

Coming Out Straight:
Role Exit and Sexual Identity (Re)Formation

by

Beverly Ann Bouma
Bachelor of Arts, University College of the Fraser Valley, 2003

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore the relevance of role exit theory in relation to heterosexual persons who formerly identified as gay, lesbian, or queer. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a self-identified sample of seven women and four men from southwestern British Columbia. Participants discussed the social processes involved in establishing a heterosexual identity, including social stigma, reactions of significant others, presenting authentically, and establishing heterosexual relationships. Research results indicate that role exit as theorized by Ebaugh (1988) cannot be used as an extension of Troiden's (1988) model of sexual identity formation to account for shifts in sexual identity subsequent to the establishment of gay, lesbian, or queer identities. Further, the experiences described by participants did not conform to the stages of role exit, which suggested the need for a flexible model of heterosexual identity (re)formation that takes into account behaviour, affect, cognition, and the acceptance of heterosexual or straight as a personal label.

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* Pseudonyms

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my father, John Bouma, and to my mother, Jane Bouma.

You taught me by example to be honest, respectful, work hard, play hard, have courage when faced with adversity, and to love with all my heart. For these and for your unfailing encouragement and support, I thank you.

1. Introduction

“I Questioned Homosexuality. Change is Possible. Discover How.” In February 2006, these words were posted on roadside billboards in Orlando, Florida, by Exodus International.¹ Shortly after posting four similar billboards in anticipation of the 2006 “Love Won Out,” an ex-gay conference sponsored by the religious organization Focus on the Family, the ads were defaced, further sparking the media’s attention on the ex-gay conference and the related issue of the mutability of sexual orientation. While television and print news quickly moved on to other stories, ex-gay support organizations waged a legal battle against Justin Watt, a San Francisco blogger who parodied the billboards on his website. According to the Ex-gayWatch website, Watt’s satire imitated the format of an Exodus ad worded, Gay? Unhappy? www.exodus.to, and read, Straight? Unhappy? www.gay.com (Airhart 2006). After American courts authorized a cease and desist order, Watt removed the Exodus logo from his website, and Exodus ended their court actions against him.

The ex-gay movement continues to occupy a place in the media, and has garnered popular media attention on prime time television shows such as *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Veronica Mars* (Tushnet 2006). In response to new media awareness of ex-gay programs, American activist Wayne Besen recently held a press conference announcing the launching of his new non-profit organization, Truth Wins OUT (TWO). TWO claims to be a formal reply to the ex-gay movement, and aims to increase public awareness concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered/transsexual (LGBT) issues (Besen, 2006). Besen, a long time denouncer of ex-gay groups and opponent of reparative therapy, continues to lead a counter-movement of former ex-gays, LGBT persons and

¹ Exodus is an umbrella group for the ex-gay movement, which aims to alter the sexuality of homosexual or bisexual persons such that they assume heterosexual lifestyles (Exodus International 2006). These usually Christian-based ex-gay groups (e.g. International Healing Foundation, Living Waters Canada, Concerned Women for America, National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality) and their supporters view sexualities other than heterosexuality as morally wrong and believe people can change through reparative therapy (religious and/or psychologically-based therapies meant to ‘repair’ non-heterosexuals).

allies in educating the public about such “right wing misinformation campaigns” (Besen 2006).

The media campaign put forth by proponents of the ex-gay movement and/or reparative therapy, and the counter-campaigns issued by organizations such as TWO and Ex-gayWatch are more than oppositional views on what some might define as a human rights concern. At the centre of the issue is a question to which both sides feel they have the answer: is sexuality mutable? More specifically, can LGBT persons become heterosexual? Each side supports their answer with a hodgepodge of personal testimonials, biblical quotations, and scientific studies of varying credibility.

Media coverage dichotomizes this controversial issue by focusing on partisan viewpoints and their opposing moral arguments. Scholarly sexual identity studies to date are rife with researcher and/or methodological bias; although many claim to be neutral in this debate, further investigation reveals affiliation with ex-gay groups (e.g. researcher Mark Yarhouse is involved with NARTH, and is an associate professor at the Regent University School of Psychology and Counselling’s Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity, which was founded by conservative television evangelist Pat Robertson). Regardless of polarized views on the veracity of individual and group claims about changes in sexual identity and the methods by which it may be accomplished, there exists a small population of heterosexually-identified people who used to identify as gay, lesbian or queer.

The purpose of this research is to study the processes and possible conflicts faced by formerly gay, lesbian and queer (GLQ) adults in establishing new heterosexual identities and lifestyles. Discourses surrounding sociological models of sexual identity formation (cf. Cass 1979, 1984a, 1984b; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989) – in particular, non-heterosexualities – present the process of identity formation as a series of stages, normally beginning with a heterosexually-identified person, and ending with a gay or lesbian-identified person. While these stage models do not adequately address the

ongoing changes in human sexualities throughout the lifespan, they are a starting point for examining the experiences of formerly-GLQ heterosexuals.

Society treats sexual identities as stable, rather than fluid. Flexibility in this area undermines the fixed categories that comprise the established, heteronormative social order (Rich 1980; Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter & Lickel 2003). Stage models of homosexuality reflect this presumption of stability by concluding with a commitment to homosexuality as an identity and a way of life. The lack of acknowledgement that further changes in sexual identity may be possible creates a space where Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory may fit in. In 1988, Ebaugh published a study of the experiences of 185 persons exiting familial, occupational, and stigmatized social roles. She posited that individuals exiting a role that is central to their identity and establishing a new role which takes into account the old role experienced common stages of social adjustment in establishing an "ex-role." Due to the rarity or relative newness of ex-gay or formerly GLQ as a recognized sexual identity in society, people in this small population have fewer behavioural expectations to guide their transition into their roles as heterosexuals. New ex-roles such as former homosexual or ex-gay have the added characteristics of being disruptive to the social order due to their perceived instability at the same time as being relatively hidden in the general population. In these ways, Ebaugh's (1988) work may be applicable to persons who challenge notions of irreversible/fixed categories of sexual identity by exiting GLQ identities, and establishing and maintaining heterosexual identities.

In considering the mutability of sexualities over time, this research addresses the unidirectional framework of previous models of sexual identity formation as a sociological research problem, and employs role exit as a theoretical framework for examining this problem. Specifically, I aim to answer the following questions: (1) is role exit theory applicable to ex-gays; and, (2) if so, can role exit theory be used as an extension of Troiden's (1988) model of homosexual identity formation to account for subsequent shifts in sexual identity?

In answering these questions, I begin Chapter Two with a description of Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b), Troiden's (1988) and other models of sexual identity formation, and outline Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory. I then discuss the four stages of role exit: (1) disengagement; (2) disidentification; (3) role residual; and, (4) the creation of the ex-role. These core concepts and the links between them formed the theoretical basis of this research, which investigated the practicability of integrating aspects of both theories into a new model of continuous sexual identity formation.

Following the theoretical framework and literature review, Chapter Three describes the research methods and defines terms important to the research topic. Also included is a brief discussion of some of the methodological challenges faced during the research process. The majority of the research findings and discussion comprise Chapter Four. Based on interviews with eleven research participants, this chapter describes some of the social implications of coming out as straight after having formerly identified as gay, lesbian or queer, and presents themes that emerged from the data in relation to role exit. Experiences of participants are described using the stages of role exit in order to establish the potential of this theory to increase our understanding of what may occur after the point homosexual identity theories leave off – with identification as gay, lesbian or queer.

Chapter Five concludes with recommendations for further research, discusses the limitations of the study, and suggests characteristics for a proposed model of continuous sexual identity formation. A reflexive account of this research project is appended to examine the relations between participants and the researcher, as well as to draw attention to the participation of the researcher within research processes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter consists of two sections: identity theory and role exit theory. First, I introduce general identity development theory, beginning with definitions of self and identity, and then expanding to include sexual identity development theory. A discussion of homosexual identity development follows, including a detailed overview and critique of various models of homosexual identity formation. Theories of sexual identity formation are presented before introducing role exit since research participants established GLQ identities prior to identifying as heterosexual. Further, familiarity with various theories of sexual identity formation is important to my research because it provides the context for answering part two of my research question: if role exit is indeed applicable to ex-gays, can role exit theory be used as an extension of Troiden's (1988) model of homosexual identity formation?

The second section of the chapter introduces Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory, a four stage model which explains the socialization process of learning a new role after having established and maintained a previous role. In order to answer my primary research question – [is role exit theory applicable to ex-gays?] – the utility of this theory in understanding role changes that are central to one's identity is examined in the context of persons who have exited a gay or lesbian identity and have since established a heterosexual identity. The core tenets of identity and role exit theories provide a vocabulary and theoretical framework for this thesis.

2.2 Identity Theory

2.2.1 General Identity Development

Identity development is affected by family, educational institutions, peer groups, the media, religious organizations, workplaces, and the government as primary agents of socialization. The self is linked to biological, physiological, and environmental needs, and is predisposed to develop in particular ways if certain conditions exist (Mead 1964; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989; Dovidio, Major & Crocker 2003). According to Mead (1964), the *I* and the *me* are conceptions of self as an inner consciousness (the subjective *I*) as

well as a social construction (the objective *me*). The *I* and the *me* have a dialogical relationship: the inner consciousness is socially organized by the importation of the exterior social world, and the objective self is a partial projection of the inner self. In a study, data related to the *I*, also known as one's self-concept, may yield data of richer depth and breadth than a study focussed on the organized perceptions of others, which make up the *me*; however, both components constitute the self (Mead 1964; Marshall 1998). Self concept (one's mental images of his/her self, what a person think s/he is like as a person) relates to identity, which refers to one's perceptions of characteristics which represent the definitive self in and across a variety of social settings, actual or imagined (Stryker 1968; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989).

The language and symbols used in society affect self-development, as one learns through family, peer groups, media, religious affiliation, government and school, to classify people and things into meaningful categories (Stryker 1968). Language enables interpretation of social values and norms; it affects how we express ourselves experientially in relation to those values and norms, as the sense of self and identity develops and evolves through the life span (Longmore 1998). Identity characteristics (e.g. homosexuality) vary in their perceived value, salience and visibility, importance, essentiality, and permanence through differing situations and time (Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989). In addition, the context in which language and symbols are expressed affect individual and group identification with social norms.

2.2.2 Socio-Cultural Contexts of Sexual Identity Development

Socio-Cultural Contexts

Individual behaviours and emotive experiences must be socially contextualized in order for us to attach the personal meanings that make these actions and feelings make sense in our particular social environment (Mead 1964). Before people are able to categorize themselves, or locate themselves within a particular set of social conditions, they must learn that these categories (e.g. variations in sexualities) exist, learn that others occupy these categories, and see that they are more similar than different from people in a particular category (or categories) in terms of socially-constructed needs and interests. In addition, they must begin to identify with others in a particular category, decide that these

same needs and interests, across differing social situations, qualify them to be a part of that category. They must then take on the label associated with being in this social category (e.g. queer, homosexual) when and where it is relevant to their social setting, and, over time, incorporate these situation-specific identities into their overall concept of self. When an individual is able to respond to his/her own person as a multi-categorical social entity in the same manner he/she responds to other people, attainment of self is said to have occurred (Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989).

Sexual Identity Development

This approach, constructing the self as both cognitive and affective (comprising both thoughts and emotions), is specifically applied by Troiden (1979, 1988, 1989) to sexual identity development. Troiden states that humans begin life "...in a state of polymorphous perversity, an open-ended, diffuse, and relatively fluid capacity for bodily pleasure seeking that may attach itself to any one of the objects, people, or events that exist in the immediate culture" (1988:5). Sexual development, then, is social in nature, and is affected by time, space, culture, material surroundings, and personal interactions (Longmore 1998). Experiences, and their particular contexts, shape sexual development as one learns about and attaches meaning to his/her own – and others' – social interactions.

Sexual conduct, and in particular, learning what is generally considered appropriate or inappropriate sexual behaviour, is socio-cultural in character (Brown 1995, Longmore 1998). We learn to be sexual through *sexual scripts*, a term first coined by Simon and Gagnon (1986) and defined by Troiden (1988:6) as, "sets of norms, values, and sanctions that govern the erotic acts, statuses, and roles recognized among a social group." All of these vary across time, culture, and social location.

Homosexual Identity Development

In North American society, heterosexuality is assumed (Rich 1980). Stage models of homosexual identity formation generally begin with this assumption, and end with the further assumption that former heterosexuals will, at some point, integrate their new gay or lesbian identity into all aspects of their lives (Cass 1979, 1984a, 1984b; Coleman

1982; Fassinger & Miller 1996; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989; McCarn & Fassinger 1996). Socially normative cultural scenarios and sexual scripts contribute to the production of common properties in the process of moving from a heterosexual to a homosexual orientation. Troiden refers to the process of adopting homosexuality as a way of life as a *status passage*, which he describes as, “observable changes in identity and world view that accompany movement from one social position to another” (1988:14). He describes heterosexual to homosexual status passage as having five main properties: (1) isolation; (2) lack of clarity of signs; (3) centrality; (4) undesirability; and, (5) irreversibility.

Isolation occurs due to social stigma, which prevents, or at least discourages, discussion of homosexual feelings and desires (Goffman 1963; Savin-Williams 1998). As the stigmatized nature of a socially undesirable attribute such as homosexuality frequently results in discriminatory actions by others (Goffman 1963; Falk 2001), the associated, often clandestine public conduct of gay men and lesbian women results in a paucity of clear behavioural signs indicating the existence of other homosexual persons. In addition, the centrality of homosexuality as a defining character of the self colours all social interactions, exacerbating the conditions of social isolation, and frequently leads to covert behaviour in public spaces. It is arguable that North American society is becoming increasingly liberal with regard to sexual diversity; however, there is continued social stigma attached to homosexual acts and actors (Haldeman 1999; Falk 2001). Finally, society treats sexual identities as stable, rather than fluid; the possibility of reversibility or mutability of sexual norms threatens the maintenance of hegemonic, heteronormative social order (Rich 1980; Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter & Lickel 2003). These interrelated characteristics of status passage to homosexuality as an identity and a way of life are particular to North American society, and comprise key elements of Troiden’s (1979, 1988, 1989) model of homosexual identity formation.

2.3 Models of Homosexual Identity Development

Developing a socially normative sexual identity is a process that involves awareness of various sexual scripts, and an understanding of which scripts are appropriate at socio-cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels. Identification of the self as belonging to particular categories in society involves learning about those categories and others who

occupy them, identifying with a particular category and labelling one's self accordingly, and incorporating this identification into the overall concept of the self. Status passage from heterosexuality to a stigmatized sexual identity has additional challenges, such as social isolation, lack of clearly established sexual scripts to follow, social stigma, and apparent irreversibility.

Models of sexual identity formation describe stages of development – usually from heterosexual to homosexual – that depict a desire for knowledge about homosexuality, increased self-acceptance of the homosexual label, and disclosure of one's homosexual identity to an ever-expanding circle of friends, family, co-workers, and the general public. Social stigma is an ongoing concern during this process, and is usually marked by a change in stigma management techniques (e.g. less effort spent on passing as heterosexual, or increased efforts to educate others regarding homosexuality). Stage models of homosexual identity development, such as those proposed by Cass (1979, 1984a, 1984b) and Troiden (1979, 1988, 1989), offer insight into the difficulties of this particular identity formation process with regard to social stigma. Nonetheless, except for acknowledging that not everyone may complete all the stages, these models do not acknowledge the possibility of further changes in sexual identity, or the management of any associated social consequences of future shifts in sexual identity.

Alternative models of sexual identity formation include Alderson's (2003) ecological model of sexual identity formation, which focuses on homosexual affect, cognition, and behaviour as key aspects of sexual identity, and Yarhouse and Tan's (2005) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) disidentification, which challenges the notion that successful identity development must necessarily conclude with the establishment of a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity. My discussion of models of homosexual identity formation now begins with a discussion of Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b) model.

2.3.1 Cass's Model

Introduction

While much has changed in the stigma associated with homosexuality since the late 1970s, studies of homosexual identity formation continue to reference Cass (1979, 1984a,

1984b) as an authority on the subject. Cass (1979, 1984a, 1984b) proposed a model of homosexual identity formation consisting of six stages: (1) identity confusion; (2) identity comparison; (3) identity tolerance; (4) identity acceptance; (5) identity pride; and, (6) identity synthesis. Cass (1979, 1984a, 1984b) indicated that there was a difference between personal and social identities, in that one might privately – but not publicly – identify as homosexual; however, as the process of identity development continues, personal and social identities become increasingly congruent. In addition, she assigned the individual an active role in his/her identity development, asserting that at any stage in the model one may choose *identity foreclosure*; that is, to no longer continue developing a homosexual identity.

Identity Confusion

Stage one, identity confusion, begins when an individual consciously realizes that his/her thoughts, emotions, behaviours, or physiological responses to others of the same sex may be construed as homosexual. This new awareness is incongruent not only with the perception of self as heterosexual, but also with others' perceptions of one's heterosexuality. One may attempt to resolve this confusion by changing one's self-perception, inhibit or deny any homosexual tendencies, or re-define the meaning of same-sex thoughts and behaviours as non-homosexual. If one is successful in re-defining oneself and/or one's behaviour as non-homosexual, identity foreclosure occurs, and one retains a heterosexual identity.

Identity Comparison

If stage one is not concluded with identity foreclosure, an individual moves on to stage two, identity comparison. At this point, the likelihood of a homosexual identity is accepted as a possibility, increasing the congruence of self-identity with thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, and decreasing the dissonance between self-perception and the perceptions of others. In this stage, a person becomes increasingly alienated, as s/he doesn't feel s/he belongs to either heterosexual or homosexual social groups or subgroups. The goal of stage two is to reduce the incongruence between self and others. Individuals use various strategies to manage this incongruence while determining what course of action to take, including continuing to pass as heterosexual in order to maintain

the perception of others in the interim, as well as devaluating others' opinions in preparation for negative responses to one's possible future presentation as homosexual. When a person finds his/her homosexual attractions acceptable, s/he moves on to stage three of the homosexual development model; if s/he does not, identity foreclosure occurs and s/he continues to identify as heterosexual.

Identity Tolerance

Increased commitment to a homosexual identity leads to stage three, identity tolerance. During this time, one feels increasingly alienated from heterosexual society, and seeks out other homosexual persons in order to reduce social isolation. Positive experiences with other homosexual persons assist with achieving a positive self-image as a homosexual, while at the same time furthering feelings of distance from heterosexual society. Negative experiences result in devaluation of the gay community, and possibly self-hatred – especially if one had already viewed homosexuals in a negative light. To address the feelings of self-loathing, one may reduce contact with the gay community, or commit to inhibiting same-sex attractions and behaviours. If the latter occurs successfully, one may continue to identify as heterosexual regardless of same-sex attractions; alternatively, one may experience positive contact with the gay community and begin to self-identify as homosexual.

Identity Acceptance

In stage four, one accepts, rather than tolerates, his/her homosexuality. Increased contact with the gay community serves to restructure one's interpersonal relationship matrix, and influences how one handles the progression of homosexual identity development. At this time, one may accept a philosophy of partial legitimization of homosexuality (that it is a valid identity in private, but should not be displayed in public), or a philosophy of complete legitimization (homosexuality is valid as a public and private identity). Acceptance of a philosophy of partial legitimization creates less interpersonal tension, as one self-identifies and behaves as homosexual, but maintains the congruency of others' perceptions by continuing to pass as heterosexual; however, limiting contact with heterosexuals and only disclosing his/her private identity to selected persons may result in intrapersonal tension (e.g. the duality of being 'in the closet'). Successful use of

compartmentalization strategies results in a manageable level of congruence between self and others, and as one's interpersonal matrix remains stable and unchanged, one accepts an identity of homosexual. Embracing a philosophy of complete legitimization causes increased tension between self perception and the perceptions of others. Management of this incongruence can lead to the next stage.

Identity Pride

Stage five, identity pride, confronts the intrapersonal tension between one's self-perception of acceptability and society's rejection of homosexuality as an acceptable public identity. A dichotomous view of society emerges, with homosexual as significant and heterosexual as insignificant, as one assumes a group identity as homosexual and spends increased time immersed in gay community, literature and culture. The work of daily living accentuates the social values of compulsory heterosexuality, and the resulting frustration and anger are a push towards rejecting strategies for homosexual identity concealment, and adopting activist behaviour. Incongruence between self-perception and others' perception of the self is more often resolved by way of disclosure. Due to the social stigma surrounding homosexuality, negative reactions from others are expected. Upon disclosure of a homosexual identity, one may accept that there will be differential responses in his/her interpersonal matrix, and will more often disclose his/her identity as homosexual. Positive reactions, most often incongruent with one's expectations, lead to the next – and final – stage, identity synthesis.

Identity Synthesis

One reaches identity synthesis when one is able to discard the false 'us-them' dichotomy of homo- and heterosexual, and realize that there are heterosexuals who accept and support one's homosexual identity. Supportive heterosexuals remain in the interpersonal matrix, while those who are unsupportive are further devalued. There is greater congruence in the interpersonal matrix, and while feelings of anger and pride remain, they are less intense. Instead of seeing the homosexual identity as paramount, one is able to integrate this identity as a part of an overall self-identity.

