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Down Low Under the Big Sky

Amee Marie Schwitters

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DOWN LOW UNDER THE BIG SKY

By

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Dissertation

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for the degree of

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in Anthropology

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Often synonymous with the rural environment is a sense of a heteronormativity and pervasive homophobia. Despite stories of gay men fleeing rural, conservative areas for larger, more accepting cities, not all men have chosen to leave. Some have chosen to quietly maintain their identity, modifying their sexual schemata in response to the desire to stay within the rural environment. It is known that homophobia and stigmatization of same-sex sexual acts regulate a person’s ability to be open about their sexual encounters, but exactly how they influence the daily lives of down low (DL) men who have sex with men (MSM) remains unknown.

Influenced by schema theory and informed by queer theory, the current study investigated the role of the rural environment in shaping men’s decisions to remain on the DL about their same-sex sexual activity and the impact of that decision on daily life. It sought to understand the influence of the rural environment on men’s decisions to not be out about their same-sex sexual identity and in turn how that decision influenced sexual risk behavior and HIV prevention. The data gathered during semi-structured qualitative interviews with forty-five self-identified closeted men living in Montana was analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach.

Several reasons for remaining closeted emerged and the level that each man was affected by his decision to remain closeted differed. Overarching themes of isolation and depression emerged from men feeling as if they had no choice, but to remain closeted while living in a rural environment. For many, homosexuality is still viewed in direct contrast to traditional ideals, leaving many men questioning how to maintain their place within the rural social environment. As Gerard Wright states, “being gay in ‘cowboy country’ similarly involves tactics of sexual camouflage: To be gay in western states such as Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana is to know when and how to ‘butch-up’ or ‘cowboy-up.’” One means of maintaining this sense of “camouflage” adopted by rural men is to remain on the DL about their same-sex sexual activity. A desire for increased social support and a more accepting social environment emerged from this research.
DEDICATION

To the 45 brave men who made this dissertation possible.

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope... and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. - Robert F. Kennedy
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible were it not for the forty-five men who stepped forward and took part in it. Thank you to the men who allowed me to interview them. The interviews were personal and often included men’s innermost thoughts and private details of their lives. The internal strength that these men possessed continues to inspire me today. The strength of this work comes largely from the depth and richness of the men’s stories. Carl, thank you for your continued conversations, company, and feedback. You’ve kept me on my toes.

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To my friends and family – thank you for your love and support. Thank you for being there despite my frequent absences. Thank you to my partner for picking up all of “the slack” that life brings along with it while I often disappeared to write. To Kellan and Kara, thank you for reminding me of the importance of laughter in the journey of life. You make everything worthwhile. Here’s to the next adventure!
Abstract

Often synonymous with the rural environment is a sense of a heteronormativity and pervasive homophobia. Despite stories of gay men fleeing rural, conservative areas for larger, more accepting cities, not all men have chosen to leave. Some have chosen to quietly maintain their identity, modifying their sexual schemata in response to the desire to stay within the rural cultural environment. It is known that homophobia and stigmatization of same-sex sexual acts regulate a person’s ability to be open about their sexual encounters, but exactly how they influence the daily lives of down low men who have sex with men (MSM) remains unknown.

Influenced by schema theory and informed by queer theory, the current study investigated the role of the rural environment in shaping men’s decisions to remain on the down low about their same-sex sexual activity and the impact of that decision on daily life. It sought to understand the influence of the rural environment on men’s decisions to not be out about their same-sex sexual identity and in turn how that decision influenced sexual risk behavior and HIV prevention. The data gathered during semi-structured qualitative interviews with forty-five self-identified closeted men living in Montana was analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach.

Several reasons for remaining closeted emerged and the level that each man was affected by his decision to remain closeted differed. Overarching themes of isolation and depression emerged from men feeling as if they had no choice, but to remain closeted while living in a rural environment. For many, homosexuality is still viewed in direct contrast to these traditional ideals, leaving many men questioning how to maintain their place within the rural social environment. As Gerard Wright states, “being gay in
‘cowboy country’ similarly involves tactics of sexual camouflage: To be gay in western states such as Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana is to know when and how to ‘butch up’ or ‘cowboy up.” One means of maintaining this sense of “camouflage” adopted by rural men is to remain on the down low about their same-sex sexual activity. A desire for increased social support and a more accepting social environment emerged from this research.

