other gay men from diverse ethnic origins.

Through community work and educational events, I have helped others. This being said, I have never run into a burning building to save a baby adorning my rainbow flag [laughs] or anything. Last year I was a student leader for first year students. (1M212-218)

The training of student leaders, social justice education, and dramatic productions,
while being their authentic selves, allowed Charles, Ethan, and Mack to be the role models that they sought in their individual identity formations. All four participants acknowledged the importance of having openly queer faculty members, student leaders, and educators in the fostering of safe learning and living environments for gay men studying in post-secondary learning environments.

**Sub-theme C: Homophobia and heterosexism: Stigma versus affirmation.** For all four participants, experiencing homophobia and heterosexism was a harsh reality that came with being a self-disclosed gay man or being perceived such by others. Each of the participants spoke of a fear based on stigma and not fitting into their residence communities and faculties. Two of the participants (David and Ethan) came from rural communities; while the other two (Charles and Mack) grew up in metropolitan communities. Growing up in smaller communities provided David and Ethan with an understanding of how difficult it is for first year students to become acculturated into a university community. David placed this phenomenon into perspective:

> A lot of students here on campus for example you know they are coming from smaller towns or grew up in places without queer role models or heavily religious environments now they are away from their parents and they are in an opportunity where they perhaps do have a chance to explore these things. (1D347-350)

Despite the realization that university communities bear a significant responsibility for educating and fostering safe learning atmospheres, this was not the case for Charles:

> I didn’t feel comfortable coming out in that environment at all because I was too worried that it would get back to my parents. So I spent these three years at ----- pretty much within a hold because here I was struggling with the thought of here I am
supposed to be learning things and becoming me, at the same, I had this huge part of me that I had to keep on hiding. (1C48-52)

The issues of safety and the fear of being found out are significant indications of the potential for stigma from self and others. As David wisely stated:

Perhaps even more so than in society at large there needs to be a real effort made into creating an environment where that is possible and so people don’t need to be afraid of stigmatizing themselves no need to be afraid of any overt homophobic or violent sort of activity either. (1D350-353)

Ethan’s experiences in his home community appeared to be more difficult than in his university setting. Ethan attributed the closed-mindedness of his home community, lack of services for gay men, and poor support networks in his high school for delaying his coming out process. Ethan reflected the following:

I came from a very closed environment in -----, compared to the environment here at school. I think part of that has to do with that it is a university setting. Plain and simple…people understand that they are liable for what they say and what they do.

(1E99-102)

At home, in the city that Ethan grew up in, people were known to shout homophobic and racist comments at members of the gay community without punishment. Ethan sought solace in knowing that his university community had a zero tolerance policy surrounding hate crimes. For him, knowing that people were accountable for their actions represented the creation of safe space for queer people on campus.

Unlike the other participants, Mack chose to disclose one specific act of homophobia that was directed towards him within his university residence community. For Mack, this act
of homophobia represented the beginning of his ability to self-advocate and confront others about discrimination and prejudice.

In the first year I had a person write a homophobic statement in permanent marker on my residence door. That was pretty uncomfortable. I tried to not make a very big deal about it, but clearly it bothered me. I went to tell my don; he didn’t really know what to do. He really wasn’t all that comforting. (1M53-60)

When Mack was unable to receive the support the he deemed necessary, he chose to educate his residence don and other members of the residence life community about issues pertaining to homophobia and heterosexism on campus. All four participants alluded to the belief that stigma must first be acknowledged on individual levels before the true affirmation of self can be achieved.

Theme Three: Shared and Individual Experiences: Cultural Expression

When asked about the nature of cultural expression, each of the participants focused on individual interpretations of the meaning of culture. One common shared experience included the belief that homophobia and heterosexism within ethnic and culture communities impaired their abilities to self-identify as gay men and merge their gay self-concepts with their pre-existing cultural identities. For Charles and David, organized religion played a significant role in their abilities to express themselves as gay men. According to Charles:

There is a lot of hate, distrust, and dislike for anyone who identifies as or could be queer. The worst insult you can place on another person is to call them gay or fag. The Trinidadian culture, it is also strongly influenced by religion. We have a huge Roman Catholic population and we all know their views on that, as well as many different religions. They are all very strongly agreed to the fact that being queer is wrong.
David reflected on a poignant moment when he and a close friend discussed how their religious upbringings limited their abilities to express themselves within the realm of gay culture:

He told me about a lot of thoughts of suicide that he had had and significant depression feelings of worthlessness, feelings of guilt, trying to reconcile what he feels, the innate part of us, with the church and the dominant Fundamentalist readings of the bible.

In contrast, Ethan and Mack found the ability to express themselves from both ethnic and gay cultural perspectives by accepting themselves on multiple levels. Ethan’s cultural expression occurred by taking on an activist role and supporting others in their coming out journeys. He stated:

I also believe that it goes along with a sense of responsibility to stand up for not only yourself, but for other people who are gay and who don’t necessarily have a voice because they are too afraid. This is how I see myself participating in gay culture.

For Mack, self-exploration and cultural expression required accepting his numerous identities and the role that racism and homophobia played in his self-concept. Mack provided a sincere depiction of the impact that dominant culture discourse plays in the perpetuation of multiple marginalization:

I feel that because I like other men, I am more acutely aware of being different as a man who doesn’t fit within the white image of what is acceptable in terms of image and sexuality. So, in growing to accept myself as a gay man came before my acceptance of
myself as a Chinese man. (1M43-47)

For all four participants, the ability to express their cultural awareness stemmed from a capacity to question preconceived social expectations and balance their individual identity journeys with truth and unconditional self-awareness.

Sub-theme A: Am I the only one? The four participants in this study clearly discussed their experiences of isolation, loneliness, and stigmatization while attempting to establish their positive gay identities. For many of the men that I interviewed, the realization that they were not the only gay man in their communities and learning environments initiated an internal awareness of self and longing for a larger community membership. It would appear, from the participants’ perspectives, that the silencing elements that came with living in the closet reinforced separation from dominant culture ideals and marginalization. For Charles, growing up as a young child who possessed what some might deem as gay mannerisms was very difficult and resulted in feelings of confusion and disequilibrium in his establishment of his identity. He stated, “To be there and be this flamboyant person who was continuously referred to as gay and queer was difficult. Trying to match these labels to myself was hard” (1C84-86).