Conclusion

Cass (1979, 1984a, 1984b) described homosexual identity development as having progressive stages, yet provided the caveat that her model may not be considered completely linear, as differing personality characteristics, socio-cultural circumstances, and experiences related to the social stigma of homosexuality affect individual developmental processes. Within this model, there are several assumptions to note: that one had previously identified as heterosexual; that people can accept homosexuality as a positively valued status; that identity is acquired through a process of progressive development; that change or stability in behaviour is highly correlated with one's social environment; and, that homosexual identity formation applies equally to all genders of GLQ persons. Cass's model is explicit regarding the possibility of cessation of homosexual identity development; however, her statement that "identity is not fully developed until the final (identity synthesis) stage" (1984a:118) seems to imply that identity foreclosure prior to the final stage is indicative of individual impairment or lack of ability to further develop one's sexual identity. Cass (1979, 1984a, 1984b) claims that individuals are active in choosing either identity foreclosure or continued progression toward a homosexual identity, but her model does not account for the continuation of same-sex desires, thoughts, and behaviours that may be inhibited by those choosing to maintain a heterosexual identity.

2.3.2 Troiden's Model

Introduction

Troiden (1979, 1988, 1989) presents an ideal type four-stage model of homosexual identity formation with a final outcome of male and female *committed homosexuals*, that is, persons perceiving themselves as homosexual – romantically and sexually – and who adopt a corresponding lifestyle. Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) model is considered an improvement on Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b) six stages of homosexual identity formation, as the latter has been criticized for the lack of definitive boundaries between stages (Degges-White, Rice & Myers 2000). Troiden (1988) notes the following common elements of previous homosexual identity development models: homosexual identity formation takes place against a backdrop of stigma; develops over time with marked stages; involves increased self-acceptance of the homosexual label; and finally, *coming*

out (disclosure of homosexuality to others) occurs at the point where one self-defines as homosexual, and takes place at a number of levels, usually involving an expanding circle of associated persons. Troiden's model contains all of these characteristics, occurring through four distinguishable stages, beginning with sensitization, progressing through identity confusion, identity assumption, and graduating with a commitment to the new identity.

Sensitization

Troiden's first stage of homosexual identity development, sensitization, occurs prior to puberty, during a time when most young people assume they are going to be heterosexual. Social experiences of difference or marginality, especially in thoughts of, or actual violation of actual gender role norms, serve to sensitize children to a later self-definition as homosexual (Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989; Nelson & Robinson 2002). Troiden (1979, 1988, 1989) asserts that childhood feelings of difference are not in themselves indicative of future homosexuality; rather, the meanings that homosexual adults later attribute to that childhood sense of standing apart from others are different than those of heterosexual persons.

Identity Confusion

Troiden typifies the second stage, identity confusion, as one of cognitive dissonance between a previously assumed heterosexual identity and the idea that one might be homosexual (1988:45). Factors resulting in identity confusion include: an altered perception of self; experience(s) of both hetero- and homosexual arousal or behaviour; the social stigma of homosexuality; and, lack of knowledge and/or misinformation regarding homosexuals and homosexuality (1988). Troiden states that in this stage, "genital and emotional experiences, more than social experiences, seem to precipitate perceptions of self as sexually different" (1988:46). Further, in an earlier study by Troiden (1979), 148 of 150 gay males recalled a stage when they thought they might be gay, but weren't completely sure.

Strategies used to deal with identity confusion include: repair (e.g. professional help to eradicate homosexuality); denial; avoidance through inhibiting homosexual behaviour

and desire; limiting opposite-sex exposure; and, for fear it will confirm homosexual status, limiting exposure to information about homosexuality. Strategies used to deal with identity confusion vary among individuals, and also include escapism through drugs and alcohol, assumption of anti-homosexual behaviours and attitudes, heterosexual immersion, and the redefinition of behaviours and desires along conventional lines. Finally, identity confusion may also result in acceptance of homosexual feelings, desires, and behaviours, accompanied by information seeking to “determine the nature of their sexual preferences” (1988:49).

Identity Assumption

During or after late adolescence “a significant number” of people proceed to stage three (Troiden 1988:50). Homosexual identity is assumed as well as presented (at least to other homosexuals). Gender role socialization plays an important part in how one defines his/her homosexuality. For example, men generally define their sexuality in terms of social and sexual situations, while women define it in terms of romance and love (Nelson & Robinson 2002; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989). Initially, individuals merely tolerate their homosexual identity, and then come to accept it. Contact with other gay or lesbian persons is important, as positive experiences may facilitate homosexual identity formation, and negative ones may result in a continuation of non-homosexual perceptions of self, and/or avoidance of future contact with homosexuals (Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989). Stigma management, such as minstrelization, passing, and avoidance or immersion in a homosexual community, becomes an important concern in this stage.

Commitment

The final stage of Troiden’s identity development model is the adoption of homosexuality as a way of life. This is usually initiated by involvement in a same-sex relationship, and signified by “self-acceptance and comfort with the homosexual identity and role” (1988:54). Indicators of being a committed homosexual are both internal and external. Internal indicators include: fusion of same-sex sexuality and emotionality; perception of the homosexual identity as an essential identity; perception of the homosexual identity as a valid self-identity; a strong degree of satisfaction with one’s homosexual identity; and increased happiness since arriving at a homosexual self-

definition. External indicators include a same-sex love relationship, disclosure of homosexual identity to heterosexual persons including family and friends, groups of people (e.g. co-workers), and the general public, and a shift in stigma management strategies. Stigma management techniques such as blending (publicly presenting only aspects of the self that blend in with heterosexual norms) and covering (deliberately presenting as heterosexual to those that are not privy to one's homosexuality) involve presenting oneself in a certain manner without denial of one's homosexual identity; however, stigma management can also involve efforts toward educating others about homosexuality, which may include overt presentation of one's homosexuality. Although internal and external indicators may be used in general to indicate one's movement into this final stage, Troiden stresses that "commitment to the homosexual identity and role is a matter of degree" (1988:58).

Conclusion

Similar to Cass's model (1979, 1984a, 1984b), Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) four-stage homosexual identity formation is linear, and stipulates that not all committed homosexuals will have progressed through every stage prior to exhibiting indicators of identity commitment, as differing characteristics, socio-cultural contexts, and individual experiences related to the social stigma of homosexuality affect one's homosexual identity formation. Troiden's (1988) model assumes previous identification as heterosexual, a continued progression of socially-driven identity development, and a final destination of a stable, committed homosexual identity.

2.3.3 An Ecological Theory of Homosexual Identity Development

Introduction

Alderson defines gay identity "as an identity status denoting those individuals who have come to identify themselves as having primarily homosexual cognition, affect, and/or behaviour, and who have adopted the construct of *gay* as having personal significance to them" (2003:78).

In order to address some of the shortcomings of stage models of sexual identity formation, Alderson (2003) proposes an ecological theory of gay male identity, and like

Troiden (1988, 1989) neglects to consider the experience of lesbian women. Alderson's (2003) model is ecological in that the author advances a holistic approach to studying humans, their environment, and how they interact. Unlike most ecological theories, it does not take biophysical factors into consideration due to the accompanying suggestion of essentialist notions of identity acquisition, a process which Alderson considers a social construct rather than a result of biophysical preconditions. Alderson's (2003) model considers psychological and social aspects, and integrates both process-related components and developmental stages.

Before Coming Out

As with previous models of homosexual identity formation, the ecological model has at its centre the concept of cognitive dissonance. Before a male person identifies as gay, he must resolve the inner conflict between the catalysts that encourage development of a gay identity, and the hindrances that repress homosexual thoughts and behaviours. In the first stage, before coming out, major catalysts and hindrances include parent/family, culture/church, and peers. The intensity of cognitive dissonance felt depends upon the frequency and intensity of positive/negative attitudes of the catalysts/hindrances in the man's interpersonal familial, institutional, and social networks. When the dissonance intensifies to a level where catalysts push past the hindrances, he is able to self-identify as a homosexual, and may or may not choose to come out as gay.

During Coming Out

The next stage, during coming out, focuses on establishing a positive gay identity. As people are socialized to believe they are heterosexual until such time as they are presented with evidence to the contrary, questioning of the homosexual identity continues in this phase until one is able to accept oneself as having primarily homosexual cognition, affect, and behaviour. Inner conflict continues due to the relative influences of catalysts and hindrances; the individual has an easier time identifying as gay if people in his interpersonal network are tolerant or supportive of his new identity. During this time of development, he continues to assess his thoughts and feelings to ensure he is, in fact, homosexual, and at the same time learns what it means to be gay. Alderson (2003) excludes behaviour from the definition of sexual orientation, because many people have

sexual relations for reasons other than their orientation, although men in this stage are likely to engage in same-sex sexual experimentation or behaviour, which may positively or negatively influence their identity development. Those who have aligned cognition, affect, and behaviour in the same direction will experience less cognitive dissonance in this stage.

Beyond Coming Out

Beyond coming out is the final stage in Alderson's (2003) ecological model. It is at this point that the homosexual man self-identifies as gay. Three areas requiring further integration so that he may be fully positive about his identity are connecting with self, connecting with the gay world, and reconnecting with the heterosexual world. Feeling authentic in one's identity, building a sense of community, reconnecting with heterosexuals, and coping with homophobia in the heterosexual world are all part of the process of this final achievement – establishing a positive gay identity.

Conclusion

Alderson's (2003) theory differs from stage models of homosexual identity formation by including cognition, affect and/or behaviour, and the adoption of a gay label or construct in the definition of homosexual identity. He uses familiar language and concepts such as Festinger's (1957) concept of cognitive dissonance in his explication of gay male identity development, but increases the applicability of his model with his assertion that sexual behaviour is not a necessary component of a successfully established gay identity.

2.3.4 A Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Disidentification

Introduction

Yarhouse and Tan state "sexual identity refers to how people think about themselves and communicate their identity to others" (2005:530). They assert that sexual identity is established over time and is considered to be fluid. The contextual nature of individual experiences within society at large requires acknowledgement of this limitation within sexual identity research. This is especially important because sexuality intersects with gender, age, ethnicity, ability and cultural variants. Labelling one's self with a particular sexual identity occurs under the influences of one's sexual attractions, biological sex,

gender identity, moral beliefs, values, and behaviours (Yarhouse 2001; Yarhouse 2005; Yarhouse & Tan 2005).

The Study

Yarhouse and Tan (2004) challenge the assumption that the successful identity development of persons with homosexual attractions and desires must necessarily end in a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) identity. In their study of Christian LGB-identified and LGB-disidentified persons (persons who once identified as LGB and then rejected the LGB label and identity), these authors suggest that religion affects one's attributions regarding homosexuality, and the options available for dealing with those desires.

In his 2005 study, Yarhouse indicates that a majority of both LGB-identified and LGB-disidentified participants re-considered their sexual identity, although their same-sex attractions remained. Six of the fourteen LGB-identified group members stated they had reconsidered their initial identification as LGB because the personal cost seemed too high, while eleven members of the fourteen in the LGB-disidentified group re-considered their decision to disidentify. These results suggest a type of cost-benefit analysis associated with sexual identity formation, as well as the possibility of a separation between same-sex attraction and sexual identity. Yarhouse and Tan (2004) suggest that these results, similar to Yarhouse's pilot study, are due to a lack of specific support for or a higher level of difficulty involved for individuals with same-sex attractions who choose to disidentify as LGB.

While the study of LGB-identified and LGB-disidentified persons conducted by Yarhouse (2005) contains valuable information and insight, it is notable that the recruitment of research participants was not done by the researcher, but by the leaders of two religious ministries: a gay-positive Metropolitan Community Church pastor, and a leader of an Exodus International affiliated ex-gay ministry. This method of recruitment may have lead to considerable bias due to the research respondents' participation in pro- and anti-gay programs/movements.

The Yarhouse Model

In the first stage, identity confusion or crisis, a person experiences his/her initial confusion at the feelings of same-sex attraction. If one attributes these feelings to the possibility of being homosexual, but has certain religious beliefs that are contrary to acceptance of homosexuality, s/he may have an identity crisis.

The second stage of this model is identity attribution, where an individual attributes same-sex desires either as an indicator of a LGB identity, or simply as an indicator of an inclination s/he has. In this stage, how one attributes one's homosexual attractions may be a factor in whether or not s/he identifies as LGB personally and/or engages in activities to establish a sense of identity as a LGB group member.

After making attributions, termed *identity foreclosure versus expansion*, a person may go on to develop a LGB identity (identity foreclosure), or investigate what other options are available to him/her (identity expansion). At this point, the Yarhouse model (Yarhouse & Tan 2004) assumes a similar process of homosexual identity development as models such as Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b) and Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989). All suggest that those who experience same-sex attraction but do not adopt a LGB identity engage in a different type of identity expansion organized around another aspect of the person, such as gender identity or religious beliefs.

This process leads to the fourth stage, identity reappraisal, which is when a person encounters difficulties surrounding the decision to either identify or disidentify as LGB, such as failed efforts to assimilate into the LGB community, or failed impulse control regarding their same-sex attraction. At this point, the person reconsiders his/her decision, and may return to the point of identity confusion or crisis. If one is satisfied with his/her choice to either identify or disidentify as LGB after reappraising their decision, s/he moves on to *identity synthesis* (Yarhouse & Tan 2004). Sexual identity synthesis, the point at which one is satisfied with one's sexual identity, is described as having two trajectories, one which Yarhouse (2004) likens to Troiden's (1988) *committed homosexual* stage, and the other which he terms a *heterosexual shift*. This shift towards a

heterosexual identity may occur after one reconsiders a former LGB identity, or after a reconsideration of whether one wishes/is able to maintain a previous heterosexual identity. Sexual identity synthesis takes place after the fourth stage of the model but it is seen not as a fifth stage; rather, it is the endpoint of sexual identity development.

Conclusion

In studies of religiously affiliated LGB-identified and LGB-disidentified people, Yarhouse (2001, 2005) suggests that persons having particular religious beliefs and values attribute their same sex attractions to having something 'wrong' with them, which conceivably contributed to their disidentification with a LGB identity. Other potential influences to which Yarhouse (2005) draws attention are family, peers, and LGB literature; these are context-dependent and as such may encourage or discourage disidentification with a LGB identity. Reported hindrances to developing a LGB identity included shame and social stigma, the possibility of jeopardizing familial relationships, denial, negative peer responses, and possible rejection from the church. Hindrances to disidentifying as LGB included emotional needs being met by same-sex relationships, sexual/physical needs being met in same-sex relationships, the suitability of the 'gay lifestyle' to one's personality, and not knowing (of) anyone else who went through the process of disidentifying as LGB (Yarhouse 2005).

Regardless of the inherent research bias, Yarhouse (2005) contributes to sexual identity theory by distinguishing three multidimensional themes related to both LGB-identified and LGB-disidentified persons. Participants from both groups went through a stage of sexual identity confusion, followed by sexual identity development, and resulting in sexual identity synthesis. The sexual identity development stage may contain a reconsideration of one's choice to identify publicly or privately as LGB or not; however, the final stage, sexual identity synthesis, suggests the finality of this choice.

2.3.5 Critiquing Models of Homosexual Identity Formation

Most models of homosexual identity formation focus on gay men (Alderson 2003; Coleman 1982; Miller 1978; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989), but there are a variety of theories and models that focus on lesbian identity development. McCarn and Fassinger's

(1996) model of lesbian sexual identity formation identifies individual and group identity development as two independent but interrelated components of sexual identity development that are often not differentiated in studies of sexual identity (cf. Coleman 1982; Miller 1978; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989). In discussing lesbian identity, Jenness emphasizes the difference that “a ‘doing’ is not a ‘being’ ” (1992:65). She argues that the adoption of the cultural construct of lesbian is dependent on a process of redefining the term lesbian such that it acquires increasingly positive and self-applicable connotations. This ongoing process, termed *detyfication*, varies along racial, ethnic, class, national, and religious lines, but in each case detyfication, rather than behaviour, is a prerequisite for women to arrive at a lesbian identity, and to identify with the social category of lesbian.

Swann and Spivey are critical of stage models of homosexual identity (cf. Cass 1979, 1984a, 1984b; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989; Coleman 1982), saying, “components of internal awareness and involvement in the larger gay and lesbian culture are conflated” (2004:630). Based on McCarn and Fassinger’s (1996) phases of sexual identity development, Swann and Spivey (2004) found that the beginning phases of lesbian identity development were associated with lower self esteem, while in the final phase of identity synthesis, there was a positive correlation with self esteem. Swann and Spivey (2004) also found that group membership acted as a protection for lesbian women’s self-esteem, even though the group itself carries social stigma.

Critiques of homosexual identity formation models tend to focus on only one aspect of a model that is considered flawed. Gender based, individual or group-focused, and progressive stage models may all then be assessed as deficient; at the same time, they do contribute to understanding the social processes surrounding changes in sexual identity from heterosexual to homosexual.

2.4 Role Exit Theory

2.4.1 Introduction

After a process of status passage from one identity or role to another, the question arises: what happens next? This is addressed by Ebaugh in her 1988 study of persons

exiting occupational, familial, and stigmatized social roles. Ebaugh coined the term role exit as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role” (1988:1).

Ebaugh (1988) maintains that role exit existed in North America as a phenomenon among people of earlier historical times. Until the late 1950s (excepting in times of war or political upheaval when social mobility could become erratic), widowhood, unemployment, or being ostracized from a group were the most commonly occurring role exits. Role exit theory now bears further examination due to its increasing prevalence in a modern society where divorce rates for first marriages are over 50%, people generally follow more than one career path, and compared to past generations, people are less likely to remain geographically close to their parents (Ebaugh 1988:2). Contemporary role exits, such as changes in marital status, career, geographical location, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation are not generally considered unusual in Canadian society at present. In particular, as issues pertaining to variations in sexualities are discussed in the media on a more frequent basis, controversial role exits such as coming out of the closet or changes in sex/gender presentation become enculturated as normal occurrences within an established minority group, while they retain the element of stigmatization in society at large (Wittig 1992).

Ebaugh asserts that this process differs from a socialization process which involves the learning of a new role without having previously established and/or maintained another role central to one’s identity; it is not simply a reverse-ordered socialization process. Properties affecting the role exit process include a continuum of voluntariness, the centrality of the role to one’s identity, and the reversibility of the change. In addition, the duration of transitional periods within a role exit are influenced by individual social factors, as well as institutional determinants such as workplace policies for leaves of absence. Role exit is also affected by whether it is an individual or group exit, whether one is exiting a single role or multiple roles simultaneously, the social desirability of the exit, the degree of institutionalization surrounding the ex-role, the degree of awareness or

intention of the exit, and whether it is one of an ordered sequence of role exits (Ebaugh 1988:35-9). These properties are seen throughout the graduated stages of role exit.

2.4.2 Four Stages of Role Exit

Ebaugh (1988) identifies four distinctive stages in role exit: (1) disengagement; (2) disidentification; (3) dealing with role residual; and (4) categorization as an ex-member of a group.

Disengagement

In the first stage, doubts regarding one's role may develop due to organizational change, job burnout, drastic changes in relationships, or unsettling events. Doubters cue others with conscious and unconscious signs of dissatisfaction with their present role, and are influenced in their actions by significant others. Disengagement occurs as the exiter begins withdrawing from the expectations associated with a particular role and the people associated with that role-set.

Disidentification

The second stage of role exit involves an individual's search for alternative roles; this is a type of cost-benefit analysis that varies in duration depending on the social desirability and reversibility of the role exit. Ebaugh (1988) found that this stage was of longer duration for those contemplating irreversible role changes, such as nuns considering leaving their order or persons desiring sex reassignment surgery, as well as those leaving occupations that required many years of training, such as physicians. During this time of deliberation, any connotations of social desirability or social stigma attached to the new role are imminent considerations, and reactions by significant others to cues given by the exiter are likely to either encourage or disrupt the move towards a new role. The process of disidentification begins when one shifts his/her identity in the direction of the new role and no longer self-identifies with the role s/he is about to exit.

Dealing With Role Residual

Following the evaluation of alternatives and during the continuing process of disidentification, one arrives at stage three – a turning point where the role exit is more formally initiated. This moment may arrive due to events which make the exit necessary, an event which constitutes the “last straw” in a negative situation, time related factors

such as age, incidents providing an excuse or justification, or “either/or” circumstances requiring action (Ebaugh 1988:125). The turning point is the focal point for the announcement of upcoming change. It reduces cognitive dissonance in the exiter’s perception of his or herself, and also functions to mobilize his/her social and emotional resources. An exiter may feel at loose ends, or in a state of euphoria combined with fear at this point in the role exit process, particularly when s/he first externally indicates the decision to make a change (Ebaugh 1988:123). It is at this point where the exiter begins to deal with *hangover identity*, or role residual, the vestiges of his/her now-previous role (Ebaugh 1988:4). Ebaugh distinguishes between socially desirable exits, such as that of a former drug abuser whose hangover identity may be negative, but whose ex-identity is socially approved, and undesirable exits, such as a former nun, whose ex-identity is not necessarily negative, but may result in a degradation of social status (Ebaugh 1988:156). Social stigma attached to either or both the former and ex-roles affects how the exiter is perceived by others, and the manner in which s/he deals with role residual.

Categorization As An Ex-Member of a Group

The fourth stage involves the creation of the ex-role, where the exiter incorporates his/her former role into a new self-concept at the same time as s/he learns his/her new role. At this stage, individuals adapt to new social expectations and learn to present themselves in the new role in a manner that is convincing to others. Depending on how well exiters take to their new role, and whether they are required to deal with the negative consequences of entering a socially discrediting role, they may continue to experience some role residual, such as the ex-physician that others continue to address as ‘doctor.’ Accordingly, they may engage in various stigma management strategies.

Ebaugh (1988:3) states, “an ex-status derives meaning from contrast with the status previously held.” In other words, there exists no ex-status without a former role from which one has disengaged. Indeed, some exes, such as former sex-trade workers and substance abusers, base their new roles on their previous deviant roles, and credit their former roles for their success in their ex-roles as counsellors to persons in their former role-set (Brown 1991; Sharp & Hope 2001). The more central the role exited is to one’s identity, the more profound the exiting experience.