This dissertation provides a voice for men previously excluded from the literature on rural sexual minorities. It provides insight into men’s everyday life experiences stemming from feelings of having to remain closeted about a part of their personal identity. This dissertation seeks to contribute to the literature on rural gay lives.
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Chapter One: Introduction

There is an abrupt shift where the city ends and the prairie begins. The sky suddenly opens... and a loud quiet settles on your ears. The first time I encountered this shift my heart sank with the realization that I was about to become a prairie resident. I was stunned to find myself within a geography that appeared to offer absolutely nothing. Like the urban gays and lesbians... I believed in the “gay imaginary,” the notion that rural life is profoundly hostile to gay men and lesbians, and that the urban gay ghettos are the “homeland over the rainbow” where one can find true family, community, and happiness.

Growing up in a town with less than 1,000 people... I was always aware that gay people existed in my community, but we were implicitly taught to never acknowledge such a difference. (My son’s) death opened my eyes to the impact that silence has on people’s lives. By failing to openly accept differences, my home community made real the gay imaginary (Under the Rainbow 2003).

The two quotes above, while talking about rural Midwestern life, illustrate the importance of our own perceptions of place on identity and a sense of community belonging. The initial quote exemplifies the common perception of a hostile rural gay environment, while the latter quote demonstrates the traditional rural values surrounding acceptance within a largely heteronormative environment. While research involving urban gay and lesbian populations has been increasing within the social sciences, research focusing on rural lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations remains limited. This lack of research has supported the myth that LGB persons are absent in rural
America and has led to a disjuncture between academic research and the everyday reality that needs to be addressed.

With its picturesque, seemingly endless blue skies and wide-open spaces, Montana often invokes images of beauty, isolation, and freedom. It is easy to see where the inspiration may have arisen for Montana’s unofficial slogan, “The Last Best Place.” However, despite the seemingly lighthearted portrayal of rural life, it brings to light the underlying and often unspoken sense of heteronormativity and the accompanying traditional ideas of masculinity that can be found throughout Montana. From images of the rugged lone cowboy to the providing father, ideas of masculinity are often found deeply intertwined within ideas of heterosexuality and further perpetuated through the media and social interaction.

The media has bombarded us with images of their ideas of masculinity. As Campbell (2006) states, “Real men don’t drink lattes. They drink beer, smoke Marlboros, and ride their SUVs through mud and up mountains, to the acclaim of women and the envy of other men.” These images have lasting influence on how rural representations and realities of masculinity are constructed. It is rare that the media portrays the other side of rural life. While it was a Hollywood account, Michael Bell’s film *Brokeback Mountain*, reminded us that rural masculinities often include rural gay masculinities. More often we are exposed to the image of the rural man leaning on a fence in front of his horse while wearing a cowboy hat, Wranglers, and Stetsons. This image is not accidental, it is an image that has exemplified our traditional ideas of heterosexual masculine authority and power. It is images like the prior that work to
perpetuate the traditional link between domination, authority, heterosexuality, and masculinity – the alpha male.

Despite the absence of the image of the rural gay man, not all gay men have chosen to flee the rural environment for the larger city. For some, the choice to return to, or never leave the rural environment emanates from a deeper sense of resilience. It is easy for those living in urban areas to question why someone would go through the hassle of living in a conservative rural area. As Withers (2009:1) stated, “that is the wrong question. If our identities are complex, contradictory things, then it makes perfect sense for gays to fight for the right to live and prosper in the red states.” Those men choosing to stay in rural areas are often confronted with the idea that they are out of place, further complicating the struggle for identity and acceptance. By counteracting this false stereotype through a sense of belonging, men must often rely on “the structures of rural life, particularly the dynamics of class, gender, race, and location” (Gray 2009:19). Esther Newton’s groundbreaking studies of male drag queens and later, lesbian community on Fire Island. highlights the importance of place, gender, class, and race in understanding the formation of identities.

The assumption that gay men do not choose to live in rural areas has created a void in the overall availability of LGBT literature, creating the perception that gay men cannot thrive in this environment. While many gay men have chosen to live in urban areas, there are a large number of gay men who have chosen to stay in rural areas, to embrace opportunities found within the rural environment often with varying effects on men’s ability to be open about their sexuality. The questions of why some men choose to stay in rural areas and how this decision impacts the ability to be open about same-sex sexual
activity needs to better explained. To date, there is no literature that looks at the lives of men who have sex with men (MSM) who are not open about their same-sexual activity in Montana and very little research has been attempted outside of Montana. Although rural regions have long been synonymous with increased rates of homophobia and traditional family values, the increasingly globalized world has led to an interchange of ideas and populations, creating rural areas that are no longer the isolated geographic regions they once were.