In his attempt to balance his ethnic and gay identities, Mack provided a reflection of his experiences of attempting to find others that resembled his concepts of being a gay Asian man:

Being a racial minority is definitely something that gay white men don’t necessarily understand. They get it, but they don’t fully get it. It seems to be an extra factor that gay white male students would never have to think about. You have to forge your own niche in the world. There are no other popular standards or examples of what you
should do with your life. You feel more isolated. (1M207-211)

Clearly, for Mack, the journey towards finding others who match or truly understand his identity process was both challenging and isolating. For each participant, the realization that there were other gay men in their diverse communities provided increased support and meaning to their individual coming out experiences. As David stated:

In part taking an identity, coming to identify as gay, and just trying it on for size and seeing how it works for you. Once this was done I realized that oh my goodness there are other people like me. (1D130-132)

For David, growing up in a community that did not foster positive images of gay men and reinforced heteronegative perspectives impacted his ability to find other gay men. After beginning his post-secondary learning, David quickly learned that he was not alone. For Ethan, isolation and loneliness reinforced feelings of suicide and self-harm. He stated:

I find that I would really like to believe that I am different and unique. From the other gay men that I know, maybe one or two have considered suicide. It is possible that it just isn’t discussed. I don’t have a lot of gay friends or gay role models! I have some, but I really don’t have a lot. I can count them on my fingers. It can feel really isolating at times. (1E270-273)

For all four participants, coming to terms with the fact that other gay men were present in their college and university communities facilitated their coming out process. For many first year students, post-secondary studies provide opportunities to experience cultural and sexual diversity. Each participant expressed varying elements of empowerment that resulted from finding other gay men and realizing that they were not alone.
Sub-theme B: Seeking equilibrium: Balancing cultural and worldviews. For all of the participants in this study, the attempt to balance their cultural worldviews began with periods of dissonance and negotiations between pre-established identities and the concept of queer culture. The expression of self while engaging in identity establishment and maintenance represented a paradigm shift for each participant. For Ethan, cultural identity and the celebration of individual worldviews encompassed the journey into finding his own definition of self. He stated:

If someone chooses to associate as a member of a group, this is okay and worthy of exploration. However, do not make assumptions. Start with the self, the individual, and eventually a person will define himself. (1E496-499)

For Charles and Mack, the journey into finding balance between their ethnic and gay identities signified both struggles and triumphs in their gay identity development. As Charles reflected:

I actually remember speaking with a Trinidadian priest about it once and asking him for his advice and his response was simple. It is okay to be who you are as long as you don’t act upon it. I guess that that sums up what I think the Trinidadian culture feels about it. It is very closeted there. There really isn’t much of a community there and a lot of the people that I know there spend the majority of their lives in the closet.

(1C74-77)

In his search for spiritual guidance, Charles learned in late-adolescence that in order to maintain his ethnic identity he had to silence, rather than act on, his same-sex desires.

For Mack, dissension occurred between his ethnic and sexual identity development. He had naturally assumed as a child that all members of minority groups experienced oppression
and discrimination in similar ways. Mack came to the realization that he was establishing his identities from multiple marginalized perspectives. When attempting to manage these conflicting paradigms, Mack stated:

I’ve always envisioned all minorities coming from the same point-of-view. We all desire equality and non-discrimination from people! Growing up that is how I viewed being gay and Chinese. All that I wanted was equal rights to heterosexual white men. But, many people do not see that. It is almost as though one cause is more important than another. (1M219-223)

Mack’s experience exemplifies the very nature of attempting to balance cultural and worldviews.

When asked about how he manages his identity development, while appreciating his cultural and worldviews, David provided an interesting reflection:

I suppose if you were born into a certain ethnic culture, you are born into it and so your cultural traditions are tied up with your family and that sort of thing. In queer culture on the other hand we have to often branch out from our families. A lot of people have families, which are not queer affirmative at all. Some people get disowned by their families, while many gay men cannot find a way to come out to their families until they are quite a bit older. (1D679-683)

For David, coming out to his parents and siblings would most likely have consequences that at that point in his life were not acceptable within his life management skills. For him, not disclosing his gay identity to his family was more feasible than dealing with the potential outcomes.

For each of the four participants, the attempt to seek balance between their cultural
identities and worldviews reinforced both internal and external negotiations between the self and others. Clearly, for these four men, being authentic with their families and cultural communities came with significant opportunities for estrangement and the loss of family support.

Sub-theme C: Positive and negative Space: Testing the waters... A reoccurring sub-theme centred around the importance of feeling safe their living and studying environments emerged in my discussions with the participants. This notion extended beyond the mere appearance of safety to the testing of residence life officials, professors, counsellors, and other residents living in the dorms. All participants in this study alluded to the practice of scanning their environments for key symbols, such as positive space stickers. All four lived in a residence dorm for at least one year and offered reflections of both positive and negative remarks by their peers. As wisely stated by Charles: “Having those resources and faces easily accessible to gay men in the places that they live, learn, and work is essential” (1C330-332).

For David and Ethan the presence of positive space stickers reinforced the importance of living and studying in an environment that acknowledges and celebrates sexual diversity. According to David:

As silly as it sounds, I mean these positive space stickers on doors and stuff like that; I mean it really does mean something. I think that people are actually willing to go out of their way and go to some effort to say, look you know we are queer affirming and this space is sort of devoted to that. (1D338-341)

For David, viewing positive space stickers in his faculty and student health centre reinforced to him that those members of the community had undergone training in the area of GLBTTI issues. For David, this meant that he was able to both self-identify as gay and seek
mentorship from these campus-based leaders.

Ethan echoed the importance of the positive space sticker campaign and reinforced how it would have been more helpful if it had existed during his coming out process.

The environment is really important. I would really like to be in a place that felt vibrant and had a little edge. Another thing that goes on at my school is a positive space program. People who undergo the positive space training have a sticker on their door to let people know that it is a queer positive space. This would have been ideal. (1E421-424)

Since the beginning of the positive space campaign at his university, Ethan has found four professors in his departments that support the challenges that he has experienced as a gay man in the post-secondary learning environment. For Ethan, this has made his five-year academic journey more manageable.

During our interview, Mack spoke of the positive space campaign on numerous occasions. Despite the one incident that Mack referred to regarding the homophobic statement that was written on his residence room door, Mack chose to comment on the negative experiences that his other gay male friends had experienced. He commented:

I have heard from friends about their negative experiences. This one guy that I dated, he had a confrontation with a burly jock on his floor, confronting him about his homophobia. Apparently this guy said, “It’s because you are gay that you have all of these problems”. (1M61-64)

For Mack and his friends, being blamed by the perpetrators of these verbal acts of violence only reinforced to them the gaps in education that existed at their university at that point in time. Having a positive space representative to talk to about these situations assisted Mack
and his friends in finding support and solutions to these challenges.

Three of the four participants commented on the fact that without such programs and support within their university communities, they would have most likely either remained in the closet or their studies would have been negatively impacted. For each participant, testing the waters for potential physical and emotional harm was an ongoing practice. However, such programs as a positive space initiative provided comfort and support in moments of need.

**Theme Four: The Counselling Process: Finding Meaning**

The counselling relationship offers unique opportunities for client growth, change, and an increased level of self-awareness. As stated by Greenberg and Rice (1997), all clients possess “the gift of awareness, and if the therapist could provide the appropriate conditions, clients could become aware of their own perceptions of inner and outer reality and thus could increasingly guide their own life’s choices in fulfilling directions” (p. 104). The participants’ experiences within their therapeutic alliances offered eclectic insights into various presenting concerns, as well as their personal understandings of their experiences as gay men and identity development. Each participant made reference to the belief that through their counselling processes that they were able to find meaning and comfort. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged: (a) seeking support, establishing awareness, (b) the counselling relationship, and (c) opening the closet door in counselling.

All four participants reported that their therapeutic alliances with their counsellors offered significant learning opportunities and a safe space to grow and reflect. The process of counselling mirrored the importance of addressing internal and external struggles, while maintaining and fostering the concept of self-care. Affirmation and encouragement from their
counsellors were also essential elements in the establishment and maintenance of meaning and awareness. As enthusiastically stated by Charles, “My second counsellor introduced me to internalized homophobia. I had never heard of this before” (1C385-386). David linked the educational process of counselling to feelings of importance and to having his self-growth and identity formation affirmed. He stated, “I think in both cases counselling provided a place where my problems or issues were legitimised” (1D403-404).