Ebaugh also states, “another characteristic that makes the ex-status unique are the images society holds of previous roles” (1988:5). Exes are judged not only on their current role and role performativity, they are also judged on their previous role(s), if known. For persons moving from a stigmatized to a socially sanctioned role – such as an alcoholic joining a twelve-step program – information regarding their formerly discredited state may yet be stigmatizing; however, the desirability of the ex-status provides a higher level of social approval. When one moves from a socially accepted to a stigmatized role, such as a homosexual coming out to an ever-widening circle of family, friends, and members of the general public, stigma is attached to the new role as well as the motivations surrounding the process itself.

Exes of all types are constantly required to interact with persons who were not part of their previous group. Ebaugh touches on the possibly detrimental consequences of these situations, which often require some form of stigma or information management, saying, “the attitudes of such people often involve ignorance, stereotypes, curiosity, and a lack of sensitivity to the nuances of a previous role” (1988:6). In addition, the stigma associated with the role exit may surface during encounters with the exiter’s previous role-set.

Conclusion

Role exit is the disengagement from one role and the establishment of a new role that takes into account the former, both of which are considered central to one’s self-identity. The ex-role, while a unique sociological phenomenon, is increasingly prevalent in North American society, as cultural values and norms such as those pertaining to the immutability of gender, changes in sexual orientation, religious traditions, and heterosexual marriage become increasingly liberal. Elements of the role exit process especially related to changes in sexual identity include the centrality of the role to one’s identity, the reversibility of the change, the social desirability of the exit, the degree of institutionalization surrounding the ex-role, the degree of intention associated with the exit, and whether one is exiting several roles simultaneously.

2.4.3 Role Exit Studies

Ebaugh's (1988) theory has been used as a theoretical framework for examining a variety of role exits including studies of former religious and cult members (cf. Albrecht and Bahr 1983; Bahr and Albrecht 1989; Ballis 1999; Boeri 2002; Dandelion 2002), former athletes (cf. Drahota and Etizen 1988), the end of adolescence (cf. Hagen and Wheaton 1993; Hagen and Foster 2001), former criminals/sex-trade workers (cf. Brown 1991; Sharp and Hope 2001; Miller 2002), and other life-changing experiences. These types of studies illustrate the usefulness of role exit as a framework for analyzing how individuals and groups negotiate changes affecting their roles and identities.

Ebaugh's (1988) model has been used successfully to illustrate that identification as an ex-member of a group creates a different role for the person having recently assumed a new role. Other persons in the new role-set or peer group having taken on that role directly do not have to deal with residual effects of a previous role. This *hangover effect* may be a detriment to some (e.g. the difficulty of breaking former patterns of behaviour) and a benefit to others (e.g. by means of experience and associated knowledge). The hangover effect is of particular interest in examining role exits where either the former role or the new ex-role (or both) have the additional challenge of managing the effects of social stigma.

Role residual, or the hangover effect is of particular interest in relation to persons engaged in the process of exiting an established homosexual role and assuming an ex-role as heterosexual. Ebaugh states that "there are ex-roles which are relatively new or rare in society and for which there exist fewer specific expectations" (1988:19).

Such ex-roles involve greater 'role making' since individuals moving into these roles are faced with an ambiguous situation in which there are few existing behavioral expectations. As such roles become more common, they tend to become more highly institutionalized and better defined by society (1988:20).

The irony of the ambiguous terrain to be negotiated by former gays/lesbians assuming a heterosexual role in society is that heterosexuality is arguably among the most institutionalized social norms in present day Western culture. Regardless of large scale

exposure (through socialization by family, school, religion, media, government, and so on) to the expectations surrounding normative heterosexuality, the missing experiential aspect is not taken into account for ex-gays and lesbians learning their new role, because it is not taught – it is assumed. In this way, a change in identity from homosexual to heterosexual may be considered an emergent identity shift.

2.4.4 Summary

This chapter reviewed literature pertaining to identity and role exit theories, as well as theories of homosexual identity formation. Awareness of the socio-cultural contexts of sexual identity development provides a basis for understanding how people identify with particular categories in society, and incorporate these into their overall concept of self. Models of homosexual identity formation attempt to explain the social processes commonly experienced by persons shifting from heterosexual to homosexual identities. The concepts advanced in stage models of homosexual identity formation are valuable as tools for understanding the contextual character of identity shifts related to stigmatized sexualities such as former homosexuals or ex-gays. In addition to the vocabulary and concepts offered by role exit theory, Ebaugh's (1988) work is complementary to theories of homosexual identity formation due to its potential to continue on at the point homosexual identity theories leave off – with identification as gay, lesbian or queer.

To date, literature pertaining to homosexual identity formation – including those offering the possibility of retaining a heterosexual identity – does not account for possibility of further changes in sexual identity subsequent to identification as gay, lesbian or queer. Recent media attention to the ex-gay movement and the associated debate regarding the mutability of sexuality indicate the timeliness of research pertaining to multiple shifts in sexual identity. This study addresses the need for research in this area by examining the challenges faced by persons who were formerly gay, lesbian or queer, and who have subsequently established and maintained identities as heterosexuals.

3. Definitions and Method

3.1 Research Focus

This research focused on self-identified heterosexual women and men who formerly identified as lesbian, gay or queer, with the understanding that these categories are a linguistic convenience – terms of respect for persons who identify or have identified in the past with these labels – rather than divisive, discontinuous categories (Rust 1995:35).

3.2 Definitions

In this study, a shift in sexual identity is defined as a conscious, individual choice to engage in a process to change one's sexual identity, and take on the self-perceived social attributes, obligations, and consequences of that identity. For the purposes of this research, *lesbian* is defined as a person self-identifying as a lesbian female, who engages exclusively in romantic/sexual relationships with other persons identifying as female. *Gay* is defined as a person self identifying as gay male, who engages exclusively in romantic/sexual relationships with other persons identifying as male. *Queer* is inclusive of persons identifying as such, and whose sexual orientation and/or behaviour are considered to be outside heterosexual social norms. The term queer represents a diversity of persons that may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, polyamorous, or involved in any aspect of BDSM; however, to maintain the focus of the research project, persons using the term *queer* to describe their former identity must meet the same definitional criteria as gay or lesbian persons.

Heterosexual is defined as a woman self-identifying as heterosexual, who engages in romantic/sexual relationships exclusively with men, or a man self-identifying as heterosexual, who engages in romantic/sexual relationships exclusively with women. For purposes of this research, Kinseyan (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Gebhard, and Martin 1953:470) terms such as *exclusively heterosexual* and *exclusively homosexual* are used with the understanding that sexuality exists on a spectrum or series of continuums, rather than as a set of binary opposites.

3.3 Research Parameters

I chose the criterion of shifting from a homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation for the purposes of illustrating a clear, dramatic shift in sexual orientation, and for demonstrating the potential for multiple sexual identity shifts through the lifespan. Due to the small size of the study and the increased complexity involved in comparing the experiences of persons located elsewhere in the matrix of sexual identities, people formerly or presently identifying in any other categories (such as bisexual) were excluded from this study. It is important to note that participants must present as previously self-identifying as gay, lesbian, or queer, and not simply as a person with homosexual desires and/or behaviour. As Thompson (1987:xi) states, “gay implies a social identity and consciousness actively chosen, while homosexual refers to a specific form of sexuality. A person may be homosexual but that does not necessarily imply that he or she would be gay.” Thompson’s assertion indicates the difference between self-identification in society as gay or lesbian, and sexual orientation; the latter can more easily be kept private, allowing for the option of retaining a heterosexual façade.

The target population consisted of male and female adults, aged twenty-one or older, living in south-western British Columbia. To be included in the study, research participants must have established and maintained their gay, lesbian or queer identity for a minimum of two years; following this time period, they must have established and maintained a heterosexual orientation and social identity for a minimum of two years.

In her 1971 study, Ebaugh’s sample of (1988) ex-nuns had a median of one year and three months since their role exit; her 1984 sample of occupational, familial, and stigmatized role exiters had a median of three years since exiting their particular roles. In her study of workers exiting the sex trade, Miller (2002) qualifies the exiting of a role central to self identity as a process, and justifies two years as a sufficient time frame to determine a permanent role exit. Similarly, in her study of ex-gay and gay Christians, Wolkomir (2001) characterizes “longtime” church members as those actively involved for two or more years. Yarhouse and Tan (2004) also use two years as the benchmark for

identity establishment/maintenance in their study of religiously-affiliated LGB-identified and disidentified persons.

In order to maintain the focus of the research on the effects of a single change in identity, other categories known within the gender/sexuality matrix (e.g. transgendered, transsexual) were excluded.

3.4 Sampling Method

Due to the sample being hard to reach, marginalized, and requiring privacy – common characteristics of hidden populations (Heckathorn 1997) – the necessity of a small sample size and the specific requirements for inclusion in the proposed research, there was no attempt made to obtain a representative sample. Instead, convenience sampling was employed, using the snowball technique to generate a sample of qualified research participants. As snowball sampling involves having participants refer others with similar characteristics to themselves to the researcher, it is an especially appropriate method when members of a certain population are difficult to locate (Babbie 1998:195).

3.5 Ethical Issues

Issues of privacy were an ethical concern. These were addressed by obtaining informed consent, identifying interview tapes and transcriptions with a pseudonym and a number, and referring to research participants by pseudonyms in any publications resulting from the research. After project completion, audiotaped interviews and documents linking participant identities to their tapes and transcripts were destroyed. Participants were advised that only the researcher and research supervisors listed on the Participant Informed Consent Form (see Appendix IV) would have access to this documentation, located in the home office of the principal investigator. Transcripts will be retained for a period of not less than five years, in two formats: (1) a paper copy in a locked cabinet; and (2) password protected computer files, both kept by the principal investigator at her home office. After this time, paper copies of transcripts will be destroyed, and retained in electronic format only.

3.6 Recruitment and Respondents

The participants were 7 female and 4 male adults aged 22 through 62, self-identifying as formerly lesbian, gay, or queer. Recruitment occurred through an initial advertisement and follow-up advertisement on a university Pride email list, Equity and Human Rights email list, a local newsprint-style magazine, and through personal social networks. The advertisement provided potential participants with a brief overview of the research project and the email address of the researcher (see Appendix II).

Persons who responded to the advertisement(s) were screened via telephone or in person by the researcher to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the study. In addition to the question of age, potential participants were asked questions pertaining to their current and former sexual orientation in order to ascertain a shift in their sexual identity; it was explained to them that this process was required to ensure a good fit with the research project. Questions included self-rating on a seven point scale (see Appendix III) adapted from the Kinsey scale of sexual orientation.² Adaptations made from the Kinsey scale included some change in the wording of the rating interpretation (e.g. using *completely* rather than *exclusively*), as well as the expressed connotation that one's sexuality consists not only of behavioural patterns, but is also part of one's personal and social identity. Initially, a minimum four point change (from a score of 5 or 6 to a score of 0 or 1) on an adaptation of the seven point Kinsey scale was required to participate.

3.7 The Challenges of Screening Respondents

Initial screening using the qualifying questionnaire proved difficult. Persons responding to the advertisement were provided with a telephone number at which to reach me. However, some individuals wished to be interviewed by email, and I was reluctant to allow an unlimited amount of time for them to read the entire questionnaire and decide on their answers due to the possibility of skewed results or delays in the research process. Some respondents who reached me via telephone did not feel

² The Kinsey scale rates sexuality on a continuum from heterosexual to homosexual and is interpreted as follows: (0) exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual; (1) predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual; (2) predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual; (3) equally heterosexual and homosexual; (4) predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual; (5) predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual; and, (6) exclusively homosexual (Kinsey, 1948:638).

comfortable answering questions regarding their sexual identity, or saying anything that would indicate to nearby others that they were responding to my advertisement. For these reasons, I invited respondents to meet with me based on brief telephone or email conversations, and verbally completed the qualifying questionnaire with them immediately prior to the interview, taking note of their answers.

The qualifying questionnaire posed additional challenges. In most cases, it was either wearisome or confusing for respondents to have the Kinsey scale criteria explained to them. In other cases, respondents were aware of the Kinsey scale and discounted it as irrelevant. In order to address protests against the use of Kinsey type criteria, respondents were instead asked to rate how strongly they formerly identified as GLQ on a scale of zero to six (zero being not at all, and six being completely), and later asked the same question with respect to their current heterosexual identity. Use of a Likert scale to indicate strength of identity satisfied the majority of interviewees; however, I continued to face challenges regarding the quantification of sexual identity, and in three cases,³ was advised that there simply was no way of “putting a number on it.”

For example, when asked, “How strongly do you identify as straight?” Zoe responded:

That’s a pretty strongly, but it’s a bit splitting hairs...I disagree with the whole categories... I can’t really relate... I don’t – I can foresee a time in my life where I won’t identify that way again. That’s what’s funny, I guess. That’s what the whole experience has taught me, is... not to put so much emphasis on sexual identity... I’d say I identify really strongly as straight. Right now.

Gina summarized her response to questions of sexual identity by saying, “I identified after I graduated [from post-secondary education] as lesbian, and now I identify as... straight.” In these cases, respondents presently identifying as straight and previously identifying as GLQ were included in the study, based on their expression of the same.

³ Respondents Gina, Ron, and Zoe (Not their real names. All participants were assigned pseudonyms)

Another notable participant, Ron, completed the qualifying questionnaire in person and did not meet the criteria to be included in the study; however, his comments regarding the relationship between gay identity and behaviour challenged assumptions within my research parameters, so I went on to interview him at that time. Having maintained his heterosexual identity for only five months, the similarities and/or differences of Ron's experiences to that of other participants might indicate the need for different selection criteria, or suggest the possibility of differing social experiences due to length of time spent establishing and maintaining a heterosexual identity after having formerly identified as GLQ. I interviewed Ron for illustrative purposes, and with the understanding that although he had not maintained his heterosexual identity for two years, he could make a valuable contribution as a person engaged in the early stages of a change in sexual identity.

3.8 Data Collection and Coding

Prior to commencing interviews, participants were given a copy of the Participant Informed Consent Form to read and sign (see Appendix IV). I explained the content of the form to them, and any questions regarding the form or the project's approval by the Human Research Ethics Board were answered at that time.

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing the participants the opportunity to give a detailed history of their circumstances and self-perceptions of their changes in sexual orientation (see Appendix V: Interview Guide). Questions posed related to the chronological history of coming out as queer, gay, lesbian, and heterosexual, motivational factors and turning points in the process of shifting sexual identities, perceived success or failure of the changes in sexual identities, and strategies for managing the social consequences of these identity shifts. An advantage of this type of open-ended interviewing included the incorporation of a holistic view of social phenomena, with the respondents' voices being heard, and the possibilities for unforeseen themes to emerge during the course of the interview process (Davidson & Layder 1994; Rudestam & Newton 2001; Campbell & Gregor 2002).

Interviews were between one to two hours in length. They took place in a location convenient and comfortable for the participant, such as the participant's home, a university meeting room, or a coffee shop. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews, and e-mailed copies of the transcriptions to participants who had indicated interest in seeing them.⁴ While all participants were offered a copy of their interview transcript, and the further opportunity to clarify or comment on any of our discussion, none replied to my e-mail with anything other than a thank you. Transcripts were coded for the purpose of thematic analysis, focusing primarily on role exit and identity theory, while leaving room for the actualization of data-driven themes. These two levels of analysis were complementary to one another. Theory based thematic coding is suited for consistency across multiple units of analysis, whereas data-driven coding enhanced the possibilities for the emergence of previously unrecognized perspectives relating to theory (Boyatzis 1998).

The process of coding followed a three-stage model consisting of open coding, followed by axial coding, and, finally, selective coding (Neuman 2006). The open coding stage was the first pass of the data, in which themes were identified and preliminary codes were assigned. Axial coding, the second pass of the data, consisted of reviewing and examining the initial codes, further organization of themes by combining, subdividing, or organizing them in sequence, and identifying the axis of the key components that emerged in the analysis. Finally, and with specific themes identified in previous coding, selective coding took place (Neuman 2006). During this stage of analysis, I selected cases illustrative of the developed themes, and compared and contrasted consistencies and differences between cases and groups of cases. This part of the process is similar to Boyatzis' (1998) process of developing theory-based thematic coding, which consists of generating a code, reviewing and revising the code, and determining the reliability of the coder and the code. In addition, a further data analysis process consisting of examining transcripts for coding consistency by recoding at a later date, indicating the reliability of the coding process.

⁴ Ange, Eve, Gent, Lily

3.9 Reflexivity

A reflexive account of this research is included in order to draw attention to my participation as a researcher within the research process. In adopting a reflexive attitude and method, I acknowledge and examine my assumptions; in doing so, I aim to disrupt the complacency that can seep into sociological inquiry (Poller 1991:376). Walsh (2002, 2003) states that reflexivity may be characterized as attitudinal, rather than procedural; however, he emphasizes that there are diverse research practices associated with the reflexive approach. In Appendix I of this thesis, I discuss Walsh's (2002, 2003) four main aspects of reflexivity – personal, interpersonal, methodological and contextual – using my personal journal which contains my thoughts, feelings, and an accounting of some of my experiences related to this research project.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overview

In this chapter I address the research findings, beginning with a description of the data and interview participants, and a brief discussion of emergent themes in the data. I then discuss the process of role exit as it occurred for respondents, and follow those results with a discussion regarding the relevance of Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory to the data.

4.1.1 Description of Data

The data are derived from interviews conducted in south-western British Columbia during March and April 2006 with eleven heterosexual persons who formerly identified as gay, lesbian or queer. Interviews focused on the social processes involved in changing one's sexual identity, including motivations, social consequences, and actions related to those consequences.

4.1.2 Description of Participants

The participants were eleven residents of south-western British Columbia. Seven were female, and four were male, aged twenty-two to sixty-two years, with an average age of forty-one. All but one Chinese-Canadian were Caucasian, and indicated Canadian or Euro-Canadian ethnicity. Their education levels ranged from completion of grade eleven high school to six years of post-secondary study. All but two of the participants had some college or university education, and four had completed a university degree. Six participants had no religious beliefs or affiliations. The others identified as Buddhist, Wiccan, Pagan, "kind of Christian," or simply stated they were spiritual people. Three participants, two men and one woman, were in long-term heterosexual relationships of two years or more, and two other women stated they were in a dating/sexual relationship with men. Two participants were in parenting relationships with teenaged or adult children.

In accordance with recruitment criteria, the participants had formerly identified as gay, lesbian, or queer for a period of two to twenty-nine years, with an average of over twelve years. With the exception of Ron, the participants had identified as heterosexual for a period of two to twenty-three years, with an average of over seven years. On the whole,

participants resisted quantifying how strongly they identified as homosexual or heterosexual, and some⁵ identified as straight due to their thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviour, rather than any affinity with heterosexual or straight labels.

4.2 Emergent Themes in the Data

Inductive coding yielded themes of gender differences, sexuality and social stigma in the data, which were also present throughout the theoretically-based codes. A theme of dualities/binaries weaves through the interviews, as participants describe the processes involved in forming and re-forming their sexual identities.

4.2.1 Gender Differences and Gender Roles

Differences between female and male participants were marked by internalized social norms and feelings that it was important to meet expectations for gender-appropriate behaviour. Gender role performance emphasized traditional masculine and feminine qualities; this was especially evident in the participants' presentation of self and our discussions of sexual relations. Men appeared more affected by social stigma, while women felt sexualized by men who knew of their previous lesbian identities.

Gender Role Performance

In discussing the process of establishing a heterosexual identity, masculinity and femininity were frequent topics, and were generally conflated with gender role performance. Excepting one woman who described all women as "loving and caring" by nature, the women generally expressed femininity in terms of appearance, making reference to make-up, dresses, long hair, and beautification for the purpose of becoming more attractive to men. The women also used expressions such as, "he's such a man," when describing their perceptions of men as less emotionally and relationally mature.

The male participants' portrayal of masculinity was action-based. In discussing masculinity, Bill expressed his feeling that any remnant of effeminate speech or gesture would result in others perceiving him as gay. Bill spoke of the pains he took to correct his posture and body language, and emphasized the importance of meeting social standards of masculinity by saying, "that's how they'll get you, by your body language."

⁵ Ange, Eve, Lily, and Zoe

Although Gent expressed his opinion of a “real man” as one who is “in touch with his yin side,” the others spoke of gay males as effeminate, or as Ty stated, “more of a woman than a man,” when comparing their previous relationships with men against their experiences with women. Overall, women’s descriptions of femininity emphasized passivity, where men’s descriptions of masculinity emphasized activity; however, in both cases, masculinity and femininity were presented as mutually exclusive and opposites to one another.

Sexuality

While it was not part of the interview guide, both men and women volunteered information regarding their experiences and perspectives on sexuality. Participants’ interpersonal sexual scripts were reflective of cultural and context-based scenarios, and followed a pattern of relational scripts for women, and recreational scripts for men (Trolden 1988). Descriptions of (hetero)sexual experimentation were generally presented as opportunistic or situational. Women stated they had interactions that were “just sex,” or in which they were “just a body” that was sexually available; similarly, male participants often referenced sexual relations in terms of being “meaningless,” or “a positive and pleasurable thing.” Both female and male participants perceived men as more goal-oriented than women in sexual relationships, and noted that initiating sexual relations with men was a more “straightforward” process. Female participants associated emotional relationships with sexual relationships more often than did males, while both men and women referenced stereotypical notions of female sexual urges such as “lesbian bed-death,” and the notion that women find sex less enjoyable than men. In addition, the women reported feeling sexualized by men who, once they were aware of their former relationships with other women, perceived them as either sexually inexperienced (virgins) or oversexed (sluts).