This Study

Through this dissertation, the influence of the rural sociocultural environment on sexual identity will be explored. How are sexual minority identities influenced by place, specifically by the more traditionally conservative rural social environment? Further, how do social and cultural expectations or restrictions on sexual identity influence sexual risk communication and safer sex behaviors among rural men who have sex with men? The influence of one’s self-awareness of same-sex sexual desires and the desire for a sense of community belonging is influenced by our opportunities within the environment in which we live. The environment has the potential to impact how and when we express our identity by influencing how we integrate our identities into our everyday life. As looked at through the experiences of forty-five MSM who are not out about their same-sex sexual activity, these questions will be further explored.
Schema theory surmises that we all possess conceptual abstractions or scripts that help us to mediate between our inner world and our behavioral responses to the stimuli we receive. These abstractions serve as our basis for understanding and responding to the world in which we live (Fillmore 1977; Rumelhart 1980). Schemas tell us what is appropriate and how to act in social situations (Brower 2008). We know how to act appropriately within the world we live because of the knowledge we possess about that world. In other words, our identities are cultural assemblages influenced by our social surroundings (Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959; Mead and Morris 1934; Strauss 1959).

Often synonymous with the rural environment is a sense of a heteronormativity and pervasive homophobia. These can lead to an overall sense of fear by those who do not conform to the perceived ideals of society. Heteronormativity and homophobia can profoundly influence attitudes and shape perceptions about one’s identity. In response to our cultural environments we are able to modify our schemata in an effort to maintain our emotional well-being and physical safety. In an environment, where it is still possible to hear the terms gay or queer being used as insults, rather than identities, the motivation to modify personal schemas, for example, keeping one’s sexuality or sexual identity hidden, can be a daily persistence. While much has changed since 1998, not all has changed. Matthew Shepard’s name came up several times throughout the course of this research. Many of the men described what happened to Matthew as an extreme case of homophobia, yet acknowledged the impact of this incident on their hesitation to be open about their sexuality. Today, while rural areas are still associated with violence, more often it is the fear of exclusion that perpetuates the regulation of identity within the rural public environment.
The influence on remaining closeted about a part of one’s life has the potential to greatly impact feeling’s of connectedness to or being within the larger community. The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1927) described being as a connectedness to the world, to a person’s everyday existence. This sense of being is reflected by men’s decision to openly express their sexual identity. This decision is even more complex when living in a conservative rural social environment.

Men who have sex with men (MSM) is a public health term that has long been critiqued for having been clinically created (Ayala 2003; Narayan 2000; Young and Meyer 2005). As with any scientifically created identity category, the term MSM has the potential to obscure critical inquiry into the social meaning of sexuality (Young and Meyer 2005). Despite the critiques, MSM captures the discord between sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior. In a recently released study conducted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services from 2006-2008, approximately 58,000 men living in the United States, ages 18-44 responded to questions about sexual identity, attraction, and activity (Chandra et al. 2011). While 1.2% of male respondents reported same-sex sexual attraction and 1.7% reported their sexual identity as homosexual or gay, 5.2% reported same-sex oral or anal sexual activity. These results are representative of the discrepancy between sexual attraction, orientation, and activity and demonstrate the need to better understand the relationship between each. While the term gay implies a sense of identity, not all men in this study identify as gay, despite sharing the common connection of same-sex sexual activity.

The focus on the rural environment within this study highlights the distinct differences that accompany life away from a major metropolitan city. However, despite
the many differences, one finds similarities arising from the common fight for equality and acceptance. As Gray (2009) and Halberstam (2005) state, there is a need to move away from the metronormativity that has long accompanied LGBT research, especially research that has focused on MSM and HIV. The marginalization of rural gay life and the automatic dismissal of the possibility of acceptance within rural communities “naturalizes cities as the necessary centers and standard bearers of queer politics and representations (Gray 2009:38).

The false perceptions of rural gay life often portrayed in popular culture promotes rural LGBT identities as out of place and estranged from authentic urban queerness (Gray 2009). These false perceptions further the divide between rural and urban LGBT worlds. Gay culture is often absent in popular media’s depiction of the rural environment. Those contributions that do hint at some form of gay rural culture are often created by outsiders. They are created by urban men and women who rarely spend time in our culture, rather than by those who have experienced the juxtaposition of a rootedness to place with a sense of exile or displacement (Tuan 1976). The story of MSM living in rural Montana is long overdue.

This is the story of forty-five self-identified MSM living in a rural state. It will seek to tell their story through their own words, their own lived experiences. These experiences paint a vivid picture of the social and cultural rural environment as perceived through down low MSM. Borrowing from phenomenological-style interviewing techniques, these lived experiences allow outsiders to see life through the eyes of those men in the study (Bruyn 1996). The difficulties and rewards that accompany everyday
life and the struggle to create a life while remaining closeted about a part of one’s identity is explored.