For Ethan and Mack, therapy provided opportunities to express what was on their minds and to seek solutions and objective perspectives from their counsellors. According to Ethan, he learned valuable skills for communicating his feelings and thoughts, while being challenged to view his life situations from differing perspectives. He stated:

It was a start to discussing and exploring my sense of self without hearing a friendship response. I have enough of those. I am smart enough to know if I want sympathy I will go to one friend…if I want someone to be hard nosed I will go to somebody else. We all want to hear what we want to hear. I know how to do that. When someone won’t necessarily give you a response and is more there to listen, it is up to you. And that has been refreshing. (1E322-326)

Perspective building and the testing of new ideas and concepts played a dramatic role in Ethan’s ability to find meaning in his life.

From Mack’s perspective, having the ability to speak in an environment where he could be both authentic and candid, without fear of retribution assisted in fostering his wellness process.

With my laying it all out on the table, I didn’t feel like I had to hide my story and issues. I definitely found that having a counsellor know every aspect of what you are
For Mack, challenging his preconceived notions of counselling proved to be beneficial in moving forward in his goal of improved self-care and unconditional positive regard. Counselling allowed the participants to establish new perspectives, while challenging their old beliefs, values, and mores.

Sub-theme A: Seeking support, establishing awareness. All participants in this study identified with feelings of confusion, anxiety, and fear related to their initial decisions to seek counselling. For Charles and Mack, engaging in the process of counselling came with specific cultural stigmas about psychotherapy and mental health. Despite the elements of consternation in regards to cultural expectations, all four participants challenged certain negative societal stereotypes regarding mental health and engaged in therapeutic alliances with numerous counsellors. In their efforts to seek support, each gained an element of self and societal awareness within their individual counselling sessions. As Charles reflected:

I had established a very good relationship with my counsellor at that point in time. I felt comfortable sharing anything with her! Her reactions were marvelous. She helped me by presenting the essential options in dealing with this specific instance of homophobia [the guy who assaulted me]. It was what I needed at that point. (1C177-180)

For all participants, the establishment of a counselling relationship, whether completely queer affirmative or not, represented an opportunity to expand upon their personal and
academic support networks.

As Ethan stated:

She [his counsellor] helped me become, almost be comfortable, with the fact that I was having these problems and actually assisted in my realizing that the time had come for me to start taking care of myself. It was almost as though I didn’t have that awareness.

(1E333-335)

For Ethan, his relationship with his counsellor provided him with the knowledge that it was okay to take care of himself and that his choice to be open about his sexual orientation was in fact an act of self-care.

As a young child growing up in central Canada, David learned to turn to God for guidance and support. For years David carried feelings of guilt and shame about being gay and held onto the belief that turning to mental health practitioners was wrong and in violation of his religious upbringing. David eventually gained the necessary courage to put his needs first and sought counselling. His experience challenged the messages that he received as a child about people who go to see counselling practitioners.

Having the experience of actually going to a therapist with such a positive environment gave me a really positive view of the profession as a whole. Perhaps, I think it may have even played a role in my pursuing a career in clinical psychology…The therapist created a warm and safe space by not making assumptions and carefully with accuracy reflecting a genuine nature; resulting in a non-judgmental atmosphere. (1D796-801)

From David’s perspective, being in an environment that was judgment free allowed him to explore his life challenges and to question the role that others had played in his identity development.
Seeking support and establishing a higher level of awareness was very important in Mack’s decision to seek counselling. From a cultural perspective, the discussion of mental health concerns was often centred within familial discussions. This caused further conflict in Mack’s attempt to find balance between being a gay man and Chinese. He learned as a child that to have mental health concerns or to seek counselling represented a weakness and not a personal strength. From Mack’s perspective, the need to speak with a professional counsellor outweighed the cultural implications.

I felt comfortable telling him that I was gay. Even though it was a personal piece of information, he didn’t really do anything that was spectacularly gay friendly. I am sort of at the level of comfort telling anybody. Trying to see it from other people’s perspectives, counselling here has a gay friendly vibe. This reflects to queer people, a well-needed comfort in access to services in the mental health field. (1M286-291)

Despite the notion that his counsellor at the time did not appear to be overly affirmative, the counselling intervention served its purpose in offering Mack the support and awareness that he required at that point in time.

Sub-theme B: The counselling relationship. In their discussions about their relationships with their counsellors, each participant focused on memorable and meaningful aspects of their wellness journeys, in which numerous opportunities for growth and support existed. Both men and women were represented as counselling practitioners, and all were Caucasian and perceived to be heterosexual. One of the central concerns reported in the interviews stemmed from the therapists’ inability, on some level, to identify with gay or ethnic and cultural concerns. In addition, each participant reported that, despite other potential concerns with their mental health functioning, their sexual orientation appeared to
be identified by the therapist as the primary presenting concern or centre of focus. The
experience presented by Mack places this reality in context:

Being out to your counsellor allows you to feel present and provides the counsellor
with all the information required to provide a complete service. Come to think of it, my
counsellor and I never addressed my being Chinese. At the forefront of all my
problems, he would never sort of address my ethnic culture. It was like it was a non-
issue. It is an issue! (1M305-311)

For Mack, the lack of cultural recognition on behalf of his counsellor at the time questioned
the very core of his therapeutic alliance. As in many counselling relationships, Mack turned
to his therapist to guide the process as opposed to feeling that he had a right to bring to the
forefront the role that his ethnic identity played in his current mental health functioning.

For Charles, issues pertaining to gender and ethnicity played a significant role in
limiting his therapeutic growth. Although having experiences with his two counsellors that
he considered momentous in his growth as a human being, Charles felt that his sexual
orientation was often at the forefront of exploration and that the role that his ethnicity played
in his life challenges was often neglected.

The common issue with both counsellors was that they were both Caucasian women. I
think that this played out in a huge role because I was also looking for answers
surrounding my ethnicity; sort of finding my place within this context. Both
counsellors were unable to help me from their experience because they weren’t able to
identify that way. (1C466-469)

From Charles’ perspective, people relate to others based on shared cultural experiences and
the absence of such opportunities limited his ability to take his relationship with his therapists
to higher levels. This, in itself, offered Charles with an opportunity for growth. He believes that in the future he will be able to secure a therapeutic relationship with a counsellor who can identify with him from cultural, ethnic, and sexuality perspectives.

David’s experiences with counselling were extremely positive in nature. Despite the subtle nuances of heterosexism, such as the lack of gender-neutral language, David was able to overlook these therapeutic mishaps and educate his therapists by coming out to them and challenging their assumptions. By doing so, David feels that his therapeutic alliances were strengthened and that the power differential between his counsellors and himself were minimized. When asked to reflect on his counselling relationships, David stated:

All of the therapists that I have seen have been pretty open to discussing gay issues. I would not consider ever seeing a non-queer positive counsellor and if I discovered a counsellor that was clearly not queer positive I would be tempted to report them to their professional association … as far as being a professional mental health care worker. As far as I am concerned, it is a critical competency. (1D569-573)

David’s assertions surrounding affirmative practice and the establishment of critical competencies reinforce his belief that therapists play a dramatic role in the wellness process of gay men.