4.2.2 Social Stigma

Social stigma was a factor for participants, particularly during the cost-benefit analysis and for the establishment/maintenance of a heterosexual identity. Internalized feelings of “not being normal” or marginalization were motivators in initiating or accepting a shift towards heterosexuality, particularly for male participants. While there was a certain

level of acceptance of social stigma as a fact of life for participants during the time they identified as GLQ, the social stigma of having formerly been GLQ differed due to its potential to discredit established heterosexual identities. Participants engaged in various stigma management strategies, such as compartmentalizing interactions with the straight and GLQ communities, changing modes of dress/personal appearance/body language to conform to traditional gender roles, withholding personal information during social interactions, and avoiding uncomfortable social situations. The longer an individual had maintained their heterosexual identity, the less they felt the social stigma of having formerly been GLQ.

4.2.3 Social Stigma and Gender Differences

Gender differences were largely situated in experiences of social stigma. Male participants did not come out to their parents/families as GLQ due to their expectation of negative reactions, and were therefore unable to draw support for their subsequent shift to heterosexuality. For example, of the men, Bill was adamant regarding keeping this part of his past from his family and current (female) partner of two years. Even though ten years had passed since his change in sexual identity, Bill felt that deeply-held homophobic sentiments of his loved ones would result in rejection of his present self, due to his former identity as a gay man. While Ty and Gent did not rule out the possibility of revealing their former gay identities to their families, only Gent shared this part of his history with his partner, and recently discussed his twenty-nine years as a gay man with one of his brothers who seemed to be struggling with same-sex attractions, and his mother prior to her death. For these men, during the time they were gay, the perceived consequences of being so took them to places where they knew they would be accepted and safe: the queer community, a community of artists, or in relationship to same-sex partners. With the exception of Gent, who shared his experience of shifting his identity from gay to straight with counselling clients and his family, being straight men involved putting their past in the closet.

Overall, female participants spoke of social stigma more in terms of how they interacted with others, rather than as an internal force that inhibited their actions or choices. Women received positive and negative responses from family members and

friends regarding their lesbian identities, as well as their subsequent heterosexual shifts. Even with the expectation that someone might react negatively to the knowledge of their former lesbian or queer identities, women expressed more often that they took – or would take – the opportunity to share that part of their history with another. In addition, women more often than men indicated changes in personal appearance or fashion as a part of presenting authentically as heterosexual. These findings suggest that gender differences in socialization contribute to men feeling more keenly than women the possible consequences of violating traditional norms of gender and heterosexuality.

4.2.4 Social Stigma and Heteronormativity

In recounting their experiences as GLQ, participants described the effects of social stigma and internalization of social norms. As a gay man, Ty felt keenly the possibility of being verbally or physically abused in public spaces, and continually made efforts to be in safe spaces when engaging with members of the queer community. As a straight man, he continues to segregate his interactions with gay friends from those who know him as straight. Gent asserted the seemingly contradictory beliefs that it was “perfectly okay” to be gay, and that “homosexuality is an illness,” blending mainstream liberalism with conservative rhetoric. While Ron stated he hadn’t really felt stigmatized while he was gay, using the term “proper relationship” to describe his desire for a romantic/sexual relationship with a woman indicated internalization of heterosexual norms. His feelings of having avoided social stigma may be a result of withholding information from family and intimates regarding his gay identity, as well as the process of establishing himself as newly heterosexual.

Gina deemed lesbian relationships as “unbalanced,” due to the absence of the physical safety that is theoretically provided by the man in a heterosexual relationship. While Zoe also voiced her belief that lesbian relationships were lacking, she specified that that was not always the case; it was simply her experience and what she felt at that time of her life. Dealing with “negative stereotypes” and “being defined against a mainstream” were described as frustrating and a source of anger. While fitting in as a heterosexual was difficult at times, it was “easier” than “being a minority.” Overall, increased valuation of heterosexual norms by participants was evidenced by information management, social

avoidance of homosexuals, and clear statements regarding homosexuals as the other. Further discussion of these strategies follows in section 4.3.7, stigma management techniques.

4.3 Role Exit and Coming Out Straight

4.3.1 Searching for Alternatives

The exiting process began with the participants' search for alternative roles. This cost-benefit analysis was evident as individuals described assessing the pros and cons of being gay or lesbian in relation to other important wants, needs, and goals.

Two participants, Ty and Ron, considered their gay identities in the context of a larger cost-benefit analysis of their life choices. Ty described a thought process he used in evaluating the choices he made on a daily basis, saying:

Do I really want this? Is this a positive part of my life? Is it helping me... to succeed? And it wasn't, you know, it was bringing me down, it was giving negative side effects to everything else I was doing, so that's... when I changed the thought of my identity... in a sense.

Ron related a similar process of making decisions:

I've just been doing a lot of mental work, and a lot of what do I really want? type of stuff, you know. What is the stress on me? What do I really want? ... I've just been chucking out things that don't work, be they, you know... day jobs, or ways that I do things, or whatever... so, I guess it's kind of inevitable, given that process, that I would eventually... come down to... chucking out seeing guys, too, that that would have to go... as something that just wasn't working.

Ty and Ron's decision-making processes regarding sexuality and life choices are similar, even though Ty has maintained his heterosexual identity for two years, compared to Ron's five months. That Ty remains actively engaged in an ongoing cost-benefit analysis with regard to sexual cognition and behaviour suggests that this process may be a continuous element of an identity shift, rather than limited to the disidentification stage of a role exit (Ebaugh 1988).

Zoe's disappointment in the lesbian "way of making rules and relationship patterns" lead her to examine what type of relationship would best fulfill her needs at that point in her life. Although she had been happy with "butch-femme dynamics," and was conscious that she could have and raise children in a lesbian relationship, she was not completely satisfied on a deeper, "primal" level:

The inner... fertility thing, which is, kind of at the base of a lot of relationships, was not being met... we would prune each other into these strange shapes, to try and satisfy each other, and it's like, oh, what are we doing, you know? there's something really satisfying about relationships that follow a traditional pattern in your mind... your deep, cultural mind. And I think I was always trying to make that happen, but inside of a lesbian relationship.

Feelings of grief at the lack of fertility in her lesbian relationships were a factor in Zoe's consideration of a heterosexual relationship as viable alternative. In considering the relation between biology and role exit, Zoe's experience of same-sex relationship dissatisfaction due to her perception of its inherent infertility is reflected in Ebaugh's (1988) research only in her treatment of age as an impetus for change, and biological factors that may be related to the role exit experiences of transsexuals.⁶

Three other participants provided evidence of a search for alternative roles due to failed same-sex relationships, or disenchantment with what they perceived as the gay lifestyle. Bill described taking a hard look at the "gay scene" and was discouraged to see so many of his gay male friends engaging in risky behaviour, and having repeated relationship failures. In deciding that what he wanted was a long-term, monogamous relationship, and that he didn't want to suffer the consequences of promiscuity or repeated heartbreak, the thought of "crossing over" to the heterosexual world became a consideration. Gina also found it difficult to remain in a same-sex relationship, saying, "it didn't really work out too well." In determining what was the best course for her life, Stella considered the

⁶ It is of note that Zoe's experience is not reflected in sociological stage models of homosexual identity development, and points to a gap in Alderson's (2003) ecological model. Contrary to other ecological theories, Alderson (2003) avoids the suggestion of an essentialist perspective by specifically excluding biophysical factors.

negative aspects of previous lesbian relationships which she felt were different from heterosexual relationships, such as changes in women's behaviour after beginning to date, and their "irrational" behaviour when it came time to parting ways.

Searching for alternatives involved a cost-benefit analysis which included a broad range of factors such as personal stressors, employment, social and cultural traditions, the possibility of bearing children, relationship experiences, and a review of the positive and negative aspects of available choices. Aside from child-bearing, the weighing of alternatives is consistent with Ebaugh's (1988) theory, and encompasses societal influences and environmental factors such as parents/significant other(s), cultural and peer pressures, each of which exerts influence during the process of a shift in sexual identity.

4.3.2 Turning Points

Following the evaluation of alternatives, participants experienced a turning point where the role exit was more formally initiated. Turning points were relationship related, the result of a negative event which constituted the 'last straw,' or were due to incidents providing an excuse or justification, or a combination of these. Two participants experienced other life-changing events to which they attributed the initiation of their shift in sexual identity. The turning point was a point of convergence for participants' disidentification as GLQ, as well as for their announcements of imminent change.

Relationship - Related

The turning point for Bill came when he met a woman to whom he was attracted. At that time, he "crossed over" to the heterosexual world. After his relationship with the woman ended, he continued to engage only in romantic and sexual relationships with women, and has now done so for ten years. Gina indicated a similar scenario: meeting a man she wanted to date, just at the "point I kinda got at the end of my rope, and I'm just like, I'm not happy, I'm totally miserable... I'm going to try something else..." Gina ended her relationship with a woman, ceased her involvement with the queer community, and began seeing the man she found attractive. For Zoe, the day she left her female

partner and moved in with a man marked a turning point, since it was the first outward action taken that indicated her inner questioning process.

Georgia marked the turning point in changing her sexual identity as the time her relationship with a woman ended in disaster. Lily also cited a bad ending to a two-year lesbian relationship, but in conjunction with a timely opportunity to accept the offer of a date with a man, as the point at which she began to establish herself as heterosexual.

Ty recalled a poor relationship ending with a particularly effeminate man that prompted him to say, “no, I want to try something different, and see if there’s more positives on the other side.” Stella related a series of negative conclusions to relationships with women, and while her memory wasn’t completely clear, she was certain it was shortly after an ex-girlfriend attempted suicide that she began dating men. Eve also experienced a difficult same-sex relationship ending, but located the impetus for change at the time when she was recovering from the break-up. She began to increase her social interactions, and found gender was less important to her than it had been previously, when establishing romantic, kink,⁷ or sexual relationships.

Ron, who had only maintained his heterosexual identity for five months, stated that while being with men “wore him down,” the last straw was approximately six months prior to his participation in my research project, when a male sexual partner was not as safe as Ron wanted. As a result, Ron initiated a series of tests for sexually transmitted diseases, and decided during the time he awaited his results that he couldn’t “settle for second best anymore...which is really the point that I came to in terms of second choice, or almost really last resort, you know, being with guys.”

Other Life-Changing Events

Ange hearkened back to her car accident and subsequent years of recovery from physical disability as a time of significant change in her life:

⁷ The term *kink* is used to refer to unconventional sexual practices and includes BDSM (bondage, domination and submission, and sadomasochism) and sexual fetishism

I always knew there was something going on that I just couldn't put my finger on. And... the biggest thing was the car accident that happened, that probably started making me wonder, 'cause it was a very very very very slow process. I was 27 when I fell in love with [her female partner], and we broke up when I was 30, 31... so, it was very slow.

Having so much time to re-evaluate her life and remember the things that were important to her slowly changed her relationships. This resulted in a break-up with her life partner, who remained a close friend, and a newfound closeness with her mother.

Like Ange, Gent described a transformative experience that changed his life in a dramatic fashion. While on a European holiday, the ringing of church bells drew his attention such that he entered the building in the middle of a service. Inside the church, he stated he:

Felt an enormous amount of sweetness coming out... here [indicates heart area on self]... and I knew, that that day, in that church, that it was gonna change my life. It had nothing to do with religion, so to say, it was just... I got a memory of when I was 19... and things were so absolutely right, and I wanted to carry on there, and all those intervening years, it was wonderful, but it wasn't me.

At that moment, Gent felt a powerful energy running "like a fire" through his body, and although he was not able to articulate what it was at that time, he later identified it as a kundalini⁸ experience. Gent attributed the disappearance of homosexual urges to his work with the self-healing properties of kundalini energy.

⁸ The concept of Kundalini comes from yogic philosophy of ancient India and refers to the mothering intelligence behind yogic awakening and spiritual maturation. Within a western frame of understanding it is often associated with the practice of contemplative or religious practices that might induce an altered state of consciousness, either brought about spontaneously, through a type of yoga, through psychedelic drugs, or through a near-death experience. Kundalini energy is also interpreted as a vibrational phenomena that initiates a period or a process of vibrational spiritual development (Sovatsky 1998).

These relationship-related and other life-changing events were described by participants as particularly influential in initiating their shifts from GLQ to heterosexual identities, and are consistent with what Ebaugh (1988) described as the turning point in stage three of role exit theory: dealing with role residual.

4.3.3 No Longer Identifying as GLQ

After reaching the turning point, participants no longer identified as gay or lesbian, and shifted their identities in the direction of heterosexuality. In her discussion of seeking alternatives, Ebaugh (1988) asserts that individuals focus on a specific choice or choices, and then begin to disidentify with their former role. The chronology of participant disidentification as GLQ occurred at a later time in the role exit process than suggested by the order of Ebaugh's (1988) model; rather than discussing participant statements about disidentification immediately after the section on seeking alternatives, their statements are now discussed after their respective turning points. Gent, Georgia and Lily made strong statements about identifying as straight or heterosexual. The same applies to Ty, Gina, Bill and Ron, all of whom identified as straight, but whose statements of disidentification were not as markedly clear. The stories of Ange, Stella, Eve and Zoe challenged the notion of disidentification in terms of taking up a new identity to replace their former GLQ identity.

Gent's narrative of personal transformation outlined clearly his excitement at becoming heterosexual. As he stated, "there was really more to it," but "the gayness is gone... totally gone..." Gent stated that since his sexual desires for men ceased, he is no longer tempted to admire attractive men or boys, even in passing.

Georgia and Lily both strongly identified as straight women. In the six years since leaving her gay identity in the past, Georgia did not have any serious relationships with men, but said that since she had upgraded her education, employment and housing, she felt more settled and emotionally prepared for that to happen. Lily stated that her coming out as straight coincided with her second heterosexual relationship, and had the same strength as the feelings she had when she first came out as lesbian.

Ange stated several times that she doesn't like labels, and challenged the notion that behaviour or emotional connections with others can be described with the use of exclusive categories. In fact, the notion of labelling her relationships in such a way no longer occurred to her in the way it did during the seventeen years she identified as lesbian:

If I fall in love with a man, and we are together, does that mean I'm straight? Not necessarily. What if we get divorced? Or ... what if I want to have a fling with a woman? ...I think it's a natural part of me, and I wonder if it's a natural part of everyone, so I... can't tell you... that I have, or I ever will, for sure, become *totally* straight. I was never *totally* gay... I don't think I have to be one or the other. Whoever I'm attracted to next is who I'm attracted to. It doesn't have to be, I'm straight now, I used to be gay, maybe I'll be gay again or... that's not what's going through my mind.

Even though her same-sex desire remains, Stella was firm in saying she no longer identifies as lesbian. Her present relationships are heterosexual, and have been for 23 years; still, even with her attractions towards men she had difficulty in adopting heterosexual or straight as personal labels. In attempting to describe her sexual identity, she suggested that "non-practicing bisexual" was the closest thing she could come to within the limits of the English language, but conceded that that was not an accurate description either:

I think that I'm very lucky to believe that beauty is where I find it, and that I don't have to qualify my choices... I can't say that I would never date a woman again, it's possible... for today, I choose not to. There are no absolutes in life. I'm just glad that beauty's where I find it.

For Stella, this self-imposed limitation is a part of her sexual identity and relationship practices. She expressed her sexuality as mutable; however, her decision to no longer date women has held for twenty-three years. Even so, Stella felt that the directions of her desires and associated behaviours could not be summarized by using exclusive identity categories or labels, saying, "there's no word for who I am."

When asked about her sexual identity, Eve challenged the idea that all individuals have a specific sexual identity, saying, “there wasn’t one. It wasn’t bi, it wasn’t gay, it wasn’t straight. I’m just me... at some point... it ceased to be about orientation and just being about me.” She went on to explain that she has no interest in the “average male;” she is interested in her partner, whom she considers an exceptional human being, and who happens to be male. Eve disidentified as lesbian, but did not take up a new label to describe her sexual self after beginning a now three-year long heterosexual relationship, preferring instead to adopt an ideal where gender became less important in considering prospective partners for romantic, kink, or sexual relationships.

Zoe qualified her statement of identifying as straight by framing her identity as something that exists as her present state of being, saying:

So that’s why when I say, oh I’m straight... right now I really am, I’m in love with a man, I’m living with him like a married straight couple...[we’ll] probably have a family... that’s the straight life. I can’t live in that life and be like, no! But I’m different! ... I could, but wow, it’s a lot of explaining and effort, and I don’t really want to hold that level of complexity all the time in myself in that very personal place that is the self.

Zoe’s explained that continuing to claim her queer identity while she is living “the straight life” would be artificial, even though she indicated feelings of difference from heterosexuals who have continuously identified as straight throughout their lifetimes. In Zoe’s case, current social behaviour appeared paramount in enabling her to identify as heterosexual, and no longer entitled her to claim to be queer.

Disidentification begins when the individual shifts his or her identity in the direction of the new role and no longer self-identifies with the role they are about to exit (Ebaugh 1988). Due to some participants’⁹ belief in the inadequacy of labels to capture the breadth of human experience, disidentification did not appear to conform to role exit theory; however, disidentifying as GLQ as well as a shift towards a new identity was

⁹ Ange, Eve, Stella and Zoe

evident, even if a label to describe that identity was not adopted. Participants such as Georgia, who had not yet become (hetero)sexually intimate, can also be said to have disidentified, due to her experience of changes in her thoughts/attractions and emotional connection/love from lesbian to heterosexual. Conversely, other participants changed their behaviour and emotional focus and saw that their actions and relationships could be labelled as heterosexual, but were hesitant to identify themselves as heterosexual. In these cases, disidentification appears to be a movement away from a previous identity, and a shift towards a more loosely-defined identity.

4.3.4 Announcement of Change

The turning point was pivotal to the announcement of upcoming change. In making their decisions public, participants committed to following through with their shift in sexual identity, and set the stage to either obtain support for or defend their decision. Almost all participants made some sort of announcement regarding this life change, either generally or to a selected group of people, although only two indicated a sense of relief related to this action.

No Announcement

All but two participants generally announced, or told selected people, about their shift in sexual identity. It is notable that the circumstances preventing these two from such disclosure did not prevent them from speaking – however hesitantly – about their experiences. Gina displayed discomfort with the subject, even during her interview, and made a joke about telling a male date about her former lesbian identity, and having it be the last time she saw him. In a more serious tone, she mused that she would consider telling the man she was seeing if she was sure he would understand, and if their dating relationship became serious:

No, I don't think I would tell him, unless it was, like, with [current male dating partner] I think the guy I'm seeing now is kinda, like, he's as curious as me, so I'm sure he's been on the other side... I'm sure he's slept with guys before, so, I mean, I don't know... I don't know if I would, I would have to be in a relationship for a very long time, 'cause I feel so uncomfortable even just talking about this...I don't know, I don't know.

Georgia described a very different situation, where she became unemployed and was homeless for a stretch of time. For her, “survival issues” eclipsed any issues around her sexual identity, and since she had re-integrated herself in society with an increased level of education, employment, and place to live, the changes in her sexual identity that occurred over six years ago do not seem as pertinent to her social life as they are to her inner sense of self. For these reasons, she has not shared her history as a lesbian with her new peers and co-workers.

Partial Announcement

Two of the men shared their shift in sexual identity with selected people, outside of their families.

Bill hadn't told anyone he knows now as a straight person that he used to be gay, except me (the researcher). As a young man, he left his hometown for a more accepting environment and lived on Canada's West Coast as an out gay man for over 20 years without ever coming out to his family. Bill felt that if his family or female partner knew his history he would lose them. He did announce his intention to “cross over” to his friends in the gay community and received a mix of positive and negative responses.

Ron, more recently having become heterosexual, also did not reveal his gay identity to his family, and was unsure that he ever would do so, even in the context of presenting it as a former part of his life. In addition, he stated he had only recently shared this part of his history with two women he has dated, and would not go out of his way to withhold or to share the information with others:

It's just, there are right and wrong times for things I guess, and that wasn't really... really it, but no... it's not really a big deal. I mean, there really isn't too much that really is, when you come right down to it.... the worst that could really happen really actually isn't that bad, ultimately.

While Ron was less sure of speaking to his family regarding his former GLQ identity and subsequent shift to heterosexuality, telling friends or dates was a matter of considering the context and reminding himself that the worst possible reaction was not a likely outcome.

Ambivalence

Three participants indicated a level of ambivalence about making any sort of announcement, meaning that they saw both the positive and negative aspects of telling others about their change in sexual identity, and experienced some fluctuation in their feelings about doing so. Some chose to share only limited information and others simply indicated a change in identity through their private and public behaviour as a part of a heterosexual couple.

Ange stated that she did not tell anyone outright that she is straight but has let it be known to her family and friends that she is attracted to men:

I think the only thing I'm doing is... just the men I want to sleep with, I'm going and telling them, let's sleep together. I don't think I've told anyone I'm straight, right out... I really don't like labels.... but, yeah, definitely in the last couple of years... I'm letting people know that I'm attracted to men.

Lily indicated that she questioned letting the people around her know she was attracted to and dating men, but because she felt that her family and friends were accepting of the person she was, she didn't feel the need for any special announcement, nor did she hide her new heterosexual identity:

The first thing that happened when I started dating men – I had heterosexual friends when I was in a lesbian relationships – and they always seemed... I always believed them to be very accepting, and open... just to who I was...and when I started dating men, the lesbians just kind of fell away, and, the heterosexuals, umm...I was really offended. You know, my family, and the heterosexual people in my life, you know, were, 'oh,' you know, 'you've finally given your head a shake, you've finally figured it out. You finally got it out of your system,'

or, you're finally, you know... 'doing it right,' or 'doing it normal,' or whatever.

Lily was happy she had been open about the changes in her life, but expressed anger and disappointment with her family and friends, whose open-mindedness and acceptance she felt she had overestimated during the fifteen years she identified as lesbian.