Why then, do some men choose to stay in the rural environment, rather than leave for urban areas as assumed in prior research? Is the rural environment as hostile towards MSM as it has previously been described? What is the impact of remaining closeted on men’s ability to find sexual partners and how does remaining closeted influence HIV susceptibility? Does remaining closeted directly influence men’s everyday lives? How have men chosen to navigate the rural environment despite not conforming to the often-assumed heteronormative culture? What role does resilience play in men’s ability to stay in the rural environment and how can this sense of resilience be incorporated into HIV prevention? These questions will be further explored in the following chapters.

Despite being the fourth largest state, Montana is the third least densely populated state within the United States. Prior studies conducted among openly gay men residing in Montana support ideas of geographic and social isolation that were found in the current study. Since HIV reporting began in 1985, Montana has had 955 cumulative cases of HIV reported with 595 cases diagnosed in Montana. Alarmingly, 39% of new HIV cases in 2009 were co-diagnosed with AIDS at the time of initial diagnosis indicating barriers to testing especially within the MSM community (MDPHHS 2009). Overall, MSM account for nearly 2/3 of all people living with HIV/AIDS (MDPHHS 2009).

The 2010 Montana MSM Needs Assessment reached out to men who identified as being openly gay or bisexual throughout the State through individual key informant interviews, focus group participation, and through an electronic survey. While there are distinct differences between men who are out and not out about their same sex sexual
activity, the research mentioned above represents the most recent research with “out” MSM throughout the State. Through this research several themes emerged that share a degree of commonality with men who are not out including drug and alcohol abuse, feelings of geographic isolation, social isolation, and conservative or anti-gay attitudes.

Sondag et al. (2011) and Gray (2009) reported feelings of conservative attitudes that made it harder for gay men to feel a part of their community. This marginalization of gay men often leads to a loss of true identity where one becomes a stranger not only in society, but also a stranger to themselves. Moses and Buckner (1980) identified clients’ isolation and fear of discovery as gay or lesbian as major obstacles facing rural lesbians and gay men in need of social services. In William’s (2005) study, men reported controlling when and how to be visibly gay as a means of survival in rural areas. Similar to William’s study, several men that were out within their communities in Sondag et al’s study reported experiences where they had tried to hide or minimize their sexuality in fear of their personal safety.

In agreement with the handful of prior studies focusing on rural LGBT research, Sondag’s study found that MSM living in rural communities face challenges such as conservative values regarding sexual behavior, social hostility including homophobia and antigay violence, isolation, and loneliness (Simon, Rosser, and Horvath 2007; Williams, Bowen, and Horvath 2005). Rural communities also have increased concerns regarding anonymity and confidentiality, stigma, and the traditions and cultures within the community (Heckman and Carlson 2007; Mancoske 1998; Preston et al. 2007; Shernoff 1997; Ullrich, Lutgendorf, and Stapleton 2002; Uphold et al. 2005). Rural areas often lack the visible, viable LGB communities that thrive in urban settings.
Of the literature that addresses “out” gay men living in rural communities, much of it has emphasized their relative invisibility (Green 2006). This is said to stem from the exclusion imposed upon them by the community in which they live (Boulden 1999) and a self-imposed restriction stemming from knowing they do not fit into a heterogeneous world (Green 2006). This can lead to feelings that invisibility by gay men is obligatory to remain in such a rural community (Brown 1996; D’Augelli and Hart 1987). The combination of these rural characteristics can promote fear and intolerance, resulting in depression, stress, lack of social supports, and poor coping mechanisms (Uphold et al., 2005). While urban MSM are not immune to the challenges outlined above, within rural areas these challenges are often compounded by a decreased visibility in the community, smaller numbers, and less financial assets to advocate for greater visibility and awareness (Gray 2009).

There are limits to this research. This study focused solely on rural MSM in Montana. While all rural areas share some degree of commonality, there are also unique characteristics between rural areas. As with all qualitative research, the stories told within this dissertation belong to the men specific to this study and cannot necessarily represent the exact experiences of other down low\(^1\) or out MSM living in Montana. The perceptions of the community in which these men live are their own and may not be shared by others living within the community.

This research focused only on men and excluded women. Prior research (see D’Augelli and colleagues, Kramer, and Krieger) has explored the influence of the rural

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\(^1\) Down low and closeted are being used in the current study to describe men who are having sex with other men, but are actively trying to hide their same-sex sexual activity including attempting to remain anonymous with their sexual partners.
environment on lesbian women who are out about their sexual identity. In relation to
sexual risk behaviors, lesbian women are at significantly less risk for HIV/AIDS than gay
men. While this research only focused on rural MSM who were not open about their
same-sex sexual identity, an important direction for future research would be to include
rural women who are not open about their same-sex sexual identity.