During our conversation, Ethan spoke about what it meant for him to be a Caucasian gay male. While acknowledging the nature of white privilege, Ethan found that other Caucasian males who were heterosexual placed him in “a different class” than themselves. For Ethan, this represented an awakening that reinforced his perceived minority status.

They were both white and I am white. I think it is really interesting that this never really came into play. However, never once did I feel a part of the dominant culture. I
felt that it was left more free and open for exploration. The counsellors were not part of a minority, and yet, I am part of a sexual minority. (1E510-513)

Ethan reflected that despite the strong rapport that he felt with his counsellors, in the future, he would most likely seek out a gay male therapist in order to feel more comfortable addressing his issues surrounding sexual orientation.

For each of the four participants in this study, the relationships they had with their therapists offered growth opportunities for support and introspective awareness. All participants were able to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of these relationships and felt empowered to negotiate healthy relationships with new counsellors. All four participants expressed an interest in engaging in therapeutic alliances with gay male therapists who could identify with them on issues of ethnicity and cultural awareness.

*Sub-theme C: Opening the closet door in counselling.* When presented with the option of providing insight and feedback to counsellors, each participant provided a personalized response. Charles placed into context the very quintessence of the roles of support and affirmation within his counselling experiences, when he stated:

Had she [his therapist] not been queer positive, I don’t know how I would have made it through some of those difficult times. I don’t know if I would have remained out as a gay man. I think that it is imperative that as a queer individual that you see a queer positive therapist because otherwise they just don’t understand. (1C518-522)

Within a society that often limits or questions the journey into establishing a positive gay identity, we as counsellors can play a significant role in fostering wellness and safety by acknowledging and celebrating each client as a unique individual regardless of sexual orientation and cultural identity. As wisely stated by Arthur (2003), the “Seeking [of]
counselling can be a last resort measure. Building a relationship around understanding, support, hope and resources can be the difference for people to choose life.” While the participants in this particular study did not report intense feelings of suicidal ideation or other forms of self-harm, the discussion of support and affirmation was clearly documented. As wisely stated by Mack:

Assuming that all gay men have the same experiences or even similar experiences can have a negative impact on the counselling relationship. A counsellor needs to make sure that each queer person has his or her own perspective as being LGBTT. We are each individuals in our own right. (1M345-348)

From Ethan’s perspective, the establishment of counselling relationships that celebrate an individual’s independent identity is essential. Ethan encouraged counsellors to foster continuous growth while challenging their assumptions, values, and biases towards their clients. In Ethan’s reflection he stated:

I would probably say that understanding one’s uniqueness and celebrating that, while remaining open-minded and creating a welcoming environment where people can be comfortable is essential. Not only by helping yourself, but helping others in terms of giving a voice to all queer individuals. For me, when I go to counselling, knowing that an institution has resources available and is trying to do what they can do in their mandates to help other people experience unconditional support. (1E553-558)

David offers a differing perspective that builds on the feedback provided by Charles, Mack, and Ethan. In his discussion surrounding political correctness, David warns counsellors about the role that perceived false empathy can play in the therapeutic alliance.

I suppose they should be kind of up to date on the current politically correct ways of
identifying people. At the same time you can have people who are really PC and you know have all the terminology but you don’t get the feeling that they regard your queer identity as a particularly joyful or a good thing. I suppose I want to feel that not only is it fine that I am gay but the recognition and celebration that I have gone through a lot of hard work to achieve a positive gay identity.

From David’s experience, therapeutic success is highly dependent on the therapists’ abilities to acknowledge and celebrate the independent identity journeys of their gay male clients. All four participants clearly acknowledged and encouraged counsellors to engage in continued competency development in the area of gay men and their mental health concerns.

Summary: Revisiting the Research Questions

At the outset of this research project, I proposed six research questions in the hopes of seeking detailed insights in the mental health experiences and challenges of young gay men in post-secondary learning environments. In this section, I revisit each of the research questions and link the central findings of the data analysis to the academic literature in the field of counselling psychology.

*What are the current mental health experiences and challenges of young gay men in Canadian universities?*

There are several central themes that emerged from the data about the experiences and challenges of young gay men in Canadian university settings. They are summarized in this section.

*One: Identity development.* All four participants in this study acknowledged the fact that for them, identity development represented an on-going process of becoming aware of an
independent sense of self, while questioning and re-evaluating dominant culture discourse and re-establishing their place in society.

Two: Multiple identity negotiation. The process of negotiating a positive gay identity for each participant required acknowledging and attempting to balance three competing identities and roles in society as: (a) gay men, (b) members of diverse ethnic origins, nationalities, and religious groups, and (c) students in higher learning environments.

Three: Internal and external influences. After their independent explorations of self in relation to their sexuality, cultural origins, and academic roles, each of the participants moved towards decisions to branch out, express their identities on numerous levels, and attempt to integrate their core self-concepts with their diverse communities (Meyer & Dean, 1998). For many of the participants, internal and external influences impacted their identity development process. Three core factors impacted each participant: (a) whether or not to come out to others as gay men, (b) their sense of cultural communities, and (c) the university environment. All four participants reported both positive and negative experiences in coming out to others, attempting to integrate themselves as out gay men within their ethnic and religious affiliations, and experiences with homophobia and heterosexism on their university campuses. These findings are consistent with the current academic literature in this area (Bauder, 1998; Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000).

Four: Cultural dissonance. I define the concept of cultural dissonance as the internal conflict one may experience when attempting to manage multiple identities that include sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and academia. All four participants in this study reported feeling marginalized and struggled to find meaning in their process of stigma management (Chen-Hayes, 2001). For all of the participants, acts of homophobia and
heterosexism, expectations of family and societal norms, and the need to be authentic about their gay identities resulted in the need to engage in a therapeutic alliance with a counselling practitioner.

*What similarities and differences exist in the coming out and mental health experiences of young gay men in post-secondary educational settings?*

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, it became apparent that despite the central commonalities that existed in the coming out experiences and subsequent gay identity development processes, each participant’s journey was unique and individual in nature. Phellas (2002) argues that, “the individual feels that his personal lifestyle and sexual preferences have limited consequences in his life and as a result he experiences feelings of anger, insecurity and frustration” (p. 28). All four participants shared their struggles with establishing a renewed sense of self, challenging conflicting emotions, and creating strong support networks in coming out to their families and friends. The discussions of role models and the need for queer representation reinforced the importance of making visible what dominant culture has attempted to make invisible (Paniagua, 2005). The management of multiple marginalization was a key factor, shared between the four participants. The central areas for subsequent prejudice, shared between the research findings and the literature include: (a) ethnic stereotyping (Greene, 1994; Humphrey, 1999; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002); (b) religious influences (Haldeman, 2004; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994), and (c) mental health diagnoses (Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 1995).

*What aspects of therapeutic processes in post-secondary counselling services have assisted or detracted these young gay men to develop healthier functioning?*

Political issues within all sectors of society have often denied gay male youths such
essential life skills as queer representation in the classroom, health studies, and an affirmative life-learning atmosphere (Mohler, 2000). The fostering of a positive space represented a core foundation in participants’ abilities to develop healthier functioning strategies. The presence of essential skills in counselling, for example, non-biased language and queer affirmative approaches to care were indispensable in their continued participation in therapeutic interactions. The literature in the area of counselling and mental health care for gay men clearly supports this finding (Davison, 2001; Mair, 2003). Factors that negatively impacted participation in counselling initiatives occurred in the processes leading to the establishment of their therapeutic alliances. Campus, societal, and cultural stereotypes about counselling impacted time-lines for care for each participant. Frontline staff also played a significant role in attendance and or premature termination of therapeutic initiatives (Johnson & Chernin, 2003). What became very clear is that once each of the participants had been processed through the initial intake process, counsellor personality and skills were the mitigating factors in therapeutic success (Pixton, 2003).