Eve stated she "has no shame" in telling people about her previous sexual identity when it comes up in conversation. Eve cited traditional values such as not discussing what happens "behind closed doors" as a reason she is not as open with family in discussing issues of sexuality as she is with friends and acquaintances. Due to this standard of propriety within her family, she did not indicate to them that she would consider a relationship with a man until she met her current male partner. When it came time to introduce her partner to her family, said Eve, "I treated the situation as totally natural and normal, because it is... a lot of times I don't quite understand what the fuss is."

People have been so accepting. I think we're living in an age where I would say the people are more accepting of other people's lifestyles than they were ten years ago, or twenty years ago, and I say accepting rather than tolerant, because tolerance to me suggests sufferance. 'Yeah, okay, fine, *but*'... whereas, I think in general, the response to my situation is more, 'oh well, that's neat.' And then we just go on with whatever the topic of the day is.

Treating the situation as normal with her friends as well as with family members, Eve found that people in her life responded in kind. This, in turn, gave Eve the perception that society overall is becoming increasingly accepting of sexual diversity; however, it may be that Eve's generalization is particular to her friends and family, and that others outside her social circle were accepting of her sexuality simply because she met their heteronormative expectations.

In terms of announcing her change in sexual identity, Zoe also dealt with social situations by introducing her boyfriend as if it was unremarkable that she was with a man, rather than a woman. She felt she didn't have to explain herself to anyone, and stated

that she hasn't done so "in any way more than to shrug my shoulders and to say, Eh! Whadda you know!"

I'd moved countries, too, so that helped... in a way, I was... staying away from my family, friends, hometown, uhm, with the idea that that might free my sexual identity to become straight again. I was ready for that, I wanted to have sex with men, I wanted to have a family, all these things. I mean, you can have that as a lesbian as well, but I saw it as being part of a heterosexual lifestyle... anyway, that was when... I came back to Canada with a boyfriend. and it was like, hey guys! Deal with it (laughs) um, that was all... I never explained.

Zoe went on to say that aside from me, she had only ever explained her identity shift to one very close friend, and was grateful to have had a "diverse group of friends" to whom the gender of her partner didn't matter.

Stella stated she did not feel any need at the time to explain any issues around her sexuality, saying:

I don't have room in my life for people that get knicker-twisted about things like that. I've been lucky, I think, though. I've been able to live my life with my choices. Having no family... there isn't anyone that someone could go running to and get me in trouble. You know, I don't have some grandmother, or a family member, or the people I work for, or kids, that they could hang it over my head and... there's no real blackmail factor, you know.

Stella's 'take me or leave me' attitude appears to have been established during or prior to her time as an out lesbian, and continues to operate in all aspects of her life, such as during an employment interview when she was asked to take out her nose ring, and she refused:

I think, you know what, if this bothers you, you need to find someone else to work here. Because... it's part of who I am, and if you don't like me now, you're certainly not gonna like me when you get to know me.

Stella was clear in saying she had no room in her social circle for people who are not accepting of her as she is; however, her statement regarding having no one to answer to

made it clear that she understood how the social stigma associated with homosexuality might damage others' relationships with parents, children, or employers.

Relief

Two participants, Gent and Ty, conveyed feelings of relief after coming out as straight. Gent stated he that told his wife of his kundalini experience right away. Gent further commented on the remarkable relationship he has with his wife:

She knew about all this... she knows everything about me, so, all this she was very much aware of, and she saw me going through this.... I don't think that it changed our relationship... because that relationship had always been one of mutual understanding.

Ty described a similar situation to Bill's, in that he has not had contact with his family for the past eight or nine years, and they remain unaware of his previous sexual identity. Having kept his identity as a gay man secret from his family and various groups of friends, he described relief when he was able to make it known that he formerly had relationships with men and no longer has to take such efforts to compartmentalize his life:

Things are a lot lighter on my head. I don't have to worry about people running into other people, and I don't have that weight clouding over my head and you know, gettin' ready to dump on me because I made one wrong little puny step... so, that has kind of lifted my shoulders a bit, and said ah, you can do that, and not have to worry about the consequences in the end.

Even though he continued to keep his gay and straight friends as separate social spheres, no longer having to hide who he was eased Ty's mind when considering the possibility of someone who knew him as straight running into him at a time when he was socializing with someone else who knew him as gay.

External indications of their changes in sexual identity were of varying importance to participants. They were viewed as a general part of social life for some, and a source of relief for others. The action of announcing or revealing new identities illustrated

participants' commitment to lives as heterosexuals, and, for most of them, functioned to reduce cognitive dissonance.

4.3.5 Reductions in Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger (1957) describes cognitive dissonance as the tension that develops from holding two incompatible beliefs or perceptions at the same time. Ebaugh (1988) uses this definition to describe the tension that arises prior to an individual reaching the turning point in his/her role exit. Six participants¹⁰ experienced a reduction of cognitive dissonance following their turning point, disidentification as GLQ, and announcement of change; however, some¹¹ indicated an increase, either in addition to the resolved dissonance, or as their only change in dissonant perceptions.

Decreases in Cognitive Dissonance

Bill's move to a new city to be with a woman created a situation such that current friends and co-workers over the past decade have only known him as straight. This move and the passage of time resulted in a reduction in cognitive dissonance. Ron's more recent role exit saw him "moving in a very positive direction," and establishing a greater sense of self-esteem.

Ty echoed Ron's sentiment about moving in a positive direction, but qualified it with a statement that completing an identity shift from gay to straight takes time, saying, "to be able to go and switch from one extreme to another, it's not going to happen overnight. And it didn't with me." Ty's increase in life satisfaction occurred gradually over the previous two years, and is ongoing as he continues to use a cost-benefit analysis for considering not only his choices for romantic and sexual relationships, but also in regard to employment, education, and other matters. Ange agreed that the process of change takes time. Five and a half years earlier she made the shift from lesbian to heterosexual, and it is only recently that she has been able to say, "I feel the way I'm attracted to men is what I should have felt when I was seventeen, when I fell in love with my girlfriend." Feeling now as if she is experiencing heterosexual puberty, albeit later in life than most,

¹⁰ Ty, Eve, Gent, Ron, Bill and Zoe

¹¹ Gina, Lily, Ron, Bill and Zoe

gave Ange a sense that she had finally become privy to the experiences her former teenaged friends appeared to take for granted.

One woman's sense of relief appeared to originate from two main sources. Eve stated, "I just never quite seemed to fit in with the lesbian community because I didn't have a problem with the average male." In this case, no longer identifying as a rogue member of the lesbian community, as well as the joy in finding a life partner resulted in reduced cognitive dissonance.

Gent's sense of relief is illustrated in his description of himself as "more normal" since his same-sex attractions are gone and he became attracted to women. Similarly, Gina indicated her happiness at having less confusion in her life, and said she finds it "easier to try to do straight things." Gina's dissonance was reduced by removing the back-and-forth she felt from navigating between the gay and straight communities for her social interactions, and investing herself in the larger, readily available, straight community.

Zoe lamented the "hard lines" in society that force people to make choices regarding their sexuality, and at the same time expressed pleasure in taking on a more traditional female role:

Now in my life I really appreciate the sort of traditional male-female role playing... I see the point. I see its purpose, socially... but wow, I'm glad I had that time before, where everything was thrown open – that was great.

Increases in Cognitive Dissonance

Some participants expressed increased cognitive dissonance with their shift in sexual identity. For example, Bill felt he had established his life as a straight man well; however, he admitted that he still has sexual attractions to men, and sometimes when relationship difficulties crop up with his girlfriend, he thinks about what it might be like to re-establish his former gay identity. He also added, "...that if anyone thinks they can just 'poof' be straight all of the sudden and have no urges or desires towards the same sex, it's a lie. It's an everyday, ongoing process, where you have to keep on deciding that you're going to keep on doing it, day by day." Along the same vein, Gina labelled her

continued attraction to women as a “challenge” to see if she could be fulfilled in a heterosexual relationship, or if she would continue to be tempted to act on her same-sex desires.

Ron expressed frustration at the rate at which he was accomplishing his goal of establishing his heterosexual identity, stating that he felt that inwardly he could not change quickly enough. This was also evidenced by his comments in regard to dating and gaining sexual experience with women over the past five months:

I've just found that to be an exhausting process that I'd just as soon forget, but I've still got the urges so it's a difficult thing, which is why, like I say, at one point I've gone back. A guy called me, and I went back, because... I still need an outlet, which I don't have.

Lily related an anecdote about being invited to a function at her father's business shortly after she started dating a man – something that had never happened during the fifteen years she dated and partnered with women – and expressed that she was angrier with her newfound acceptance than she was with any of the difficulties of coming out as lesbian. Rather than a decrease in cognitive dissonance, Lily's increased social acceptability functioned as a belated rejection of her previous lesbian identity, previous partners, and to some degree, the child she and her lesbian partner raised, creating an increased level of dissonance. In addition, she indicated an ongoing struggle with vestiges of “heterophobia” in certain social situations, saying, “...you see all those parents standing there, and you think, wow, if they knew I'm me, I wouldn't be accepted.”

About the same time Zoe moved into a more traditional female role, she began to experience conflicting feelings concerning exiting her lesbian identity. Said Zoe, “I didn't feel like what I was going through was acceptable... I felt like a traitor... because it was political.” At the time, Zoe encountered feelings of guilt, as if leaving behind her lesbian identity was an admission of defeat or failure. Although at the time of the interview she stated that she did not feel she had failed at being a lesbian, Zoe was

convinced that “the message is still out there” that a woman is a failure if she leaves the lesbian community.

Reductions in cognitive dissonance occurred for most participants after coming out as straight. Overall, reductions in cognitive dissonance appear related to a higher valuation of heterosexual norms, rather than an increased sense of ease in social interactions within the heterosexual community. For some, the process brought forth urges to return to a GLQ identity, struggles with continued same-sex attraction, feelings of failure, guilt, and anger which created new dissonance requiring resolution.

4.3.6 Adapting to New Social Situations

Ebaugh states, “nowhere do individual self-identity and self-transformation intertwine more sensitively and centrally with societal expectations than in the area of ex-roles” (1988:149). In creating their ex-roles, participants incorporated former GLQ identities into a new self-concept at the same time as they learned their new role. At this point, individuals adapted to new social expectations and either learned to present themselves as heterosexual in a manner that is convincing to others, or came to the conclusion that others’ perceptions deserved less credence than previously accorded. Most participants experienced role residual, as their previous GLQ identity informed and became incorporated to their new heterosexual identities. They addressed this role residual with a variety of stigma management techniques.

Dating

Commencing new dating relationships posed a unique set of logistical considerations for participants. Having heterosexual dates and new friends see their homes lead some participants to re-evaluate some of their choices in décor – particularly art work – as well as remove any evidence of their previous GLQ identity. Same-sex oriented or nude photography, personal photographs of GLQ friends, former partners and events, books, posters, and other identifiers were subject to removal in order to avoid unwanted questions or awkward situations.

Gina articulated the difficulty of the trial-and-error experience in ascertaining the “right versus wrong” actions in social situations with men, in order to strike a balance between not being perceived as “slutty” or “too conservative.” One of Ty’s challenges was dealing with the difference he perceived in how much more “up front” men were about what they wanted in a relationship, especially regarding sex. Ange also stated she was “not doing very well” in her attempts to establish new romantic relationships, and admitted that while she has approached men in whom she is interested, she has not yet been asked out on a date by a man.

One of the ironies for Lily in entering new social situations with men was that when she presented differently, and was perceived differently by them, she retained the same perceptions of men that she held when she was a lesbian. For her, there was a fine line: she wanted to be perceived as heterosexual, but became irritated when men who had paid her no attention when she was lesbian suddenly began to notice her as she began to change her appearance.

On occasion, adapting to new social situations called for humour to relieve the tensions felt when presenting socially for the first time as part of a heterosexual couple. Eve laughed as she recalled the confusion that occurred when she began dating her current male partner. Since he had already told a number of friends about his “wonderful lesbian friend” prior to introducing Eve as his date, there was some uncertainty as to whether or not Eve and the lesbian friend were, in fact, the same person.

Public and Workplace Interactions

For recent exiters, even brief, mundane social interactions were challenging. For example, Zoe mentioned how people would ask her, “... what have you been doing over the last couple of years? ... stories would come up, that would... obviously involve the queer part of my identity, but now, those things are far away.” With time, recent history, including events associated with their former identities as gay or lesbian, became less relevant to the every day lived realities of the research participants.

Bill described the first time his “macho” male co-workers made derogatory remarks about gay men. He stifled his initial reaction of anger, as he felt it might give him away, and watched how the other men participated in the conversation. Not only was he making efforts to fit in with them as the newest employee, he felt he needed to learn how the average heterosexual man responded to such a situation.

Reactions of Loved Ones

Some exiters, such as Ange, reported relatively smooth transitions and social interactions with their former same-sex partners. As well, Lily continued to have a strong co-parenting relationship with her former female partner, regardless of her relationships with other women, or with men. Lily’s challenge in social situations with family members was to curb the “rebellion” she felt at their newfound indications of acceptance. Gent stated that his wife was aware of his process, and his relationship with her was not adversely affected by his change in sexual identity, since they had built a strong foundation of mutual understanding and emotional support.

Reactions of family members sometimes made for awkward or surprising social interactions. Upon hearing that Ange was seeing men, her sister responded with, “well, what are you now?” Zoe felt her family’s relief at her new sexual identity, but said they didn’t want to discuss it, even though they seemed puzzled by the change in her behaviour. Lily noted tension in her relationship with a gay male family member after she came out as straight, perceiving that he was disappointed in her for “letting down the team.”

During the time immediately following coming out as straight, participants became accustomed to new social expectations and experienced a diversity of reactions from others. Most participants experienced role residual, as their previous GLQ identity informed and became incorporated in their new heterosexual identities, and they addressed it with a variety of stigma management techniques.

4.3.7 Stigma Management

Techniques for managing social stigma varied according to the importance participants placed on others' perception or opinion of them as a person. Some participants changed their outward appearance and/or body language to meet their own perception of how heterosexuals dress and behave, while others felt that being authentic simply meant making more of an effort to 'be themselves.' Most participants made efforts to manage who in their social circles received information regarding their previous GLQ identities, and shared anecdotes as to how they avoided social situations which might become uncomfortable if their previous identity was revealed.

Presenting Authentically

Participants began to present themselves as heterosexual in a manner that they felt was convincing to others; in a few cases, interviewees indicated others' perceptions were not important, and did not make any changes in how they presented themselves.

Ange did not feel as if she had to present in a certain way, either during the time she identified as a lesbian, or presently, as a heterosexual woman. She conceded that she became more conservative after obtaining employment that required her to dress professionally, and that even though she is "certainly not going out and making an effort to look straight," she thought she appeared to be so.

At the time of her role exit, Georgia began to wear dresses, and she used make-up for the first time. These actions were not only important in terms of presentation of self; to her, it seemed important at the time to "get in touch with [her] femininity." In contrast, although Stella's role exit occurred 23 years prior to our interview, she mentioned that in the past couple of years she has been buying clothing that is more feminine. Lily also mentioned wearing more dresses after beginning relationships with men, and also grew her hair long, noting that people – especially men – treated her quite differently as her appearance changed.

Gina stated she had a lot to learn about affecting "a beauty ritual" after her exit. Even though she entered a heterosexual marriage at a young age, she considered herself a

“tomboy” back then, and did not bother with things like hair, make-up, and clothing styles, or consideration of how to present herself attractively to men.

Bill continued to have concerns about presentation of self. During the interview, he indicated his clothing as one of the things he changed, and stated he’d gotten rid of all his slacks, tight t-shirts and sweaters in favour of jeans, sweatshirts, and running shoes. In addition, he worked on changing his body language, gestures, and posture to conform to what he felt was a more masculine style.

Presenting authentically for Ron meant “just trying to... be more me.” By genuinely following what he wanted for himself – a successful transition to a heterosexual identity – Ron felt that he would be perceived as genuinely heterosexual. Ty presented a similar sentiment, saying, “I go through life, working, I do everything the same as I would, it’s just I don’t frequent the same places.” For Ty, a successful shift into a heterosexual identity didn’t involve how he interacted with people; rather, he changed his pattern of frequenting locations where he would usually meet other gay men.

Zoe marked the difference in efforts at outward appearance between coming out lesbian and coming out as straight, saying, “when I came out as a dyke, I pierced my nose, and I dyed my hair... coming out straight? I think I might have allowed myself more femme behaviour than I had before, but... I was already identified in a femme way, so it wasn’t huge... I didn’t find the need to mark it externally.”

To summarize, both men and women made efforts to conform to gender norms in order to present as what they considered authentically heterosexual. In this case, stigma management focused on preventing any perception of difference from other heterosexuals. In at least one case, practicing new body language such that it became “second nature” reduced the possibility of performing an unmeant gesture or committing a social faux pas, and assisted in reducing social anxiety (Goffman 1959:212). Forestalling questions or suspicions regarding sexuality was one method of precluding the emergence of potentially discrediting information about an individual’s former sexual

identity (Goffman, 1959:209). In a few cases, participants did not make any changes in outer appearance to mark their identity shift, in part because they felt that the internalization of their new identities was either personal, or that it was unnecessary, since it would be perceived through their everyday actions.

Information Management and Social Avoidance

Zoe put forth questions that summarized a large portion of interview discussions regarding the relationship between her former and present identities:

We have a culture [in which] it's shameful to be queer, and I definitely felt that way at some points in my life... and I wonder if I'm... internalizing or accepting some of that shame back... the complexity when you come out, you have to identify strongly, you have to be proud, right, you've gotta fight to be accepting yourself all the time... to have self-love, and to accept yourself in this homophobic society, but then, in my position now, it is like that part of myself is having to be closeted. And I don't want it to be... so I don't need to be out and proud... but at the same time, how do you avoid internalizing some of that cultural shame? And silencing that closeting? Can you be in the closet in your past? Is my past in the closet now? 'Cause my present doesn't need to be.

Participants primarily put their pasts in the closet in terms of their intimate and public lives by withholding information, and avoiding social situations in which they were known as queer.

For Bill, Ron, and Ty, withholding information from their families regarding their changes in sexual identity is simply the continuation of a previous stigma management technique from when they lived as gay men. These three men also stated they do not speak of their former identities in most social situations, and have cut ties, wholly or in part, with gay friends and the gay community. Gina and Georgia also no longer attended queer community events and did not continue associations with her former gay friends. Further, Gina stated there are so few environments that are not homophobic that she "can't see how anyone does it" on an ongoing basis.

Ty's method of compartmentalizing his life served him well in avoiding social interactions which might prove uncomfortable. He indicated that he doesn't frequent the same places he did when he was gay, and ensured this was taken into consideration when he planned his daily activities. While Lily didn't make those same types of changes to her routine, in meeting new people, she "lets them assume" that she has always been straight. Having a child was helpful in maintaining this impression. When she chose to withhold information, she referenced her child's other female parent using gender neutral terms.

Zoe stated she no longer attended queer events, but indicated that the impetus for the move was to begin broadening her circle of heterosexual friends, and find potential dating partners. Now that she is in a heterosexual relationship with a man, she doesn't feel part of the queer community anymore, although she maintained some of her close friendships. Zoe's partner knew of her history, but in less intimate social interactions, she has preferred to keep her previous identity to herself unless she felt it necessary to address others' homophobia. "If it's important to me," said Zoe, "I'll deal with it."

Gent, as a professional, married man with a child, did not face the same social situations as most other participants. As his wife knew of his relationships with men, he did not have concerns regarding information management in his intimate relationships. Despite his outward appearance of heterosexuality, Gent chose to share information regarding his previous gay identity, and stated he was not ashamed of it, and felt that if others knew, it might help them to realize that the changes they were seeking in their lives were possible too.

Eve and Stella were unconcerned about what others might feel is discrediting information. They did not go out of their way to present or withhold information regarding their previous identities, and held the general sentiment that the people they would allow into their social circles were ones who would accept them as they are.

Participants withheld discrediting information and engaged in social avoidance as part of ongoing stigma management in both intimate and public relationships (Goffman 1963:55). Using others' assumption of heterosexuality, gender neutral language, and keeping the knowers and non-knowers of discrediting information separate were all employed to minimize the negative effects of social stigma (Goffman 1963:66). With three notable exceptions, participants engaged in varying levels of information repression as they chose whether or not to put their past in the closet.

4.4 Coming Out Straight and the Relevance of Role Exit Theory

The four distinctive stages of role exit are: disengagement; disidentification; dealing with role residual; and categorization as an ex-member of a group (a more detailed explanation of each stage appears in section 2.4). In this section, I examine the extent to which role exit theory may be applied to persons formerly identifying as GLQ. Parts of Ebaugh's (1988) theory were not congruent with the processes described by participants, and others may be applied with variations in sequence.

4.4.1 Absence of First Doubts

First Doubts

Most participants experienced changes in spousal/romantic relationships during the process of coming out as straight; however, these changes were more consistent with a turning point than with experiencing first doubts. In discussing first doubts, Ebaugh states that "...the individual first experiences overall dissatisfaction in a generalized way and only eventually is able to specify and articulate what he or she finds lacking in the situation" (1988:41). Overall, changes in relationships appeared to have a dynamic effect in facilitating an identity shift, such as in the case of Ange, whose female partner discovered her affair with a male friend, or Georgia, Stella, Lily and Ty, whose final same-sex relationships ended poorly.

Participants indicating what might be considered as doubts regarding their previous GLQ identities did not express their experience in terms of doubt; instead, they described a process consistent with searching for alternatives or an ongoing, life-long process. Overall, participants did not appear to doubt or question their identities; rather, they

attributed any questioning of their identity to a decision-making process or to a turning point event.