There is a need to further explore the influence of heteronormativity on closeted
rural MSM’s sexual risk behaviors and their ability to access HIV prevention
information, testing, and HIV-positive programs and support groups. Traditional rural
values can contribute to negative attitudes toward men who have sex with other men,
HIV positive individuals, and those persons seen as participating in risky sexual behavior
(Dreisbach 2010). This study seeks to further describe the lived experience of rural
MSM. Rather than looking at rural areas in comparison to urban areas, which further
legitimizes urban as the norm, this study will continue to increase our understanding of
the rural experience allowing us to view rural and urban gay life through a continuous
and equal lens.

This is not a comparative study, which seeks to compare rural MSM to urban
MSM. Gray (2009) and Halberstam (2005) state that we must stop viewing rural gay
communities as lacking, incomplete or devalued in comparison to their urban
counterparts. By continuing this sense of metronormativity, we continue to further
promote the urban/rural binary that governs our ideas of modern sexual identities. This
work does not seek to compare MSM who are out to those who are not out. As men who
are out about their sexuality are viewed as the norm, to compare these two groups, would
only serve to place blame on men that are not out or further the idea of societal norms.
The Research Problem

This study sought out to explore the experience of being a man on the down low in a rural environment. The research questions were: 1) What is the overall experience of being a closeted MSM living in a rural area; 2) What role or restriction does community play in the formation of identity; 3) How does culture influence the management of identity; 4) How does the decision to remain closeted influence the ability to communicate about safe sex practices; and 5) How does remaining closeted influence perceptions of HIV among MSM? Each of these research questions sought not only to provide simple answers, but also to describe in depth these experiences, while attempting to understand and theorize the responses. By approaching the research from a qualitative perspective, the voice of the participants is emphasized; what the experiences meant to the men are described in rich detail.

The purpose of this research was to describe the everyday lives of the men as seen through their own eyes. This research was interested in the sociocultural conditions which influence men’s decisions to remain on the down low and how this decision impacts overall well being, sexual risk communication, and HIV risk behaviors. While the research questions can be looked at individually, there is a clear relationship between each of them and to better understand each, they were analyzed as a whole. The interrelationship between the questions provides a deeper understanding of the men’s everyday lives. Like most qualitative research, within this study new questions emerged and original questions evolved as the interviews progressed. However, the focus remained on describing the overall experience of being a down low man in Montana.
Significance of the Study

The lack of rural-based LGBT research has led to deficiencies in our understanding of rural LGBT health. The Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) report, *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People* published in 2011, states that LGBT persons living in rural areas may feel less comfortable coming out, have less access to an LGBT community, and have less support from their families and friends. Browning (1996:2) suggested that the voice of gay people is “with rare exception, the voice of an urban metropolis.” Binnie and Valentine’s review of cultural geography highlights the urban dominance of research as the handful of rural sexuality studies, “demonstrate how much we take for granted that lesbian and gay lives are lived in the urban environment” (1999:178).

Much of the prior research and literature has centered around urban gay and lesbian life. Without studies of rural gay life, our understanding of the experiences of gay men and lesbians remains fragmentary, at best. By not “penetrating the necessarily closeted gay life of small towns… there remains a strangely lopsided view of American gay life (White 1980:336). Much of what we know about rural LGBT health has come from a handful of studies or hypotheses that have been created from urban-based research. Few studies have explored the effect of geography on health outcomes among rural LGBT populations (McCarthy 2000; Williams et al. 2005). As stated by Martin Manalansan (2003), established norms of gay and lesbian culture are constantly translated and transformed in specific locations, making the use of direct comparisons of rural and urban gay life obsolete.
The urban bias of academia reaches far beyond LGBT studies. Creed and Ching (1997:11) state, “the identity politics of being and becoming an intellectual” has sustained the tendency of many academics to shy away from rural-based or rural oriented research. They further critique researchers, for their history of supposed intellectual superiority and academic authority over rural persons. Bell and Valentine (1995) note that rurality and sexuality rarely are integrated in social science research. This absence further reinforces the idea that gay and rural are incompatible. In this study, the researcher lives in the rural area but, it is the rural men that will speak for themselves. This research is about giving a voice to those in the population that are usually silenced.