*What aspects of the counselling relationship have positively and or negatively impacted the well-being of young gay men?*

Even some educational and mental-health based institutions still exhibit extreme examples of homophobia and heterosexism (Travers & Schneider, 1996; Woog, 1995) and inadvertently deny accurate erudition and competent health promotion and awareness to young gay men. Acceptability and accessibility issues can have serious and often deadly consequences (Hartstein, 1996). Specifically, practitioners can, “play a crucial role in helping gay clients who are coming out, learning new skills, including how to form intimate relationships and how to trust others with information formerly kept secret” (Schope, 2004,
p. 267). Each alliance with young gay men must be viewed as unique and individual in nature (Mair & Izzard, 2001). The four participants in this study echoed the findings of the above literature; specifically, those counsellors who engaged in the roles of educator and advocate positively impacted the overall well-being of the participants. Therapists who subscribed to dominant culture approaches to mental health care were of limited assistance and sometimes were had detrimental impacts on the overall well-being of each participant. Essentially, the merging of a queer affirmative approach with therapeutic chemistry between the therapist and client were core components in the establishment of healthy mental functioning.

What should counselling practitioners within higher learning institutions understand about the unique and diverse needs of young gay men studying at the post-secondary level?

Access to culturally competent health practitioners has been identified as having profound impact on the physical and emotional well-being of young gay men in post-secondary learning environments. D’Augelli (1993) suggested that through service provisions of “unbiased and affirmative counselling, campus mental health facilities should take the initiative in outreach to the gay and lesbian population” (p. 255). For the participants in this study, access to safe spaces to explore their gay identities represented the first step in their explorations of their individual mental health needs. Having access to supportive networks and culturally appropriate counselling interventions was also noted as essential to the fostering of mental health awareness for young gay men in secondary learning environments.

We can either be leaders or followers in the perpetuation and evolution of inclusive and accepting perspectives within our profession and society. Societal homophobia is a major obstacle in the development of support programs for young gay men (Hedgepath & Helmich,
Positive messages and services that attempt to help young gay men are often misunderstood and labeled as recruitment measures or the promotion of homosexuality (Savin-Williams, 2001). In fact, these services positively support the experiences and safety of today’s youth, regardless of their sexual orientation. The conclusion is simple: We must choose to either be part of the solution or we contribute to the insurmountable obstacles. In opening the closet doors within the fields of counselling psychology and the other allied health professions, we must continue in our roles of educators, advocates, research methodologists, and change agents.

What systemic factors serve as barriers to or facilitators of effective counselling services for young gay men?

The four participants in this study spoke candidly about their experiences within therapeutic alliances. Two of the four spoke of having moments in counselling where they could not address their concerns regarding their gay identity or cultural perspectives. All four participants were engaged in almost exclusive alliances with Caucasian mental health practitioners and reported waiting a period of time before disclosing their gay identities. Systemic barriers to comprehensive multicultural counselling are present throughout all levels of society, including the mental health professions (Sue & Sue, 1999, 2003). The acts of oppression and the marginalization of minorities have been blatantly obvious in society and in the field of psychology (Fernando, 1995). Mack spoke of this reality when his ethnicity was never discussed or explored within his therapeutic alliance.

Treviño (1996) called upon both the psychological and anthropological literature to explore worldviews and changes in cross-cultural counselling practices. She insightfully concluded, “Understanding change within cross-cultural counselling…provides a powerful
way of understanding and operationalizing the world through the eyes of another human being” (p. 212). In order to adequately understand socially engrained values that limit the delivery of counselling efforts to culturally diverse communities, the counselling profession as a whole and its independent practitioners must first dissect the influences of dominant culture on both personal and professional levels (Dana, 1998; Roughley, 2005). Research into counsellors’ experiences working with gay men who hold culturally diverse identities might further engage discourse in this area.

Conclusion

Chapter Four represents the core of this research project. From a research perspective, the central themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collected allowed each participant’s experiences as gay men in post-secondary learning environments to be placed into a larger perspective. From the data, potential implications for current and future research and practice can be acknowledged. Chapter Five places this reality into context while synthesizing the research and offering final conclusions.
CHAPTER V
Synthesis and Implications

In this chapter of the paper I explore the overall implications of its findings to the
practice of counselling psychology and other allied health professions. I have divided this
section of the study into the following areas: (a) implications of the research findings, (b)
strengths and limitations, (c) future exploration and research, and (d) final conclusions:
personal and professional reflections. Each section will be discussed in turn.

Implications of the Research Findings
A discussion of the implications of this research is essential in contextualizing the overall
findings of this study within the field of counselling psychology. According to D’Augelli
(2003), “As new research accumulates, the unique contributions that LGBT lives make to our
understanding of the nature of human development will be documented in ways never before
thought possible” (p. xxi). The results of this qualitative study offer significant implications
for the practice of counselling psychology in terms of both treatment and research, which
will be discussed in turn.

Treatment

assessment of the client’s concerns, which includes an in-depth understanding of the factors
that influence the client’s experience, perception, and presentation of his or her problems” (p.
357). Based on the research findings of this study, the implications for assessment and
intervention include:

1. Acknowledgment of the roles that ecological and systemic factors play in the gay
   male client’s presenting concerns;
2. Exploration of the roles that culture, ethnicity, and religion play in identity development;

3. Assessing the psychosocial implications of homophobia and heterosexism;

4. Assessing the gay male client’s self-concept and the potential for assistance in the negotiation of multiple identities; and

5. Integrating culturally and queer affirmative interventions into the therapeutic alliance.

Evidence of change and client satisfaction is highly dependent upon the counselling process itself and the subsequent outcomes of the counselling relationship. The findings of this research might suggest that the ultimate goal of the counselling process is for the client to experience relief from presenting concerns and to leave with tangible skills for survival. Egan (1994) referred to this outcome when he stated, “The goal of the counselor is to help clients engage in constructive change” (p. 220). For each of the participants in the study, the therapeutic relationship represented a process of change that allowed them to experience a healing metamorphosis. From an Adlerian counselling outlook, it is believed that “people change when they come to understand the style of life they have created, especially its mistaken aspects, and choose to modify their style of life, including thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2004, p. 127). The process of change calls on experiential (consciousness raising, emotional arousal, social liberation, self-reevaluation, and environmental reevaluation) and behavioural (self-liberation, countering, environmental control, reward management, and helping relationships) processes (Hotz, 1999).

Bohan (1996) states, “What is most remarkable is that the vast majority of LGB individuals successfully negotiate the passage to homophilic identity, emerging with exemplary mental health and personal well-being” (p. 100). Counselling with young gay men
should focus on the concepts of effectiveness, efficacy, and self-actualization. Prochaska (1999) calls upon health practitioners to appreciate that change is not a single serendipitous event. Based on the research findings, the use of queer affirmative understanding, within the counselling process, can have powerful positive impacts on the lives of young gay men. Change, like the coming out experience, is not a specific event or measure. Change is a goal, unique and individual in nature, which represents a celebration of self, identity, and world-views.