Two participants appeared to be the exceptions in this regard. Eve's involvements with the kink community lead her to re-evaluate her relationship priorities, which, in turn, opened the possibility of future heterosexual relationships:

I didn't have a word for it – I don't think I ever really discussed it much...gradually, the lines started to get more and more blurred, and the harder I found it to find local women who were interested in kink, the more I thought, you know, what's most important to me? Is it a relationship with a sexual meaning, or is it a relationship with a kink meaning? I discovered that the kink was more important than the sex or gender.

When asked at what point she began to question her identity as queer, Zoe stated:

I think I secretly questioned it all along. Just the way when I was a heterosexual teenager, I was always questioning it, because I was having all these emotional, sexual responses with women, so I was like, oh no, but I kept it a big secret, you know. And then when I came out, I was having the same thing, but in the opposite direction... so when I did start questioning? In my own self, I was always questioning it.

Where Eve didn't actually doubt her identity as a lesbian during the time of her examination of relationship desires, the elevation of kink as an essential part of her relationship practices made sex and gender less of a priority when considering future romantic partners. In contrast, Zoe questioned her identity consistently, from the time she was a heterosexual teenager of 14 or 15 years through her process of coming out queer at 21, as well as in her late 20s, when she moved out of her relationship with a woman and into a heterosexual cohabitation.

Two participants indicated they did not question their sexual identity at all, regardless of their attractions or outward behaviour. In relation to his homosexual attractions, Gent stated, "... so it wasn't like that I was questioning, but something that I knew that I really

had to control..." Lily asserted that she did not doubt her identity as a lesbian, even though she occasionally dated men:

And I didn't question it at all... I believed, in my heart and soul and bones, you know. I'm a lesbian. I was a lesbian parent at school... everybody knew... I was the lesbian example, you know, I was it... and... then... there was a time... I slept with a guy, just out of curiosity, just, it was there, it was available. It was dumb, I don't know, it was... yeah, I wonder what that would be like after all of these years? ... it was... what's the big deal?... I had another relationship, actually, with another woman, come to think of it, that's when I started dating men... and still, I wasn't questioning my sexuality...

Stella did not recall a time of doubt; rather, she remembers making a conscious decision "not to spend time with them [women] in that way" and attributes the likely cause to negative outcomes in a series of lesbian relationships. When asked about their process from gay to straight, Bill, Ty and Ron described a similar decision-making process in the form of a cost-benefit analysis, rather than any doubt about or questioning of sexual identity.

Unsettling Events

For three participants, changes in relationships tied in to other unsettling events, such as recurring relationship disappointments, illness, and physical disability. When Stella related multiple failed attempts at dating women, she expressed frustration that some women presented themselves socially in a way that did not carry over to the realm of intimate relationships:

It seemed that I would be attracted to these women that were strong and powerful and knew their own mind, and then I'd start dating them and they'd be like, 'I don't know, what do you wanna do?' like these half-set jello people that lost their spine, and I'd be like, well, that wasn't what I was attracted to.

Ange described a car accident that forced her to quit work and move residences:

I haven't worked since 1999. I, literally, was paralyzed... flat on my back, and I had nothing to do for four years but meditate, and meditate, and try to keep my pain level down.

And I lost all my friends, and I think I went through a whole identity crisis – not just sexual – but a huge identity crisis... just a huge spiritual movement...and I started healing my relationship with my mother... and as that healed... I became less attracted to women...

During the process of moving home with her family and recovering from the accident, Ange also experienced the ending of a long-term lesbian relationship, and remained socially isolated due to her physical disability.

Prior to her change in sexual identity, Lily experienced the break-up of a two year lesbian relationship, and endured physical disability for a time – as well as a change in body image – from a double mastectomy due to breast cancer. In discussing this disquieting time in her life, she related, “I was feeling probably a little shaky... coming out of being a lesbian, you know?”

One participant, Gent, revealed that although he did not have any difficulty or judgments around himself or others being gay, he did not condone sexual activities between adults and young people that were not of the age of consent. Prior to coming out as straight, during the time that he was working at a grade school, he found his attractions to men evolving to include younger men and boys, and became greatly disturbed by this:

It bothered me... that was very strong, but because I was working at the school, and constantly surrounded by children, that became bothersome, because I started feeling that my – that – I was very, very safe, never anything happened, that was very important to me. But it became a temptation to me, to be with younger boys. It was a temptation... it was very hard, and I didn't want that... it wasn't right... and, you know, I don't know how grateful I am to whatever I have to be grateful to, that I actually never got into any stupid, stupid action.

Gent's ethical standards served him well; however, he went through a time of great turmoil in realizing that the love and attraction he had for men could possibly become something that – if acted upon – was harmful. Dealing with those conflicting feelings eventually resulted in his resignation from that teaching position.

Participants were able recall unsettling events that occurred prior to or during their identity shift process. In many cases, changes in relationship, an unsettling event, and the turning point were the same event, or occurred simultaneously. At times, the event appears to have no bearing on the research focus, and only appears to be relevant due to retrospective links made by the participant.

4.4.2 Cueing Behaviour and the Influence of Significant Others

Ebaugh (1988) discusses cueing behaviour in relation to the doubter's significant others during the disengagement process. Parents, siblings, partners, and others interpret the unconscious cues emitted by the doubter, who, in turn, react either positively or negatively, providing feedback which inhibits or encourages the role exit. When asked to recount the process of coming out as straight, participants did not recall any unconscious or conscious behaviours which could retrospectively be construed as indicators that showed discontent with their sexual identities. Lily and Eve told narratives regarding negative family reactions during their initial coming out as lesbians, and Bill and Ron suspected their families would be hurt if they knew about their former gay lives; however, none of the participants discussed any comments or actions by significant others that encouraged or inhibited their role exits. Further, participants did not indicate that their interactions with non-significant others (e.g. a flirtatious encounter with a stranger or acceptance/rejection by a potential date) positively or negatively affected their role exit process.

4.4.3 The Turning Point

Functions of the Turning Point

These individuals described turning points in their sexual identity that were related to relationships and other life-changing events. As in Ebaugh's (1988) model, the turning point served to formally initiate the role exit with an announcement of change, and to reduce cognitive dissonance. It was at a turning point that participants no longer identified as GLQ, presented changes in outward appearance and behaviours, and shifted reference groups.

Social and Emotional Resources

Ebaugh (1988:136) states that a third function of a turning point is the mobilization of social and emotional resources. Having formally initiated a role exit, the time for deliberation is over, and it is time to take action. With the exception of Gent, participants in this study illustrated a paucity of resources to aid them in completing their role exits. Lily and Ange described the collapse of their support networks as their change to heterosexual identities became known. While Ange recounted the sudden disappearance of heterosexual friends, Lily experienced the loss of her circle of lesbian friends. Further, as discussed earlier, Lily felt more offended than supported by the heterosexual people in her life who expressed relief that she “finally figured it out...got it out of her system.” Bill also found that some of his gay friends felt betrayed by his desire to ‘cross over,’ and since they were the only ones in whom he chose to confide at the time of his role exit, he transitioned to his heterosexual identity with very little support. Participants described reading books about dating and searching internet dating services in order to learn common heterosexual dating practices and meet people to whom they did not need to (immediately) explain their history. Zoe acknowledged that while her search for support at the time of her exit was not exhaustive, she “...felt like there was a great silence...” surrounding this social issue.

For participants, the turning point was a time of great change. During this pivotal period, they disidentified as GLQ, and began to present as heterosexual. For many participants, corresponding upheaval surrounding romantic, familial, and social relationships, combined with a lack of social and emotional resources, resulted in fluctuating levels of cognitive dissonance as they began to establish their ex-roles.

Ebaugh’s (1988) concept of the turning point drew attention to the apparent absence of cueing behaviour with regard to the participants’ significant others, and the lack of social and emotional resources available during the process of establishing new heterosexual identities. The turning point is significant as an indicator of when the participants changed reference groups and made the shift from GLQ to heterosexual.

4.4.4 Considering Social Stigma

In her examination of role exit, Ebaugh (1988) points to stigma and stigma management as both impetus for, and a consequence of exits involving marginalized or non-traditional social roles. Social stigma was not always a definitive motivator for this identity shift, although it was a consideration when participants presented as heterosexual. As members of the GLQ community, respondents felt that social stigma was a fact of life, and it continued to be so after their identity shift, in an ever-diminishing manner. The further in the past the identity shift, the less likely participants' former identity as GLQ was to surface in the present. Accessing heterosexual privilege created a situation where participants suddenly became discreditable. Information management and presenting oneself as authentically heterosexual were stigma-management techniques used to ensure that participants were not dismissed by others as a gay or lesbian person 'masquerading' as straight, or in any way perceived as abnormal, diseased, or immoral. Where social stigma was previously an every day reality, in their new roles it became more of a consideration only when they felt it threatened the authenticity of their heterosexual identity.

4.4.5 Dealing with Role Residual

In addressing role residual, participants learned new social expectations and engaged in stigma management behaviour as they incorporated former roles into new roles. "What characterizes the ex is the fact that the new identity incorporates vestiges and residuals of the previous role" (Ebaugh 1988:4). Role residual, also termed *hangover identity*, was incorporated as part of participants' heterosexual identity, as their previous identities affected and informed responses to the norms and expectations associated with heterosexuality.

"An ex-status derives meaning from contrast with the status previously held" (Ebaugh 1988:3). For some participants, such as Gina, meaning was derived in part from a greater sense of compassion for 'out' gays and lesbians who routinely engaged socially in heterosexist and homophobic environments. Several participants expressed admiration for the queer community's continued political struggle, for same-sex couples who were establishing and maintaining strong, healthy relationships, as well as their perception that

GLQ persons were generally more open-minded and non-judgmental than most heterosexuals. In-group knowledge assisted participants in establishing ex-roles that they perceived had a greater sensitivity to sexual minorities than people who only ever identified as heterosexual.

Vestiges of participants' previous roles were especially apparent in the admission of continued attractions and sexual urges to same-sex persons. All participants announced their heterosexual identities with confidence, but only Gent expressed a complete cessation of any homosexual attractions or sexual urges. About her heterosexual identity, Ange stated, "I have faith, but... I just keep on, there's the girls, there's the girls!" When referencing same-sex desire, participants tended either to inject humour into the conversation, or made statements to the effect of, "you never know" what might happen in the future. Six respondents¹² acknowledged same-sex intimacies since coming out as straight. For example, Ron and Ty stated they still have "the urges" and need an "outlet" for them once in a while; however, this did not diminish their identification as heterosexual men. Although in a heterosexual relationship with a man she considers her life-mate, Eve stated if the right opportunity presented itself, she "would still date women... still make love with women...that's never going to change." Regardless of whether participants acted on their attractions, incorporating same-sex desires into their new heterosexual identities was a significant challenge for participants in dealing with role residual.

Role residual, or hangover identity, is useful in describing how participants incorporated their former GLQ identities with their new heterosexual identities. While participants learned the social expectations associated with being heterosexual and engaged in continued stigma management, vestiges of their previous identities remained. Rather than reducing the authenticity of their heterosexual identities, the presence of same-sex attractions may be viewed as a property particular to heterosexual people who formerly identified as gay, lesbian, or queer.

¹² Eve, Lily, Ron, Stella, Ty and Zoe

4.5 Summary

The data illustrates a process of heterosexual identity re-formation which may be described using the tools provided by role exit theory. Participants, however, did not appear to have gone through all the stages of role exit as defined by Ebaugh (1988). Instead of disengagement, disidentification, dealing with role residual and categorization as an ex-member of a group, participants began their process with seeking alternatives (part of Ebaugh's disidentification), and following quickly with a turning point (part of Ebaugh's dealing with role residual). The turning point facilitated participants' announcement of change, disidentification as GLQ, and highlighted the lack of social and emotional resources for persons making a shift in sexual identity from GLQ to heterosexual. Participants also described adaptation to new social situations and dealing with role residual (as in Ebaugh's categorization as an ex-member of a group).

Role exit theory could not, however, account for the lack of reported/retrospective cuing behaviour, nor the apparent unimportance of the reactions of loved ones/others to those cues. While some participants reported they felt their parents would be less accepting of them if they knew of their GLQ history, these same participants did not recall giving any cues to find out that information; they "just knew."

Three of four role exit stages occurred, but aspects of each stage varied from Ebaugh's ideal type model. For example, participants did not disidentify as GLQ until after their turning point, at which time they announced their identity shift. Ebaugh recognized that "...there are ex-roles which are relatively new or rare in society and for which there exist fewer specific expectations" (1988:19). These ex-roles, known also in the literature as emergent roles, require greater role-making, and may not fit precisely with Ebaugh's model.

In establishing their ex-roles, participants became accustomed to new social situations, dealt with social stigma, and felt both positive and negative effects from role residual. Overall, exiters felt their identities as heterosexuals were characterized by an increase in

compassion for others, as well as an acceptance of or continued struggle with same-sex urges or desires.

5. Conclusion

The ongoing debate between proponents and opponents of reparative therapy as well as the public media debate regarding the effectiveness of therapy-based and religiously-based ex-gay movements illustrate the timeliness of research focusing on the mutability of sexuality. The ability of persons to change their sexual identity from GLQ to heterosexual is hotly contested amongst scholars and researchers of sexuality, and to date, there are no definitive studies providing unbiased conclusions that support or reject this ability (Beckstead 2001; Besen 2003; Cohen 2000; Drescher 2001; Ford 2001; Haldeman 1999; Silverstein 2003; Spitzer 2003; Wolkomir 2001; Yarhouse 2001, 2005; Yarhouse and Tan 2004, 2005; Yarhouse and Throckmorton 2002; Zucker 2003).

There is a dearth of sexual identity models that incorporate the possibility of multiple changes in sexual identity. I examined stage models of homosexual identity development (Cass 1979, 1984a, 1984b; Coleman 1982; Troiden 1979, 1988, 1989; McCarn & Fassinger 1996), an ecological model of gay identity development (Alderson 2003) as well as a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual disidentification (Yarhouse 2001, 2005; Yarhouse & Tan 2004, 2005) in order to determine if Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory could be used as a continuation of homosexual identity formation to explain a subsequent status passage from GLQ to heterosexual. Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory proved to be useful for my examination of the social processes involved in a shift from homosexual to heterosexual identity. In addition, familiarity with theories of homosexual identity formation and role exit provided a theoretical basis for understanding the social process of establishing a new sexual identity.

This thesis drew upon data from a series of semi-structured interviews with seven women and three men who identified as heterosexual for two years or more, and who had formerly identified as GLQ for two years or more. My objective was to gain an understanding of the processes and conflicts undertaken by GLQ persons in establishing new identities as heterosexual. Further, an eleventh interview was conducted with a former gay man, Ron, who had only begun establishing his heterosexual identity five months previously. Ron's interview data were used illustratively; as a person more

recently undertaking this identity shift, his experience served as a challenge to the two-year criterion for inclusion in the study, and as point of comparison to participants who had spent a significantly longer time establishing and maintaining their heterosexual identities. The results of these interviews were used to answer the questions: (1) is role exit theory applicable to ex-gays; and (2) if so, can role exit theory be used as an extension of Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) model of homosexual identity formation to account for subsequent shifts in sexual identity?

5.1 Answering the Research Questions

5.1.1 Is Role Exit Theory Applicable To Ex-Gays?

In addressing the question – [is role exit theory applicable to ex-gays?] – I considered the continued relevance of Ebaugh's (1988) work. Ebaugh defines role exit as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role” (1988:1). There are four stages in this process: (1) disengagement; (2) disidentification; (3) dealing with role residual; and (4) categorization as an ex-member of a group.

Disengagement

During disengagement, doubts regarding one's role are said to develop due to job burnout, organizational change, changes in relationships, or unsettling events. The individual cues others with conscious and unconscious expressions of dissatisfaction with his/her role, and is influenced by the reactions of significant others. Finally, the exiter begins to withdraw from the expectations and people associated with that role.

Overall, participants did not express feelings of doubt regarding their previous GLQ identities; rather, they indicated considering their former identities in the same terms as other life-course decisions, or made the move towards an identity shift due to a turning point event. In addition, no participants recalled any cueing behaviour which they retrospectively construed as an indicator of role dissatisfaction. Behaviours such as heterosexual flirtations or alterations in dress, hairstyle, or body language, which could be construed as cueing behaviour, occurred chronologically after their turning points.

While a few participants¹³ recounted unsettling events, the events themselves appeared to have no direct link to the exiting process. Changes in relationships and other life-changing events were related to an exiter's turning point, rather than disengagement. Further, participants did not begin to withdraw from their GLQ role and role-set until after their turning point.

Disidentification

Disidentification marks the individual's search for alternative roles; a cost-benefit type of analysis that includes consideration of social stigma attached to the current and future roles. Reactions by significant others regarding cueing behaviour are likely to encourage or inhibit the move towards a new role. Ebaugh (1988) states that disidentification begins when one shifts his/her identity in the direction of the new role and no longer self-identifies with the role s/he is about to exit.

Participants' exiting process began with a cost-benefit assessment of a heterosexual identity shift in the larger context of overall wants, needs, and life goals. Some factors involved in this decision-making process were the potential for personal success in life, the desire to bear children, same-sex relationship dissatisfaction, and negative perceptions of the gay lifestyle. Cueing behaviour and encouragement or disruption of the exit by significant others were not a factor, as participants indicated that the decision to exit was an internal, deeply personal process. Consideration of the reactions of significant others occurred after the decision to exit was already made. In addition, participants did not shift their identities until after their turning point. By Ebaugh's (1988) criteria for this stage, this means that even though participants engaged in a cost-benefit analysis, they did not fully begin to disidentify until the following stage.

Dealing With Role Residual

This stage is often referred to by Ebaugh (1988) simply as *the turning point*, which follows the evaluation of alternatives and the beginning of disidentification. At this time, the role exit is formally initiated due to necessity, an event which constitutes the last

¹³ Ange, Stella and Gent

straw in a negative situation, time or age-related factors, an either/or circumstance, or an event that provides justification for the exit. The turning point serves as a focal point for the announcement of upcoming change and functions to mobilize an individual's social and emotional resources. In addition, the exiter experiences a reduction in cognitive dissonance in his/her perception of self.

Participants experienced a turning point after their cost-benefit analysis. The turning point constituted the formal initiation of the role exit, and signalled the beginning of disidentification as GLQ, as well as imminent announcements of change. Turning points were relationship-related, the result of a last straw incident, due to incidents providing an excuse or justification, or due to other life-changing events. I do not consider these incidences to be consistent with Ebaugh's (1988) umbrella term *unsettling events* of stage one because they did not raise doubts; rather, they prompted action. At this point of great change, participants disidentified as GLQ, began to present as heterosexual, announced their identity shift, and experienced decreases and/or increases in cognitive dissonance.

Categorization as an Ex-Member of a Group

In this final stage, the individual learns his/her new role, and at the same time, incorporates his/her former role into a new self-concept that draws on both roles. During this stage, the exiter adapts to new social situations, learns how to present his/her new identity in a convincing manner, and may use various stigma management techniques to deal with *hangover identity* (also known as role residual).

For participants, becoming accustomed to new social situations included dealing with the reactions of significant others, learning about common heterosexual dating practices and behaviour, and presenting themselves as heterosexual in a manner they felt was authentic. Some participants, such as Bill, Ron and Ty were out to friends and in the gay community, but did not come out to their families, leaving them unaware as to the change in their lives. Others encountered confused or puzzled reactions, increased levels of acceptance by family or peers, and/or the loss of segments of their friends in either or both of the GLQ and heterosexual communities. During the disruption of changing social

relationships, participants felt there was a lack of social and emotional resources available to assist them in learning their new roles; alternate resources cited were internet websites, on-line dating services, and self-help books. Participants expressed the care taken to present authentically. Actions taken to achieve this included removing artwork, photos, and other items with any GLQ connotations from their homes, and adopting body language/posture and wearing clothing that was more masculine or feminine, and using gender-neutral language.

The Relevance of Role Exit Theory

The vocabulary and description in Ebaugh's (1988) work provided a practical theoretical framework for examining the experiences of persons who formerly identified as GLQ, and have since established heterosexual identities. As an analytical tool, role-exit left me with some questions regarding its applicability. Changes in relationships, unsettling events, and a turning point event can all be interpreted as one's turning point. How does the lens of the researcher affect the outcome of a project using this framework? Would another researcher perceive similar findings using Ebaugh's (1988) theoretical framework? How does this fit with a stage model that is supposed to occur in a certain order? In this project, my perception that participants coupled thought processes with action lead to a modified three phase interpretation of the role exit process.

The experiences related by this study's participants did not fully fit Ebaugh's (1988) four stages of role exit. Nonetheless, her terms and definitions proved useful in describing my research results. This process of role exit encompassed three modified phases: (1) cost-benefit analysis; (2) turning point; and (3) dealing with role residual. Because there were no apparent first doubts, Ebaugh's (1988) first stage, disengagement, is not applicable. The participants attributed the beginning of their identity shift to a cost-benefit analysis of their life situation, or to a relationship-related, last straw, or other life-changing turning-point event. This turning point stage marked the beginning of an individual disidentifying as GLQ, and in most cases was followed by an announcement or other indication of a change in his/her sexual identity. Finally, the last phase involved dealing with role residual via various stigma management techniques, learning to present

authentically, and integrating or accepting the continuation of same-sex desires and/or attractions that differentiated participants from other heterosexuals who had always identified as heterosexual.