The current study describes in detail the lived experience of being a closeted MSM living in a rural environment. This research contributes to a better understanding of a population that has not been accessed in prior academic research by providing a relatively large qualitative research sample of men from a variety of non-urban locations located within the State of Montana. This work is an effort to contribute to the rural literature while raising awareness of the presence of sexual minorities in rural environments.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one has provided an introduction the study and outlines the rest of the dissertation. Chapter two provides a more detailed look at the ideas that formed the basis of this study. The ideas of identity,
rural environment, stigma, and HIV are further expanded upon. While the rural environment has always existed, it will be looked at through a queer lens within this study. Prior literature that has focused on gay men living in rural environments will be identified. When studying LGBT issues from an anthropological standpoint, it is necessary to acknowledge the discipline’s controversial history directed towards the idea of homosexuality, its current state, and the future directions of this field of research. The groundbreaking report by the Institute of Medicine, *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People* released in 2011 offers a renewed sense of academic legitimacy in the demand for increased LGBT research both within and outside of anthropology.

Chapter three outlines the methodology and theoretical framework that influenced this study. The methods that guided the collection of the data and the subsequent analysis are further explained. The processes of data collection and interview techniques are detailed. Queer theory and schema theory are explained both in broader terms of their relevance to academic research as well as their applicability to the current study. The position of the researcher, ethical implications for sexuality-based research, and reciprocity in the research process are discussed in chapter three as well.

Chapters four through six detail the results of the analysis by describing in depth the influence of the rural sociocultural environment on sexual identity. The decision to remain closeted about same-sex sexual activity is further explored and the influences of remaining closeted on sexual risk behaviors and communication are examined. Men’s sense of place within the rural community are contrasted with their desires to be open about their same-sex sexual activities. Many of the men in this study exhibited a
tremendous sense of resilience that allowed them to live in rural areas while having to control when and where they could express their full sense of identity.

Chapter seven draws together the findings of this research and positions them within the larger contextual frameworks of LGBT and rural research. Beyond the theoretical contribution to anthropological ideas of identity and sexuality, applied recommendations are made with a public health focus in seeking to improve the overall health status of rural LGBT individuals. Through the incorporation of empowerment and resilience, two ideas exhibited by the men in this research, strategies are outlined within the context of HIV prevention and structures that promote overall emotional and physical well-being.

**Contextual Background**

This dissertation could be said to have been written from a rural insider’s perspective. While I did not grow up in a rural area, I have spent the greater part of the last thirteen years of my life living in rural or underserved areas. Some of the problems the men in this study struggle with are common to all rural residents regardless of sexuality. This common rural bond adds a depth to this research that could not be obtained by an urban-based researcher. As Oakley (1981) states, “personal involvement… is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit each other into their lives.” This connectedness to the rural environment forms a deeper connection to this dissertation.
I believe that many of us to some extent have hidden parts of our identities during various points in our lives. The extent to which this affects our daily lives, depends on the magnitude of the identity we are hiding. I am however, an outsider in the context that I do not identify as a man. This does not mean that I did not have considerable appreciation for the men’s positions or experiences. In contrast, the stories that were shared with me will continue to shape who I am not only as a researcher, but also who I am as a person.

Conclusion

The current study describes in detail the lived experience of being a closeted MSM living in a rural environment. The MSM assigned identity, like identities in general are complex and influenced by many factors. While the term is used to group together men sharing one common characteristic, it is imperative to emphasize the uniqueness of the men within this common group. Men within this scientifically created category differ by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, self-identified sexual identity, and age, as well as others. What these men do share is a historically marginalized social status relative to the traditional heterosexual societal norm (IOM 2011).

To better understand the experiences of rural MSM it is essential to better understand influencing factors such as stigma, demography, and larger social influences and support networks. It is necessary to look beyond the individual to the larger social
environment. At a time when urban LGBT populations are experiencing an increased 
visibility, rural LGBT populations remain largely hidden.

This dissertation positions itself at intersecting points found within academia’s 
traditional avoidance of rural research and anthropology’s controversial history within 
LGBT research. The work presented in this dissertation joins the relatively recent trend 
among a small group of queer anthropologists seeking to rewrite anthropology’s 
relationship within LGBT research while setting direction for future researchers. This is 
the largely hidden and untold story of down low men living in a rural state.
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

“It is ironic that so influential a discipline [anthropology] has been oddly parochial in resisting the study of sexuality… the institutions of the discipline have often failed to encourage, and have in some respects obstructed, research on homosexuality, especially in Western urban contexts” (Rubin 2002).

Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to related literature within and outside of anthropology. Despite anthropology’s revelatory history, homosexuality, until recently has been a noticeably absent topic within the literature. Even with the recent increase there still remains a debate over the legitimacy of conducting fieldwork so close to “home” among some anthropologists. As globalization continues to spread into new areas, rural areas as were once defined, are no longer the isolated constructs we once thought them to be. Research focusing exclusively on down low or closeted MSM is almost non-existent in the literature, especially literature focusing on the rural environment. The current study seeks to fill this void in the literature by giving voice those men who have often been absent in the prior literature presented here.

An introduction to the major themes influencing this research is presented in this chapter. A brief summary of the study of same-sex sexuality within anthropology is given, followed by introductions to recent research on stigma, identity, HIV/AIDS (with a focus specific to rural areas), and the rural environment within the contexts of masculinity and resilience. As this research process unfolded, the resilience of the men
living in the rural environment became evident as described by the men themselves in the interviews. To provide a background for the reader, a brief introduction to resilience theory as influenced by Stall and colleagues is presented in this chapter. In chapter three schema and queer theories, the major theories guiding this research will be presented in detail. While queer and schema theories remain the guiding theories for this study, many of the men’s experiences relating to health outcomes and emotional and physical health began to share similarities with findings found by Meyer and colleagues through their use of minority stress theory. In keeping with the anthropological nature of this study, the greatest attention is given to schema and queer theories. However, with the potential public health implications of this research it is important to include theory that can be used to account for the influences of the social and cultural environment on individual health outcomes and so a brief introduction to minority stress theory is provided in the current chapter.

**Anthropology of Homosexuality**

Through the 1960s, anthropologists largely “ignored homosexuality in Western societies and what is worse, have barely taken note of it as it manifests itself in primitive groups” (Sonenschein 1966:75) It can be argued that until recently there has been an uncomfortable atmosphere surrounding the study of Western homosexuality in mainstream anthropology. It was not until the late 1960s that seminal anthropological works began to be published. In 1993, Kath Weston’s summary piece, entitled
Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology represented an “institutionalizing move for an emergent domain of inquiry” (340). While homosexuality had been subtly present in anthropology for some time, it was usually presented in terms of the other in an attempt to eroticize indigenous cultural practices.

Boellstorff (2007) questions gay and lesbian studies place within anthropology, citing that because of American university politics, it often lands within forms of queer politics, much the same as the anthropology of women began within feminist politics. Lewin and Leap use lesbian and gay anthropology to refer to an “intellectual, political, and theoretical stance that has grown out of the experiences of lesbian/gay life in the USA during the last decades of the 20th century” (2009:1).

Only in the last quarter of a century has the study of homosexuality within anthropology begun to move from the periphery of the discipline into a more accepted area of research. With the increase in research, there has been a growing debate over the terminology used within studies of sexuality. Today, the term homosexuality is often described as a “wooden, over determined term coined in the nineteenth century” that fails to take into account the “plasticity and malleability of human sexual practices and identities” (Robertson 2005:1).

Terms such as “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality,” although they may appear helpful on the surface, “rarely live up to their promise as secure categories, nor can such static descriptions of sexuality capture the dynamic nature of sexual expression over time or provide insights into the culture-bound limits of these terms” (Silenzio 2003:36). By viewing homosexuality as a static all encompassing term, efforts overlook complete populations of men including males who have sex with males, but do not label
themselves as gay or MSM, males on the down-low or closeted, and males who may either be married to a female or who have sex with females, while also having occasional male sexual encounters, just to name a few.

From the time Weston published *Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology* in 1993, LG has evolved into the LGBTQQI acronym we often see today with the ever-present debate on enlarging it even further. This alphabet soup, inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex individuals has reached a point in which today, it is beginning to be critiqued by some for being too broad. The inclusion of transgender persons in the LGBTQQI acronym has demonstrated the complex relationship between gender and sexuality in our modern world. The separation of gender and sexuality as “different realms of human experience has…highlighted the complex relationships between gendered and sexual subjectivities and the political and cultural meanings and contexts within which such subjectivities are produced and experienced” (Valentine 2002). The debate over gender and sexuality highlights their linkage while emphasizing their distinctiveness (Boellstroff 2007).

As Goldenweiser stated in 1929, “In the beginning was sex and sex will be in the end… I maintain – and this is my thesis – that sex as a feature of man and society was always central and remains such” (Vance 2005:15). Despite sex being a central part of human culture, anthropology has struggled with its relationship to sex and even more so, same-sex sexual acts. Vance (2005) highlights the controversy surrounding sexuality as a legitimate field of study in anthropology while criticizing the discipline for its lack of training opportunities provided to graduate students interested in pursuing research revolving around sex and sexuality.
Early attempts by anthropologists to explore homosexuality were usually conducted in terms of the “other” through their emphasis on primitive indigenous populations (Berndt 1963; Hill 1935; Layard 1959; Mead 1935; Metraux 1940; Roheim 1950; Spencer and Gillen 1927). The study of homosexuality in nonwestern cultures was often used as a means of reinforcing the idea of the exotic “other.” Though emphasis was placed on the “other,” there was a collective underlying call for the inclusion of homosexuality within the overall idea of culture (Lyons 2004).