Research

When I engaged in the preliminary preparation of this area of study, I was concerned on a professional level about the limited research in a Canadian context. Numerous areas for future exploration and research have emerged from the data collection and analysis in this study. Within the Canadian framework, research of a qualitative nature, which places into context the mental health concerns of young gay men and their experiences within counselling settings in higher learning, is extremely limited. While statistical data offers insights, quantitative data can remove the contextual experiences, detach the participant from the specific situation, and potentially devalue the individual experiences (Morse & Field, 1995) of young gay men. Future research of a qualitative nature is essential in removing methodological barriers that may perpetuate marginalization and stigmatization (Mair & Izzard, 2001). Hence, through the voices of participants, fruitful and trustworthy data may emerge.
Strengths and Limitations

The acknowledgment of strengths and limitations of this research are crucial components in the discussion of the study results. Qualitative studies often employ small sample sizes, where each participant shares common experiences that are directly related to a specific phenomenon (Morse & Field, 1995; Patton, 2002). The current research collected data that represents each participant’s stories related to the mental health experiences of young gay men in post-secondary learning environments and identifies key thematic commonalities and differences in their lives. From my perspective as the principle investigator, the central strength of this study stems from the emergence of the common shared experiences of the four participants. The four participants came from diverse ethnic populations and academic disciplines; yet, as the central themes and sub-themes began to emerge, it became evident that there were common elements that could be interpreted as representing shared experiences.

An additional strength stemmed from approaching this study from an emic perspective. According to LaSala (2003), “Lesbian and gay investigators who study lesbians and gay men may bring special knowledge and understanding to their research, which can facilitate data collection and analysis” (p. 15). LaSala continued, “Qualitative researchers who are members of the groups or communities they study may have a unique ability not only to elicit emic perspectives, but to understand their importance” (p. 17). In their discussion of culture-infused counselling, Arthur and Collins (2005) presented the following definition of the emic approach to counselling and research:

The emic approach argues that specific cultural knowledge is required about the diverse groups counsellors work with, focused on the uniqueness of each cultural
group, and identifies specific theoretical models and strategies that are congruent with a particular cultural experience. (p. 18)

As stated in the procedures section of this study, I engaged several strategies to raise the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. I used triangulation, employing interview analysis and participant review of transcripts, analysis of data using tapes and transcripts, as well as note-taking and reflective journal writing as a debriefing process. Throughout the process of this research project, I continuously fostered the questioning of themes for potential research bias. By asking each participant to review their individual interviews, I enhanced the overall essence and trustworthiness of each participant’s life experiences.

The size of the participant pool represents a significant limitation in this study; hence caution should be exercised in reviewing the conclusions and the overall transferability of the results. In LaSala’s (2003) discussion of the potential advantages that exist from the “insider” perspective, he cautions his readers of the potential disadvantages that may limit the outcomes of the investigation. LaSala stated, “Inside investigators may mistakenly assume common cultural understandings with interviewees and fail to explore their respondents’ unique perceptions. Furthermore, social desirability effects can bias respondent reports” (p. 15). Despite employing fundamental interviewing skills and using declarative probes, reflections of affect and meaning, paraphrasing, and summarizing, the potential that such bias has found its way into the research findings exists.

According to Have (2004), theory “provides modes of conceptualization for describing and explaining, while it should be clear and understandable to a wide range of people, including sociologists [and psychologists] of any viewpoint as well as lay people” (p.
Further research that explores the experiences of young gay men in post-secondary settings and identifies how their needs might be best addressed through counselling services is indicated. This would likely involve expansion of the participant pool and more in-depth qualitative analysis to facilitate the generation of a theoretical model.

Future Exploration and Research

The individual and collective stories of the research participants offered insights into future research areas and additional questions. The feedback provided by the participants in this study integrates with the current literature surrounding queer affirmative therapy and therapeutic alliances. For the purpose of this discussion, I have chosen two specific areas of focus: (a) multicultural and queer affirmative competencies: preparation and commitment, and (b) the working/therapeutic alliances. Each area for future research will be discussed in turn.

Multicultural and Queer Affirmative Competencies: Preparation and Commitment

There is much discussion in the current literature about the development of multicultural competencies (Arthur & Collins, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2003). None-the-less, I am curious to learn more about the roles of motivation, cultural identity, and worldview in the establishment of gay affirmative counselling competencies. For instance, what factors enhance or deter counselling practitioners from engaging in continued competency development with gay men? What are the potential outcomes of conflicting perspectives between individuals’ personal and professional identities? What skills are required for negotiating a sense of equilibrium between these two potentially competing paradigms? According to Toporek (2001), aptitude requires a balance or “an awareness and examination of one’s own personal growth, concerns, and biases on personal, professional, and
institutional levels” (pp. 16-17). What tools are required for a counselling practitioner to bridge the competency gaps when working with gay male clients?

Within the current Canadian context, how prepared are counsellors to meet the needs of gay men? Arthur (1998) cites the need for teaching multicultural competencies, for the inclusion of multicultural populations, continuing education, and the removal of institutional barriers within counselling educational programs (pp. 89-95). According to Pedersen (1994), “By learning to work with people who are different from ourselves, we will develop the facility for being culture-centered and that facility will prepare us for the future” (p. 295).

Counselling psychologists, within educational and community service organizations, must be introduced to culturally relevant programs and intervention strategies in order to enhance the overall well being of gay male youths. Concepts of family, education, community, and sexual health are central concerns in the cultural identity development of gay male youths (Fish & Harvey, 2005; Shannon & Woods, 1998). Inherent in the central issues of multicultural counselling, are consistent and reoccurring themes pertaining to several barriers, which hinder effective multicultural counselling and therapy. Recognition of the importance of diversity issues in the field of counselling psychology makes essential the use of culturally appropriate intervention strategies (Sue & Sue, 2003). Throughout the process of acquiring multicultural competencies, counsellors have the potential to learn to acknowledge and respect the unique and generic experiences, worldviews, and cultural identities of gay male youths. An additional query for future exploration might include the following question: What current social, educational, and institutional barriers exist for Canadian counsellors in the establishment and maintenance of gay affirmative counselling competencies?
Maria Montessori once stated that, “The development of the individual can be described as a succession of new births at consecutively higher levels” (Frank, 2001, p. 769). The counselling experience offers significant opportunities for participants to learn and grow in healthy, experiential, and transformative ways (Mezirow, 1991). The question on numerous scholars’ minds focuses on what the therapist brings into the working alliance.

Tjeltveit (1999) advocates that, “good therapy processes, by way of contrast, preserve and enhance client autonomy” (p. 169). Change is promoted by encouraging clients to maintain a sense of power and control over their change process and by accepting that the client is his or her own expert (Weiss, 1993). Clients tend to bring their preconceived perceptions of healing into the therapeutic environment; hence, counsellors must strive to create a safe space for their diverse clientele. In their roles as educators, counsellors need to teach their clients about the proposed process of psychotherapy. Collaborative communications assist with the development of a trusting and nurturing environment in which both the counsellor and client have an opportunity to learn and grow.