Role exit properties cited by Ebaugh (1988) as particular to role exit that are apparent in the participant group included: a continuum of voluntariness; the centrality of the role to overall identity; the reversibility of the change; social desirability; and, multiple role exits. Participant role exits were voluntary. Within the group, the degree of voluntariness varied from one of acceptance that one's interests/desires were changing,¹⁴ to making a conscious choice to change one's identity after a cost-benefit analysis or turning point event.¹⁵ This experience enabled the participants to become aware that others in society have the same potential for change. Social desirability of heterosexuality was a consideration for participants in the cost-benefit analysis phase, coupled with social stigma; however, these were components of this phase, rather than the sole motivators for change. While sexual identity was considered central to individuals' sense of self, the participants indicated their sexual identity shift didn't change their overall self-concept of who they were as people. Some participants situated this identity shift during a time of other changes in their lives, such as geographical moves and changes in employment, which assisted them in establishing heterosexual identities. Overall, participants' identity shift indicated not just the reversibility of the change, but also the possibility for future shifts in sexual identity.

5.1.2 Can Role Exit Theory Be Used as an Extension of Troiden's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation?

My study suggests that role exit theory cannot be used as an extension of Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) model of homosexual identity formation to account for shifts in sexual identity subsequent to the establishment and maintenance of a GLQ identity for several reasons. First, contrary to Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) studies of homosexual identity development, some participants¹⁶ in this study indicated that they did not identify

¹⁴ Ange, Gent, Lily, and Zoe

¹⁵ Bill, Eve, Georgia, Gina, Ron, Stella, and Ty

¹⁶ Ange, Bill and Gent

as heterosexual prior to becoming GLQ. In addition, there are those who believe people are born gay, and others who report feeling only same-sex attractions/desires throughout their entire lives. Second, we would have to accept that an individual's movement from one identity to another occurs in commonly occurring graduated stages, and is largely unaffected by gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, education, geographic location, physical and mental (dis)ability. Differences in models of homosexual identity development suggest that these factors may affect sexual identity development and that the progression of stages may vary accordingly; however, none have made a persuasive case in this regard, since previous studies of homosexual identity development have largely centred on relatively homogeneous and/or small-sized samples of Caucasian, middle-class, North American men. Although the limitations and scope of this study constrain the drawing of conclusions related to various socio-demographic factors, the research yielded some suggestion of gender differences worthy of further exploration. Third, Troiden (1979, 1988, 1989) characterizes the status passage from heterosexual to homosexual as "irreversible," which has been disproved by the participants in this research project.

Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) and other stage models of homosexual identity formation provide background information and descriptions of the struggles many individuals face in coming out as GLQ. Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b) model, although dated, allowed for the possibility of the cessation of homosexual identity development and the coinciding retention of a heterosexual identity, but did not account for ongoing same-sex attractions. Yarhouse and Tan (2004, 2005) and Yarhouse (2005) stated that the distinction between sexual identity and overall identity is a social construction, given the stability of sexual desires/behaviour and the fluidity of self-identity. They further acknowledged the intersection of sexuality with gender, age, ethnicity, ability and cultural variants, but with the exception of religious affiliation, have not yet reported on these types of intersections in the results of their research. Where Troiden (1988) indicated *committed homosexual* as the endpoint of homosexual identity formation, the models proposed by Cass (1979, 1984a, 1984b), Yarhouse (2001, 2005), and Yarhouse and Tan (2004, 2005) offered the alternative outcome of heterosexuality, but did not address the possibility of the

continued presence of homosexual desires/attractions in those who pursue a *heterosexual shift*.

Alderson (2003) indicated that part of the process of establishing a positive gay identity involved establishing connections in the gay community and re-establishing any broken connections to the heterosexual community. Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b) stage six, *identity synthesis*, stated that a person achieves identity synthesis when s/he is able to discard the false us-them dichotomy of homosexual and heterosexual. This similarity suggested that the same might be true for homosexuals completing an identity shift to heterosexual; however, the homosexual/heterosexual binary surfaced in data from this study related to both homosexual and heterosexual others. For example, in describing their previous GLQ identities and the establishment of new heterosexual identities, participants portrayed themselves in terms of the 'other.' In conversation it was often the case that whichever sexual-self a participant referenced, GLQ or heterosexual, most often the 'other' identity was referred to as 'them' and the identity to which they referred at the time was 'us.' Rather than a complete synthesis of identities, participants retained a type of 'us-them' perspective that changed viewpoints depending on the chronological location of their sexual identity development.

Alderson's (2003) ecological model of gay male identity formation offered a different perspective in suggesting that sexual behaviour is not a necessary component of a successfully established gay identity. He argued that individuals engage in sexual relations for reasons other than sexual orientation, and that while individuals with greater congruence between cognition, affect and behaviour experience less cognitive dissonance, engaging in same-sex sexual relations is not necessary for the achievement of a gay identity. Participants' indications of incidental or occasional homosexual relations may not be indication of failure in attempting to establish a heterosexual identity; rather, they evidence Jenness's (1992) statement that one's actions do not always accurately reflect who they perceive themselves to be as a person.

Role exit cannot be used as an extension of Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) model of homosexual identity formation to account for shifts in sexual identity subsequent to GLQ identities; however, the various models of sexual identities previously discussed offer insight into and provide a vocabulary for discussing shifts in sexual identity. While Troiden's (1979, 1988, 1989) assumptions about an individual's first sexual identification as heterosexual and the associated final outcome of a committed homosexual may be reflective of some people's homosexual identity development, these were not evidenced in the study sample.

In addition, while the vocabulary and description in Ebaugh's (1988) work provided a practical theoretical framework, as an analytical tool, role exit left me with some questions regarding its applicability. The range of experiences that might be included in each stage (e.g. changes in relationships, unsettling events, turning points) may be the same, suggesting that a graduated stage model may not be the best fit for studies of multiple changes in sexual identity.

5.2 Characteristics For A Proposed Model Of Sexual Identity (Re)Formation

A model of heterosexual identity (re)formation would do well to combine aspects of role exit and various homosexual identity formation models. For example, Alderson's (2003) ecological model of gay identity formation could be adapted to create a model of heterosexual identity (re)formation that takes into account behaviour, affect, cognition, and the acceptance of heterosexual or straight as a personal label, and that occurs in a similar fashion to the stages of role exit. One difficulty in attempting to develop such a model is that the end result would be another theory with assumed start and end points, applicable only to a limited subsection of a sexual minority. With the answers to my research questions raising more questions regarding how best to understand the experiences of persons undertaking multiple shifts in sexual identity, I questioned the need for another situation-specific stage model. A model with wider application that is easily adapted to variations in social contexts would be more beneficial to understanding the social processes of sexual identity formation and reformation.

I propose a model of multiple sexual identity formation(s) and shifts similar to Alderson's (2003) framework, one which does not assume a particular starting point, includes personal and social factors, and contains common properties for various sexual identity shifts that occur in flexible/overlapping phases. Formation of a particular sexual identity (e.g. asexual, bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual) involves cognition, affect, behaviour, and the adoption of a particular label (e.g. gay, lesbian, straight, chaste, queer, or one who refuses to take on a certain sexual label). Due to increasingly complex interactions of gender and sexuality, the formation of transsexual identities is not included in this model.

As in Alderson's (2003) model, behaviour is not included in my proposed model as a necessary component of identity, because individuals engage in sexual relations for reasons other than their inclinations or preferences. In addition, people will accept or reject behavioural labels because of social stigma or social rewards. Cognition and affect interact to comprise *sexual orientation*, which is understood to be a relatively stable affectional, erotic and sexual attraction to persons of a particular gender (Shively & DeCecco 1977; Alderson 2003; Diamond 2003).

Social influences considered in the model of multiple sexual identity formation(s) and shifts are: (1) family and significant other(s); (2) peers; (3) education; (4) media; (5) culture; (6) spiritual/religious beliefs and/or affiliation with a particular religious tradition/church; and, (7) physical and social conditions (child-bearing years/age, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, socio-economic status, physical or mental disability).

In this model, there are two overlapping spheres of self: the personal and the social. The personal sphere contains an individual's cognition and affect, spiritual/religious beliefs, as well as physical condition(s), which may or may not be visible or otherwise apparent. Physical and mental conditions, especially if readily apparent due to personal appearance, demeanour or action, may overlap into the social sphere in the same manner as one's personal behaviour. The social sphere contains the self that is presented to others across a variety of social situations. In addition to behaviour, in this sphere are the

relationship links to a person's religious community and former and present role-sets. The more an individual integrates personal and the social aspects of his or herself (the more those two spheres overlap), the greater the degree of sexual identity synthesis. The higher the integration of social and personal spheres, the less cognitive dissonance one is likely to feel. Both spheres are affected by social influences such as family, peers, education, media and culture. Increased congruence between personal and the social spheres is indicative of the successful establishment of a new sexual identity.

Establishment of a new sexual identity appears to have common phases of development. Prompted by feelings of cognitive dissonance, a cost-benefit analysis of one's present versus future identity occurs; during or after this time a turning point event takes place that initiates the identity shift (Ebaugh 1988). One begins to disidentify with one's former identity, and announces or otherwise indicates his/her change in sexual identity. At this time, the personal and social spheres begin to overlap and increase in congruence (Ebaugh 1988, Alderson 2003). In establishing a new sexual identity, a person may engage in stigma management to deal with hangover identity, as vestiges of the former become integrated with the latter. Establishment of a new sexual identity involves making links to a new role-set, disidentifying with former role-sets, coping with any sexual attractions more appropriate to the previous identity, and learning how to present oneself authentically in one's new identity (Ebaugh 1988). During this process, personal and social spheres are increasingly integrated, and one either adopts a new identity label, or refuses to accept a sexual identity label, even if one's behaviour, affect and cognition match a known social category.

5.3 Contributions to Social Research

In addition to the beginning formulations of a model for sexual identity (re)formation, this research contributes to social theory by establishing the relevance of primary theoretical models of homosexual identity formation and role exit as they pertain to heterosexual persons who formerly identified as gay, lesbian or queer.

One additional man who had maintained his heterosexual identity for only five months rather than two years was included in the study for illustrative purposes. His inclusion in

this research suggested that there may be little difference between those newly establishing heterosexual identities and those who have maintained their heterosexual identities for two years or more, a favoured criteria for describing “long-term” changes in identity (cf. Wolkomir 2001; Miller 2002, Yarhouse & Tan 2004). This is in need of further study.

In addition, this thesis may contain less social desirability bias (e.g. participants may have been forthcoming with information to do with same-sex attraction and behaviour) as well as less researcher bias than previous studies that were funded by or conducted in affiliation with religious or psychologically-based ex-gay groups that may have a desire to establish the success of their programs. Research of this type is important because it offers insight into the process surrounding changes of sexual identity; motivations, social consequences, and the continued challenges of dealing with role residual as a component of identity maintenance.

This research has offered insight into the everyday lived realities of heterosexual individuals who formerly identified as gay, lesbian or queer. The qualitative nature of this project enabled the voices of research participants to find expression in these pages as individuals with similar experiences, rather than as a part of any group advocating for or against the possibility of GLQ persons becoming heterosexual. Their stories showed that changes in sexual identity are possible, even though in all but one case, same-sex attractions – and sometimes even intimacies – continued. Further, participant narratives illustrate the social effects of changes in sexual identity and the perceived personal and social limitations involved in making such changes. The experiences shared and examined in this thesis can offer insight into the structure of sexual identity and how sexual identity is negotiated, re-negotiated, and practiced in society.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in several ways. The non-random sample was small in size and was confined to a small geographical area in British Columbia. Although the participants varied in marital/relationship status, employment and religious affiliation, and their ages were well dispersed from age twenty-two through sixty-two; all but one person was

Caucasian. These constraints render the research results ungeneralizable to a larger, more diverse population of similarly sexually-identified individuals.

Further limitations involve the voluntary nature of the study. The viewpoints expressed were those of self-selected persons with particular motivations to volunteer their time to assist my research. In a few cases,¹⁷ participants shared that their choice to participate came from a desire to share a part of their process of living that they felt either unable to tell anyone else or chose not to share with family, friends, or others in their social circles. Issues of literacy, access to e-mail and the newsprint magazines in which I advertised also contributed to the unequal chance of participation in the research project.

Methodologically, the criteria for inclusion in the study may be seen as limiting. For example, even though participants were screened to ensure they previously identified as GLQ and presently identified as heterosexual, during the interviews some participants stated that they continued to have same-sex attractions. For some participants, this was something to resist; for others, continued same-sex attractions and/or sexual encounters were a natural by-product of their previous GLQ identity and did not affect their self-perceptions as heterosexuals. In either case, all but one participant, Stella, resisted the label 'bisexual,' suggesting that she might be described as a "non-practicing bisexual." Broader inclusion criteria in the initial stages of this project might have created a less constraining space in which participants could articulate their sexual identities.

The interview format had its own limitations as well. Although it was semi-structured to allow participants the freedom to share their stories, issues of reactivity due to my presence, gender, and the personal nature of the topic are likely. In addition, it is possible that some participants initially perceived me to be anti-gay (see Appendix I for more information on this topic), and they may not have shared their experiences openly with me until we developed a rapport and I answered their questions regarding my motivations for research.

¹⁷ Bill, Ange, Zoe, Ron and Georgia

Finally, the research and analysis are limited by the perspective of only one researcher. This project was also restricted in size and scope due to limitations in time for completion and funding. As a single researcher, one is capable of accomplishing a certain amount of work in a designated period of time, whereas a longer time frame, funding for increased advertising and research assistants would likely yield a larger participant pool and increased time available for in-depth data analysis. As such, this should be considered a pilot project for future research in this area.

5.5 Directions for Future Research

While this research was initially fuelled by an interest in the ex-gay movement, none of the research participants considered themselves a part of the ex-gay movement, and none had affiliation with ex-gay therapists or groups. Future research involving heterosexual persons who formerly identified as GLQ may involve participants who are part of the ex-gay movement; in this case, it would be helpful to situate the every day lived experiences of these persons within the larger context of the ex-gay movement. In addition, a wider study of the ex-gay movement, its counter-movements, and an exploration of the networks which include ex-gays, reparative therapy advocates, and religiously-based anti-gay groups would make a notable contribution to the sociology of organizational networks and social movements.

While gender and sexuality are not to be conflated, participants in this study reported attempts to indicate their heterosexuality by conforming to their perceptions of traditional gender norms by way of their fashion choices and body language. Future studies of sexual identity development and motivations for changes in sexual identity – particularly those involving non-heterosexualities – may find it beneficial to engage in further exploration into participant attitudes about what constitutes masculinity and femininity and how they are enacted and performed.

Future studies may add to the literature by including people at various points of identity development, and following their progress with a longitudinal study. The additional inclusion in the research sample of persons involved with reparative therapy, religious conversion, and non-affiliated persons (such as in my sample) as a comparison group

may reveal trends suggesting the long-term effectiveness of conversion therapies and self-motivated changes in sexual identity.

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7. Appendix I: Reflexive Account

7.1 Introduction

Reflexivity refers to “that which turns back upon, or takes account of, itself or the person’s self” (Holland 1999:2). Feminist uses of reflexivity draw attention to the participation of the researcher within research processes, and to the work of analysis and interpretation (Wilkinson 1988). This does more than simply enrich the account; it serves to heighten questions of power relations in research. Focusing on how one creates meaning and the relationships between structures of meanings can facilitate an understanding of the relationship between the researcher and research participants (Burman & Parker 1993). In adopting a reflexive attitude and method, the researcher acknowledges and examines assumptions; in doing so, she disrupts the complacency that can seep into sociological inquiry (Poller 1991:376). Walsh (2002, 2003) states that reflexivity may be characterized as attitudinal, rather than procedural; however, he emphasizes that there are diverse research practices associated with the reflexive approach.

Walsh (2002, 2003) describes reflexivity as having four main foci: personal; interpersonal; methodological; and contextual. Personal reflexivity focuses on the attitudes of the researcher and the expectations that shape a research project, while interpersonal reflexive methods have to do with the relationship between researcher and participants. Methodological reflexivity discusses the theoretical and/or methodological commitments involved in a research project, and contextual reflexivity situates research culturally and historically. Throughout the research process, I kept notes of my feelings, experiences, and concerns. The account that follows is based in those writings, and modeled after Walsh’s (2002, 2003) four components of reflexivity.

7.2 Personal

This thesis topic emerged serendipitously. I came to the University of Victoria with the idea of researching how lesbians in the Catholic Church manage their identities. Did they compartmentalize? Integrate? Are they part of some sort of Catholic sub-group of gay-positive Catholics? What did they do?

Managing identity is something in which I've always had an interest. When it came to the point of narrowing a research topic with my supervisor, the suggestion of role exit came up. To what new and interesting thing might role exit theory apply? We spoke of the coming out process and how it's been 'done to death,' and then inspiration struck. What about people coming out as straight? What about a radical change in identity from GLQ to straight?

Thus began my search for information regarding ex-gay groups, and literature about people who have gone straight. There is a lot of information out there regarding the debate over reparative therapy (cf. Drescher 1999; Haldeman 1999; Beckstead 2001; Ford 2001; Yarhouse & Throckmorton 2002; Spitzer 2003; Silverstein 2003). The American Psychiatric Association withdrew support for its use over thirty years ago, stating that it is harmful to the individual (Haldeman 1999; Zucker 2003). But what about those individuals who request it? There are still practitioners such as Mark Yarhouse (Yarhouse & Throckmorton 2002; Yarhouse & Burkett 2003) and Richard Cohen (Cohen 2000) who offer this kind of counselling, mostly centred on encouraging the adoption of normative gender roles in terms of appearance and activities, and establishing same-sex friendships without any sexual connotations/possibilities. The ethical issues surrounding reparative therapy intrigued me, and the links between Christian-based groups such as Exodus International, Focus on the Family and other advocates of religious-based or psychoanalytical conversion therapy such as the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH) drew me further into the network of ex-gay support groups, the ex-ex-gay countermovement (Besen 2003), and the individuals attempting to eradicate homosexual thoughts, desires, and behaviours from their lives.

It would indeed have been interesting to discuss the processes and associated cognitions, emotions, and behaviours of someone attempting this change in identity. It came to the point, though, where after being immersed in ex-gay literature for some time, I reached a saturation point and I became cynical. I wondered if the ex-gay movement was a sham, if the people involved were solely motivated by religious guilt, and if any

type of reparative psychotherapy or religious conversion therapy could truly effect a change in sexual identity. I had to be diligent in setting aside such thoughts during the research process, and I made a concerted effort to take the time to sit alone, clear my mind and focus on being open and accepting prior to each interview.

Of course, I also had to focus on learning more about the theory and practice of identity formation; the information regarding homosexual identity formation had the closest relation to former GLQ persons establishing heterosexual identities, and it easily captured my attention. To see how it related to role exit was also interesting, and how role exit has been applied in studies of professions, divorce, widowhood, various religious groups and cults fascinated me. I hadn't thought of the gay lifestyle as cult-like; although there are aspects of becoming/being GLQ that seem to require some indoctrination or education. In queer culture, it really is shameful to not have seen certain movies, read certain books, or be ignorant about Stonewall. Learning about homosexual identity formation became increasingly personal, as I related much of what I read to my own first experiences with the gay community many years ago.

The opportunity to reflect how this research impacted on me personally resulted not only in the above reflections, but also in realizations that I had overcome feelings of guilt and anger, and successfully faced my own preconceived ideas and personally constructed stereotypes of who my research participants were, as well as the authenticity of their sexual identities.

Several times during interviewing, I endured feelings of guilt and discomfort due to 'misleading' particular participants, some of whom assumed that the research was reflective of my personal experience/beliefs, and who I chose not to correct. For example, in discussing his motivation to answer the research ad Gent said:

When I saw this ad in the paper, it's about three weeks ago, and I put [the local] magazine aside, I thought, I got to answer, because you know what I found so beautiful from the simple ad was that there is a person then, that must believe, or must see, that it's possible to go from gay to normal....There is a paradigm shift, you see? And I found

that very special. Because we are in a society where we say, gay is okay – and it is okay – we don't *have* to become normal, and I'm alright with that, and then I see that, and I think, yep, I'm alright with that, but there's still a person who believes that it's possible for people who are gay can become normal, and I'd like to talk to them.

Initially, I also found Gent's use of the term "normal" to describe heterosexuality and his statement that "homosexuality is a disease" quite disturbing, and so I did not indicate to him that I had not yet drawn any conclusions regarding GLQ individuals being able to become heterosexual. Further, while I was agitated at his word choice, I did my utmost to maintain my composure and did not say anything about it, even though in other circumstances, I would likely have expressed disagreement at the sentiment that homosexuality is a disease.

During participant descriptions of the impact of social stigma, regarding either of their current or former identities, feelings of anger and sadness welled up. As Ty stated:

It was never never walk down the street with another guy, or anything like that. It never got to that point just because... you know, because of what other people would do... I was worried about that... I didn't want to even though I was walking down a safe street – even just because I was holding another guy's hand or something, you know, I could get the shit kicked out of me, right, so, for those reasons, I wouldn't.

Further, when I felt that participants were perpetuating the conflation of gender and sexuality, or expressing traditional gender role ideas, it evoked feelings of irritation that I was unable to address until after the interviews, when I had time to write in my research journal. For example, Gina stated:

I kinda had to learn how to be straight, you know? like, how to dress and all that kind of stuff... like hair and make up, wear shoes, all that kind of stuff, 'cause I never did that, 'cause I was total tomboy growing up, so I didn't really need to do that in high school either, because – I don't know why – I guess 'cause I was just really hot and young and it didn't really matter, but now it's kinda like, I have to make more of an effort, more of a beauty ritual or whatever.