A number of potential areas for future research emerge from this discussion. For instance, as stated by the participants, without the necessary competencies for gay affirmative approaches to care, the therapeutic alliances with their counsellors are significantly compromised. Hence, it might be important to ask, for example, if one is practicing therapy with gay men without a solid competency base, is the working alliance beneficial or potentially harmful to the well-being and healthy-functioning of the client?
Final Conclusions: Personal and Professional Reflections

This research into the mental health experiences of young gay men in post-secondary education offered me an opportunity to explore my own personal and professional perspectives in this area. It was through the active journaling process throughout this research endeavor, that I have come to the following reflections. As a multicultural counsellor, my skills for communication and the creation of a trusting environment for growth are at the core of my working alliances. As I write this conclusion, my feelings are mixed. On one hand, I feel a great sense of accomplishment in that my skills have been greatly enhanced, while on the other hand I appreciate that my skills will always be in constant need of reassessment and further expansion. As each life lesson presents itself, I will inevitably continue to evolve as the kindhearted and open-minded counselling practitioner I am destined to become.

The roles of counselling psychologists are multifaceted and similar to that of applied social psychologists. Oskamp and Schultz (1998), suggests that all psychologists have the following responsibilities: (a) research, (b) evaluation, (c) consultation and change agency, (d) policy advice, (e) management of organizations, and (f) social activism (pp. 10-13). Psychologists must acknowledge the societal and institutional confusion within collaborative professions. Who is ultimately responsible for meeting the mental health needs of young gay men? The answer is simple: We all are! The concept of the gay community itself being totally responsible for the development of prevention strategies and interventions is in serious need of clarification. While the gay community has been integral in the promotion of healthy gay identity issues, accessibility to educational role modes may be limited for gay males in immediate need of educational and mental health interventions.

Twelve years ago, as a young gay man in search of self, I found myself moving from
counsellor to counsellor in an attempt to develop a positive gay identity. My feelings of isolation and loneliness, coupled with a longing to find my place within my local communities and Canadian society as a whole, resulted in a long period of depression, due to internal conflicts and ongoing harassment at school. While struggling through the coming out process, I longed for a therapist who would provide me with understanding, compassion, and acceptance. In hindsight, I was seeking a culturally empathetic and client-driven counselling practitioner. Instead, what I found was traditional and closed-minded therapeutic interventions, which denied my personal and cultural identity and encouraged me to conform to the dominant norm of heterosexuality. I have the capacity to be the counselling practitioner that I once desired. I sincerely hope that my colleagues, as individual members of both the dominant and culturally diverse communities, share in my vision of a more compassionate and accepting profession.

The process of identifying and acknowledging our conscious and subconscious perceptions requires voluntary dedication, self-reflection, and introspection. As individual counsellors and a collective whole, we must value the necessity of offering culturally inclusive knowledge, interventions, and counselling to the multicultural millennium. In my personal and professional opinions, the serendipitous climax of any working alliance occurs when participants gain momentous revelations into each other and themselves. Perhaps Hiebert (1997) said it best: “The skills that professionals use to establish rapport and build trust also serve to establish trusting and meaningful relationships in everyday interactions” (p. 1). The literature surrounding the mental health needs of young gay men offers significant evidence of cultural malpractice (Hall, 1997), in both society and the many helping professions. The jury is in and the verdict is clear – guilty. Compensation can only be paid in
the form of change. Until this occurs, my central role is to continue to engage in research that provides a voice to my community and culture.

The implications of the role of a self-directed approach to lifelong learning are numerous for the counselling practitioner in training. In striving toward continued competencies in the diverse areas that define our practices, we must be able to assume responsibility and liability for learning deficits that may have negative impacts upon our numerous working alliances.

It is my belief that the process of developing a personal theory of counselling, or approach to the helping profession, is not static. Rather, as in all aspects of our lives, we as counselling practitioners must adapt according to the environments in which the desired processes of change are to occur. Peter Drucker once stated, “Work [and life] is an extension of personality. It is one of the ways in which a person defines himself [herself], measures his [her] worth, and his [her] humanity” (Frank, 2001, p. 941). As we each evolve through our life span development and advance toward our future goals, we need to revisit the competing paradigms of past and present truths and introspectively engage in seeking an awareness of our life roles. The professional practice of counselling psychology offers therapists fruitful opportunities to build upon their ever-evolving individual theories of counselling.

Broderick and Blewitt (2003) suggest, “Studying development also facilitates counsellors’ personal growth by providing a strong foundation for reflecting on their own lives” (p. 1). The essential aspects of my core definition of self, imbedded within my three roles of learner, teacher, and counsellor, allow me to live and learn in an autonomous, self-respecting, introspective, and compassionate manner. Self-reflection and an ongoing commitment to lifelong learning will enhance my metamorphosis into a more competent
counselling practitioner and human being (Roughley & Taylor, 2005).
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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster

Participant Recruitment

Are you a gay man between the ages of 18 to 25?

Title:  Insights into the Mental Health Needs of Young Gay Men in Post-Secondary Education Settings

Investigator’s name: Robert A. Roughley M.Ed.

Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative

What is the study about: This is an exploratory study into the diverse needs of 18-25 year-old gay men studying at the post-secondary level within the unique context of the Canadian mosaic. I am interested in gaining insight into the individual counselling experiences of young gay men in higher education, the cultural implications of being a gay man in a heterosexual society, and the subsequent mental health needs of young gay men pertaining to the development and maintenance of positive gay identities.

Requirements for participation: (a) You must be a self-identified gay man between the ages of 18-25, (b) have attended counselling with a therapist for at least five sessions, and (c) been out to yourself and/or others for at least one year.

What is involved? One or two interviews and the review of transcripts for accuracy (total time commitment will be approximately four to six hours).

What if I am interested in participating? If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please take one of the tabs with my phone number below and contact me at your earliest convenience.
## Appendix B

### Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Nationality</th>
<th>Undergraduate or Graduate Student</th>
<th>Total Sessions of Counselling Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Trinidadian Canadian</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mack</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese Canadian</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudonyms used here.
Appendix C – Sample Journal Entry

My personal and professional life goals are strongly rooted in the foundations of experiential and transformative thought, self-directed and lifelong learning, and most importantly, the act of self-reflection. As Solon once stated, “Each day we grow older and learn something new” (as cited in Frank, 2001, p. 362). Through self-reflection and self-awareness, I have come to realize that wisdom is not linked to age, and life experiences and chance events do not define our social and intellectual presence. Rather, the engagement of self into the experience, the challenging of thought processes through metacognition, and the discovery of truth within our identities results in authentic judgment and insight. With the appropriate tools and a personal connection to the holistic elements that define identity and individuality, the act of reflection can occur throughout lifespan development. Boud (1985) argued, “Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull over and evaluate it” (p. 19). It is my assertion that this process must extend beyond the evaluation stage to also incorporate change and holistic rejuvenation. In essence, each life experience has the ability to transform our awareness of self and others. My work throughout this research process has allowed me to explore my own development as a gay man, researcher, and counselling practitioner. This final entry is a testament to this growth process.
Appendix C

Consent Form

Information and Consent Form for the study:

*Insights into the Mental Health Needs of Young Gay Men in Post-Secondary Education Settings*

Robert A. Roughley M.Ed.
Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative

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**Information for Participants**

The requirements for the Masters in Counselling program through the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative extends beyond actual course work into a written research project. I have chosen to explore the current mental health needs of gay men in post-secondary education institutions as my central research focus.

**Why you?**

As a gay man studying at the post-secondary level, you may have had personal and professional insights into your mental health needs as well as the needs of other gay men. By participating in this study, you will be providing your experiences and observations, as well as offering feedback for what you feel is needed in counselling settings for gay men.

**What will the study be like?**

As a participant in this study, you will participate in one or two individual interviews lasting 1 to 2 hours each. You and I will meet on one or two occasions (either in person or on the telephone) to discuss your individual experiences as a gay man in a post-secondary education setting.

Our discussions will be tape-recorded and transcribed by me. I will ensure that all information that you provide during our conversation will remain in the strictest of confidence. You will be assigned a pseudonym so that your personal identity will remain confidential. If at any time you wish access to the notes or recordings of our discussions, you may do so. During the subsequent data analysis, you will be called upon to verify your statements for accuracy. You will be asked, on the second page of this consent form, to provide your email address, phone number, and mailing address. Upon completion of the study, you will receive a copy of the completed manuscript that will be submitted to an academic or professional journal for publication. Other potential forums, in which I may present the results of this study, include graduate program discussion forums, academic conferences, or workshops.
All data collected during this study will be stored in a secure, locked location for five years (February, 2010) at which time these materials (print, electronic, and audio-taped) will be professionally destroyed. Audiotapes and transcripts will have only two identifiers (date of the interview and your pseudonym). This will further protect your anonymity.

As a participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to completion of research interview(s) and confirmation of verbatim transcripts. **There is always a risk that discussing personal experience will evoke negative feelings or thoughts. In the event that past or present concerns arise during your participation in this study, you are encouraged to reconnect with your counsellor or to approach the principal investigator for a list of counsellors in your area.** This being said, the potential benefits of sharing your experiences might include: educating counsellors and other allied health professionals in the area of continued competence when working with young gay men, advocating on behalf of others who have yet to come out as gay men, and finally, affirming your own positive gay identity.

If, as a research participant you have a concern about the research, you should feel free to discuss this at any time with the investigator, Robert Allan Roughley at rob@hoddinott.com or 613-530-2953 or with my Research Supervisor, Dr. Sandra Collins, sandrac@athabascau.ca or 1-888-611-7121.

If you have understood the information that has been provided to you and are comfortable with the responses that you have received to any questions you have posed, please sign below to show your consent to participate in this study. Please retain the second signed copy for your records in the event you need to contact either the principal investigator or the supervisor.

By signing below, I am indicating that I agree to act as a participant in the study discussed herein.

___________________________    ________________________
Signature of the Participant     Date

___________________________    __________________________
Email Address                 Phone number

Mailing Address
I have carefully and thoroughly explained the nature of the above study to the participant. I certify, to the best of my knowledge, that the participant understands what the study entails and that there are no known risks or benefits to his participation in this study.

__________________________________________    ________________________
Signature of the Investigator                        Date
Appendix D

Interview Questions

Let’s start by you telling me a little about yourself.

What year are you in at university?
What is your area of focus?
What does being “gay” mean to you?
How have you come to define yourself in this manner?
What does a positive gay identity mean to you?

Next, I’d like to focus on some of the issues and challenges that you have faced to date as a gay man within the post-secondary setting.

Describe any issues or challenges that you have faced.
What helped you the most in working through these issues or concerns?
Reflecting on these challenging circumstances, what has impacted you the most about your experiences as a gay man?

Let’s take a moment to shift our conversation to the successes you have experienced.

Describe the successes that you feel you have achieved within the realm of your identity as a gay man.
Were you able to achieve these successes as an openly gay man? If not, please outline the circumstances that impacted your inability to self-identify.

We all come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and often experience barriers that impact our growth on personal, academic and professional levels…

What barriers, if any, have impacted your access to educational and mental health services?
Has being gay ever negatively impacted your ability to function in your numerous educational and life roles? Please explain…

Sometimes, young gay men will go through common experiences because of their gay identity. I’d like to focus on your perceptions of how your experiences have been similar to other gay men that you know.
What educational and mental health commonalities do you believe you share with other gay men?

What educational and mental health differences make your experience unique?

Given these shared and unique experiences, what do you feel is required to provide young gay men with a safe environment in which to live, learn, and remain their authentic selves?

Let’s talk a little bit about your experiences within the counselling process.

Please take a moment to reflect back to your initial experience of going to see a counsellor. What was this experience like for you?

Choose one of the following categories to describe the nature of your presenting concern, but do not elaborate on the specific issues you were dealing with:

• Academic
• Career
• Personal – issues with self
• Personal – relationship issues
• Personal – family and friends
• Other

What impact did seeing a counsellor play in meeting your mental health needs?

What aspects of your counselling experiences were positive in nature?

Provide two examples of the kinds of interactions, ideas, or strategies that you found helpful.

Tell me a little bit more about your experiences in counselling, with a focus on what was not beneficial or not positive.
Did you feel comfortable disclosing your gay identity to the counsellor? Why or why not?

Under these circumstances, how did it feel to be able or unable to share this information?

What specific barriers existed for you related to the counsellor’s style, attitudes, knowledge, or skills?

What other barriers to self-disclosure did you encounter with the individual counsellor or the counselling services environment?

In discussions of multiculturalism in Canada, some take the position that sexual orientation represents a unique culture in itself. I’d like to now ask a few questions about this concept.

Describe your perceptions, feelings, and insights about the concept of “queer culture.”

Do you feel that you are a member of the “queer culture?”

How would you describe “queer culture” in the contexts of it being similar to or different from other cultures, such as ethnicity?

Counsellors of all sexual orientations are encouraged to adopt what are referred to as “multicultural counselling competencies” in their practice of working with diverse clients. These are essentially the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to provide effective counselling services to a diverse clientele. I’d like your opinion about a few things in this area as we finish off our interview.
What competencies do you believe should be present in all counsellors, especially when they work with people from non-heterosexual orientations?

Thinking back to your counselling experiences, which of these competencies did you note in your counsellor?

How did this impact your counselling experience?

How did this impact your perception of the counselling profession?

Which important competencies did you feel your counsellor was lacking?

How did this impact your counselling experience?

How did this impact your perception of the counselling profession?

**Sometimes, it is the contexts surrounding counselling that make it difficult or uncomfortable for gay clients to access effective services – the location, the style of the waiting room, etc.**

What social, psychological, and physical barriers would prevent you from experiencing a positive counselling experience?

What social, psychological, and physical barriers might prevent other gay men from experiencing a positive counselling experience?

**Before we finish today, I would like to ask you one last question.**

Of all the information that you have shared today, which do you feel is the most pertinent to understanding your mental health experiences as a young gay man in post-secondary education?

**Follow-up information:**

This interview will be transcribed within 7 days of the initial discussion. It will then be emailed to you for your review. It is expected that you review the transcript within one to two weeks and report any discrepancies or areas for further discussion. Upon completing your review, the participant and I may need to meet for a secondary interview if there are additional issues that it seems important. Thank you for your time and commitment to this research study.
Today, during my interview with ------, he became very emotional surrounding his potential disclosure of his sexual orientation to a close relative. I am taking note of this reality because his emotions were communicated through his body language and not through more expressed forms of emotional outlets (i.e. tears). He appeared to have almost gone elsewhere, transitioning in and out of context, only to return to the impact that his disclosure to this one person would have on both himself and his family.