Upon hearing such sentiments, I felt quite frustrated. First, it seemed to me she was expressing a consumer view of gender; second, I didn't like that she related that her age had prompted her to make more of an effort towards her appearance; and third, I felt that neither consumer preferences of makeup and apparel nor age was definitive of sexuality. After some time spent processing my strong emotional reaction, I realized that my feelings were judgemental and intolerant. We do live in a consumer society, and most people express their gender and other aspects of themselves through their appearance. Our bodies change with age, and we tend to treat ourselves differently than when we were young. In addition, presentation of self is a part of how we relate to others, including activities such as dating, which in many cases is a screening process for choosing a romantic/sexual partner. Upon reflection, it was apparent that my emotional reaction was a result of taking Gina's remarks at face value, rather than applying a deeper understanding of the intersections of gender and sexuality, and how each may be expressed.

In retrospect, it is easy to see the changes in my impressions of the research participants from the beginning to the end of each interview. In reviewing my post-interview notes, I began each journal entry with my first impression of the participant, discussed what I felt I learned from the interview, and ended with my final impression of the interviewee. First impressions focused on participant demeanour and appearance, and after a brief summary of what I felt to be most important points of the interview, final impressions of interviewees generally contrasted first impressions, focusing on the individual's ability to genuinely open up and share deep, personal information.

7.3 Interpersonal

Interpersonal reflexivity involves the relationship between the researcher and the participant. During this research project, I had concerns regarding the ethics of presenting myself differently than my usual appearance and manner – on more than one occasion I asked myself, how should I come across to the people I interview? Should I style my hair in a more feminine fashion? Wear a skirt or dress? Dress in a business suit? With issues of minimizing reactivity in mind, I was uneasy that people who had left their GLQ identities behind might feel uncomfortable speaking with someone whose

appearance might be construed as an expression of a lesbian identity. Prior to beginning each interview, I felt that the most ethically sound decision was to present myself no differently than I would for any professional engagement, and to deal with questions surrounding my own sexuality openly. I hoped that being myself and being open to questions would be reciprocated.

In addition, gender was an issue. Would the women be comfortable speaking with me as a woman? As a queer woman? Would the men feel safe enough to reveal their histories as gay men to a woman as they might to another man? Conversely, because I am a woman, I wondered if they would be more inclined to share personal information because their masculinity was not being challenged. Would heterosexual men feel more comfortable expressing their former emotional and sexual attractions to other men to me because I am female? Because I identify as queer? Would interviews differ in their depth and scope due to gender?

Gender issues lead to considerations of power in the researcher-participant relationship. Would I be taken seriously as a researcher by male participants? By participants that were significantly older than me? Would non-Caucasian participants assume I could not understand or accurately depict their experiences? Was I only credible due to my University of Victoria affiliation? I began to see that as the researcher, I was in a position of privilege in terms of the knowledge of my subject area and research objectives; however, the participants were the experts I was consulting, and without their willingness to share their experiences, I had no project.

In light of this realization, establishing rapport with participants was important to me, particularly considering the personal nature of the interview. I was successful in striking up a pre-interview conversation with each interviewee, but in one case, was not able to continue the easy pace of our chat into the interview. The interviewee constantly looked around, and fidgeted in her seat. Her repeated attempts at joking or sarcasm created increased difficulty in ascertaining when she was giving a serious answer to a question. Approximately half way through the interview, I felt she was not being truthful, and even

if she was, she was somehow wasting my time. I asked a few repetitive questions to see if I received the same answer each time, and was so distracted by her mannerisms and the thought that she was being dishonest, that I could barely digest her answers, and moved the remaining part of the interview along as quickly as I could. At one point, the interviewee indicated she was uncomfortable with the subject of homosexuality, and I even attributed that to my perception of her dishonesty. After speaking with this person, I wished I could pretend the interview didn't happen. I felt angry and betrayed by this stranger to whom I entrusted my research. It was two weeks before I listened to the interview tape and was able to re-frame it in my mind as two people doing the best they could: she as someone uncomfortable with the subject matter, and I as a novice researcher.

Overall, I found common ground with almost all of the research participants, and was able to establish a positive rapport, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. In terms of presentation of self, I felt as if most participants assumed I was either a lesbian or a heterosexual who previously identified as such, and although I did not correct either assumption regarding my identity, I found myself most comfortable when participants assumed the former, and I did disclose information regarding my own sexual identity (e.g. my partner is a woman) with participants who were interested in knowing more about me in relation to my research.

7.4 Methodological

In addition to the challenges of screening respondents (see section 3.6), aspects of my methodological approach brought about some unexpected responses. For example, the first time I advertised, I did not receive one response. After re-advertising several weeks later (see Appendix II, section 8.1), I found myself with a sample size larger than the six to eight persons anticipated. In casual conversation with participants, I was unable to find any reason why they might have responded the second time versus the first, except that they had not seen the first ad. However, I learned from two sources that word of my ad in the local newsprint magazine was being passed by mouth, and had been the topic of discussion in coffeehouses and on the University campus (I discuss this further in section 7.5).

In addition to positive responses from persons either interested in finding out more about my research or wanting to participate in the project, I received an unexpectedly strong negative response. One person who read my ad assumed that I must identify as heterosexual or ex-gay, and/or believe that all gays and lesbians can and should become heterosexual. After asking if I hoped to “turn all gay people straight,” the anonymous self-described “dyke” went on to degrade me, my research, academia, and heterosexual people in general:

Personally, now don't get me wrong, but I think straight people should spend a lot more time worrying about their own miserable little lives, their own failing relationships with their families and friends, their partners and lovers, maybe even their kids, since they all claim it's so great to have them....Then maybe the world would be a better planet to live on. There might not be the need for a “Ministry” of Children and Families, shelters for beaten women and children, pornography, prostitution, transition houses, or rape counsellors.

After careful consideration, I decided that a polite acknowledgement of this person's thoughts and feelings was a more compassionate response than simply ignoring her, so I sent a carefully-worded email in reply. After receiving another, more politely-worded response, I ceased communication with her.

In addition to concerns regarding recruiting and selection of participants, I found that electronic devices are not always reliable. After completing my first three interviews in one afternoon/evening and the following morning, I was unable to retrieve interviews one, three, and part of two from audiotape for transcription. Having taken fairly simple notes due to the planned transcriptions, I found myself in a bit of a bind in the afternoon of that second day, as I went through the interview guide and wrote down as much as I could remember from each interview. Bill and Georgia were contacted via e-mail with a request for a second meeting; however, Bill did not respond to e-mail, and Georgia declined due to other commitments. After this experience, I took along a back-up recorder, my note-taking during interviews increased, and I obtained a new primary tape recorder.

Theoretically, I feel as though I have made a contribution by ascertaining the usefulness of existing theories to explain and/or further understand shifts in sexual identity from GLQ to heterosexual. However, I also believe that in future, a qualitative study of this nature would benefit greatly by using a grounded theory approach in which codes are developed entirely ad hoc and organized by emergent themes, rather than using a stage model such as Ebaugh's (1988) role exit to suggest any coding paradigm prior to engaging in the work of transcription and coding. Such an approach may be more conducive to formulating a theory of heterosexual identity (re)formation or a more generally applied theory of sexual identity formation.

7.5 Contextual

The fourth type of reflexivity is contextual reflexivity, which focuses on situating a given study in its cultural and historical setting. Research is contextually situated, and as such it can include immediate aspects such as interview location and surroundings, as well as specific cultural and historical facets applicable to the project (Walsh 2002, 2003).

In the immediate, interview surroundings were sometimes quite distracting. Due to my desire to meet with participants in a place that they would be comfortable, over half of my interviews took place in cafes at locations convenient for the participants. On sunny days, and/or with participants who smoked, I found myself on outdoor patios, my voice and hearing competing with loud music, traffic noise, and the conversations of passers-by. Even with a sensitive microphone, my audio recordings were intermittently unintelligible because of loud background noises such as large water fountains and jackhammers. With participant availability being a factor, there was generally no time to be spent relocating to another venue, and because privacy was an issue, most participants did not speak loudly enough to counter the noise. Interruptions also occurred, as participants were recognized by friends or acquaintances who wished to say hello, or approached by a stranger who wanted to buy a cigarette or ask for money. In each case, we continued the interview as soon as possible after these occurrences; however, they were still disruptive to the process. In the future, I would conduct my interviews in a

university classroom, meeting room, or the participant's home, in order to have clear recordings and minimize distractions.

Historically, this research took place during a time when ex-gay groups received increased publicity – both positive and negative – from exposure on prime time television as well as news media. Even though Richard Cohen, director of the ex-gay group International Healing Foundation, made appearances on *CNN with Paula Zahn* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live* earlier this year, I was surprised to hear discussion regarding such groups in public places. For some reason, I didn't feel that members of the public at large were widely aware of these groups and their programs, and that if they had seen these programs, they might have dismissed them as unrealistic. I was mistaken.

Several months ago I met two women who, upon inquiring about my thesis topic, stated that they had seen my ad, and that they had wanted to answer it to meet me and discuss the possibilities surrounding changes in sexuality/sexual identity. Having recently been exposed to a television show with an ex-gay storyline, these women became involved in a debate about whether a gay or lesbian person could truly become straight, and if so, how they would go about accomplishing that goal. Since their debate had expanded into a discussion which included categories of sexuality, social labels, social stigma, and if expressions of sexual/romantic desire were truly indicative of one's identity, they were curious to know if my research results supported any of their arguments. Continued conversation with these women revealed that mutability of sexuality was also a topic at their place of work, in their homes, and amongst peers. Further, a chance discussion with a fellow student, Lindsay, indicated that the changeability of sexuality and upsurge of the ex-gay movement was a topic of discussion at school and amongst her friends. In an e-mail following that meeting, Lindsay also revealed that discussions of my recruitment ad were raising questions about whether I worked for an ex-gay group such as Exodus International (Kearns 2006), which also may have affected participant recruitment.

Overall, this project made clear to me how important it is to see research as a collaborative process. To be successful, one requires not only research participants, but also the support of a personal network, other members of the research community, and sometimes the entire community. Indeed, this thesis is not the result of my sole effort; it is the product of a community of people who shared their time, experiences and wisdom in order to help me succeed in my learning process.

8. Appendix II: Newspaper and E-mail Advertisements

8.1 Newspaper Advertisement

Are you a straight person who used to be gay? UVic researcher wants to interview you!

Email: Beverly babouma@uvic.ca

8.2 E-mail Advertisement

PLEASE DISTRIBUTE WIDELY

Are you a heterosexual person that used to identify as gay, lesbian or queer?

Beverly Bouma, a sociology graduate student at the University of Victoria, is conducting research on sexual identity formation throughout the lifespan, and is searching for research participants.

The purpose of this research is to study the process of establishing new sexual identities, after one has already identified and lived as a gay/lesbian/queer person.

To be included in the study, participants must:

- (1) be an adult female or male person, aged 21 or older;
- (2) have established and maintained their gay/lesbian/queer sexual orientation and corresponding social identity for a minimum of two years; following this, they must have established and maintained a heterosexual orientation and social identity for a minimum of two years; and,
- (3) be willing to donate 1 – 2 hours of their time for an interview.

Interviews will be conducted in a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere, and all participants will be treated with the utmost respect.

If you know of someone that may be interested in being interviewed, please pass this email on to them, or get their permission to forward their contact information along to me.

If you would like to know more, may be willing to participate in this research project, please contact me at:

babouma@uvic.ca

Thank you!

Beverly Bouma

9. Appendix III: Qualifying Questionnaire

1. Has your sexual identity changed over time? Yes/No
2. Have you ever identified as queer/lesbian/gay? Yes/No
3. If yes, how long did you identify queer/lesbian/gay? # of years/months
4. During this time how strongly did you identify as queer/lesbian/gay?
0_1_2_3_4_5_6
5. How do you identify now (ie. heterosexual/straight/ex-gay)?
6. How long have you maintained this current identity? # of years/months
7. How strongly do you currently identify with your heterosexual identity? 0_1_2_3_4_5_6

Likert Scale Interpretation:

- 0 - Completely heterosexual (with no homosexual identity, desires, and/or behaviour)
- 1 - Predominantly heterosexual, and only incidentally homosexual (in identity, desires, and/or behaviour)
- 2 - Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual (in identity, desires, and/or behaviour)
- 3 - Equally heterosexual and homosexual (in identity, desires, and/or behaviour)
- 4 - Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual (in identity, desires, and/or behaviour)
- 5 - Predominantly homosexual, and only incidentally heterosexual (in identity, desires, and/or behaviour)
- 6 - Exclusively homosexual (with no heterosexual identity, desires, and/or behaviour)

Criteria for Participation:

- 1, 2 = Yes
- 3, 6 = > 2 years
- 4 = 5 or 6
- 5 = indication of heterosexual/straight/ex-gay sexual identity, desires, and/or behaviour
- 7 = 0 or 1

10. Appendix IV: Participant Consent Form

Coming Out Straight: Role Exit and Sexual Identity (Re)Formations

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled 'Coming Out Straight: Role Exit and Sexual Identity (Re)Formations' that is being conducted by Beverly Bouma.

Beverly Bouma is a Graduate student in the department of Sociology at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions via email at babouma@uvic.ca.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Aaron Devor and Dr. Rachel Westfall. You may contact Dr. Devor at (250) 721-7970 or ahdevor@uvic.ca, and Dr. Westfall at (250) 472-5116 or rachelw@uvic.ca.

The purpose of this research project is to study the conflicts inherent to the process of establishing new sexual identities, and increase our understanding of the nature of sexual identity formation.

Research of this type is important because it will offer insight into the process surrounding changes of sexual identity; motivations, social consequences, and possible avenues of resolution. Further, it is hoped that the close examination and critique of primary theoretical works in role exit and sexual identity formation will contribute to the development of a continuous model of sexual identity re-formation, and provide insight to persons interested in or engaged in this process.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have indicated interest in doing so, and have self-identified as a heterosexual woman or man, aged 21 or older, that formerly identified as lesbian, gay, or queer. In addition, you meet the further criteria of having established and maintained a gay/lesbian/queer sexual orientation and corresponding social identity for a minimum of two years; following this, you established and maintained a heterosexual orientation and social identity for a minimum of two years.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a one to two hour interview, at a location that that is convenient and comfortable for you, such as your home or office, a University of Victoria classroom, the University of Victoria Graduate Student Society boardroom or a local coffee shop/restaurant.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including time away from your usual activities, and possibly, traveling to a mutually agreed upon location for your interview. There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research; however, you may have an emotional response due to the highly personal nature of the topic. In the event this occurs, you may contact Nancy Nigro, M.S.W., R.S.W. at (250) 480-0080 for counseling, if needed.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include a non-judgmental environment in which to discuss the evolution of your sexual identity. In addition, it is hoped that involvement with this study will offer participants insight into the process surrounding changes of sexual identity: personal motivations, social consequences, and possible avenues of resolution for, or greater understanding of, those consequences. In answering questions regarding shifts in sexual identity from gay/lesbian/queer to heterosexual, this research aims to contribute to social theory

by examining the continued relevance of key works in role exit theory and sexual identity formation. It is further hoped that the close examination of interview data, in conjunction with a critique of these primary works in role exit and sexual identity formation will contribute to the development of a continuous model of sexual identity re-formation, and provide insight to persons interested in this process.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time during the interview without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw, the data from the completed portion of the interview may be used.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, I will assign interview tapes/transcriptions a number, and written results will refer to research subjects by pseudonyms. A list of participants and their corresponding interview numbers/aliases will be kept with the signed informed consent forms, and be kept in a locked filing cabinet, accessible only to the researcher. After the project is completed, documents linking participant identities to their tapes/transcripts will be destroyed. Transcripts will be retained by the primary investigator in a locked cabinet for a period of not less than 5 years, and during this time, may be revisited by the researcher for further analysis.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected. During the research, documents and audiotapes will be locked in a cabinet, and electronic files will be password protected and accessible only to the researcher. After the project is completed, audio-taped interviews and documents linking participant identities to their tapes/transcripts will be destroyed. Transcripts will be retained for a period of not less than five years in two formats: paper copy in a locked cabinet accessible only to the primary investigator, and password protected computer files accessible only to the primary investigator. Both formats will be kept at the residence of the primary investigator until they are either shredded or electronically erased.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: (1) shared with participants; (2) as a component of a Master's in Sociology degree; (3) conference presentation; or, (4) scholarly publication in a journal or book.

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include my supervisors, Dr. Aaron Devor and Dr. Rachel Westfall, whose contact information is at the beginning of this form.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and her supervisors at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

11. Appendix V: Interview Guide

Section 1: Sociodemographic background information

1. What year were you born? _____
2. How many years of education have you completed?
 - a. Last grade of K – 13 school _____
 - b. Post-secondary education: describe _____
3. If you are currently employed, what is your job title? _____
4. What is your cultural/ethnic background? _____
5.
 - a. Have you previously or do you now subscribe to any particular religious tradition/belief(s)? Yes/ No
 - b. If yes, which one(s)? _____
6.
 - a. Do you currently have a partner(s)/spouse(s), or are you in a love relationship(s)? Yes/ No
 - b. What is your partner's gender? _____
7.
 - a. Do you have any biological or adopted children? Yes/ No
 - b. How many? _____
 - c. What are their ages? _____

Section 2: Establishment of gay/lesbian/queer sexual identity

Now I have some questions pertaining to your sexual identity, and your experiences and past perceptions of yourself in relation to formerly being gay/lesbian/queer. I encourage you to share your thoughts in relation to your self perception and sense of identity – if you think of an experience or anecdote that you want to share, please do so.

8. Can you tell me about your sexual identity when you were in grade school? (Follow up: How old were you when you first thought you were/might be gay/lesbian/queer?)
9. What word would you have used then to describe your sexual orientation? (i.e. gay/lesbian/queer/fag/dyke/homosexual, etc.)
10.
 - a. Do you feel that others perceived/treated you differently after you were 'out'?

- b. In what way?
 - c. Can you think of (an) example(s)?
11. Was there anything you did/attempted to do to avoid being treated differently by others? (ie. Avoiding certain situations, using gender-neutral language around specific persons/social groups/general public)
12. a. At the time you identified as gay/lesbian/queer, were you active in the gay community?
 b. Can you give me an example of your involvement? (i.e. frequenting establishments/businesses that are owned by/friendly to members of the gay community; activist work; social clubs)
13. How about romantic relationships... during the time you identified as gay/lesbian/queer, were you involved with anyone?

Section 3. Role exit and establishment of straight/ex-gay sexual identity

14. a. When did you begin to question your identity as gay/lesbian/queer?
 b. Can you recall a particular incident or set of circumstances that preceded this event/time?
15. At this time, how did you feel with regard to your interactions with people in the gay/lesbian/queer community?
16. a. Were you in a romantic relationship at the time?
 b. If yes, can you give me an example of how your relationship may have changed with the change in your identity? (i.e. partner was supportive, relationship ended)
17. Do you feel as if your relationships with the heterosexual people in your life changed during the time you were considering this shift in identity?
18. What word would you use now to describe your sexual orientation? i.e. "straight," "ex-gay," etc.
19. a. Who was the first person you told about this?
 b. How did you feel about telling them? (i.e. nervous, anxious, excited)
 c. How did they react?
 d. How did you feel after telling them?

- e. Do you feel they treated you differently after you told them?
 - f. In what way?
 - g. Was there anything you did/attempted to do to avoid being treated differently by them?
20. What was the time period between first questioning your sexual orientation (as a gay/lesbian/queer person) and actually feeling as if you had completed a change in sexual identity?
21. Can you give me a couple of examples of things you did that helped you to establish this new identity? (i.e. self help group, therapy, telling people, moving to a new location, changes in relationship status)
22. How does your family feel about the change in your life?
23. a. Do you feel that any of your gay/lesbian/queer friends treated you differently?
- b. If yes, can you give me a couple of examples of how your shift in identity may have changed some of your friendships?
- c. Was there anything you did to avoid being treated differently by them? If yes, can you give me an example?
24. a. Are you at this time (still) involved with the gay/lesbian/queer community?
- b. If so, in what capacity?
25. Have you become active in any other community groups?
26. About the time you were moving from a gay/lesbian/queer identity to a heterosexual identity, were you experiencing any other big changes in your life? (i.e. employment, beginning/ending a relationship, moving to a new home, new job, new religion, starting/finishing school)
27. During this time you were moving from a gay/lesbian/queer identity to a heterosexual identity and the time following, did you have any 'lapses' in outward behaviour? (i.e. going to a gay bar, a gay/lesbian sexual encounter)
28. a. How did you feel about yourself after becoming straight?
- b. Did you notice any changes in your self-image?

29. Was there anything you did outwardly (consciously or unconsciously – seen in retrospect) to let others know that you were straight? i.e. change in types of fashion items worn, getting rid of ‘gay’ books/art/ photos etc.
30. a. Do you feel that others perceived/treated you differently after you assumed your heterosexual identity?
- b. In what way?
- c. Can give me (an) example(s)?
31. How do you feel about revealing to people that you were formerly gay/lesbian?
32. a. Do you recall any instance of a change in the way someone related to you after they found out you were formerly gay/lesbian?
- b. If yes, can you give me an example?
- c. What types of reactions did this result in?
- d. To whom, if anyone, were you able to speak about these experiences?
33. [Skip this question if respondent isn’t currently in a relationship.]
- a. Regarding your current relationship, can you describe what needs this relationship meets for you? (i.e. companionship____, friendship____, romantic/sexual fulfillment____, complimentary personality traits____, etc.)
- b. Does your current partner(s) know of your former life as a gay/lesbian/queer person?
- c. If yes: how did you feel about telling them?
- c. What was their reaction?
- d. If no: what is the motivation for keeping this to yourself?
34. a. How do you now perceive gay/lesbian/homosexual people?
- b. Do you feel your perspective has changed since your shift in identity?
35. Is there anything we haven’t talked about here that you think is important, and would like to add?