Anthropological investigations of male homosexuality have evolved from the exploration of male bodies and sexuality (Malinowski 1929, 1955) often portrayed through a Western model of deviance or abnormality (Berndt 1963; Hill 1935) to the systematic exploration of the relationship between material bodies and cultural relations (Foucault 1980; Gutmann 1997). In the late 1920’s one of the earliest comprehensive reviews of sexuality within the anthropological literature was conducted by Goldenweiser (1929). Homosexuality was mentioned briefly as, “another sub rosa aspect of sex” (1929:61). Studies on Western homosexuality within anthropology between the 1930s and 1960s were few and far between, although studies of the “other” continued.

Sonenschein, considered to be one of first anthropologists to focus on homosexuality within contemporary industrialized societies wrote one of the original early reviews on the study of homosexuality within anthropology, “Homosexuality as a Subject of Anthropologic Inquiry (1966). Sonenschein put forth a plea to increase anthropology’s contribution to the study of homosexuality, claiming it had largely been dominated by Western psychologists and sociologists. While appreciative of the contributions made by psychologists and sociologists, Sonenschein was concerned by the
portrayal of the individual as the “basic, final, and exclusive unit of study” (1966:73). He concluded with the observation that the majority of previous research involving homosexuals in industrialized countries involved patients, some in therapy by court order, who would paint a very different picture of homosexuality.

Following the trend at the time, anthropologists had largely ignored homosexuality in Western societies, while often incorporating it into their justifications of what defined the primitive “other” societies. What can be found in the almost nonexistent anthropological literature on Western homosexuality through the 1950s assumes a distinct, yet largely unknown culture perpetuated by the transmission and sharing of distinct homosexual traits such as speech, dress, behavior, and artifacts (Cohen and Short 1958). The two major exceptions to the above in the late 1960s and early 1970s were Sonenschein (1966) and Newton (1972[1979]).

In the late 1960s and early 1970’s, some within anthropology began to question the role their discipline played in sustaining a sense of androcentrism and colonialism. Hymes (1972) published Reinventing Anthropology and Asad (1973) published Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter to further advocate for social disclosure and social critique within anthropology (Lewin and Leap 2002). Furthermore, researchers began to question the relative absence of the female voice within anthropological ethnographies (Reiter 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974).

Inspired by feminist and gay rights movements, anthropological investigations of sexuality and more specifically homosexuality slowly began to increase in the 1970s (Blackwood 1986). Beginning in the 1970s the exploration of homosexuality was conducted through the lens of historical and cultural influences (D’Emilio 1983;
Plummer 1981). Rather than looking at homosexuality as a static, universal concept across cultures, gay/lesbian anthropology analyzed homosexual behaviors within larger sexual patterns and individual cultures that influence sexual behaviors (Blackwood 1986). Despite an increase in anthropological research, Kenneth Read summarized the state of anthropology at the time as, “When one attempts to unravel this tangled skein, one thread stands out: namely the anthropological research on homosexual behavior has been, and to a large extent, still is consigned to the dark recesses of the discipline’s closet (1980:192).

Into the early 1980s, the lack of anthropological theory pertaining to homosexuality was well documented (Carrier 1980; Fitzgerald 1977; Read 1980; Sonenschein 1966). In 1981, Ross and Rapp (51) stated, “the seemingly most intimate details of private existence are actually structured by larger social relations,” further justifying the need to explore homosexuality through a larger cultural lens. Several research projects have further supported Ross and Rapp’s hypothesis of the importance of culture (Carrier 1980; Herdt 1981; 1984; Levy 1971; Newton 1979; Read 1980; Wolf 1979). Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, researchers continued to demonstrate the connection between cultural ideologies and the acceptance and practice of sexual behavior.

In the late 1980s, there was a push to move anthropology beyond strictly definitions of subject matter to representation and the presentation of voice within ethnographies (Lewin and Leap 2002). Throughout the 1990s to the present, anthropologists have continued looking at homosexuality within other cultures, but the emphasis has shifted from the “static other” to “legitimate forms of selfhood” and
addresses cultural, political, and economic influences (Boellstorff 2007; Donham 1998; Yue, Martin, and Berry 2003). A growing sense of the differences between lesbian women and gay men has influenced the divergence of the two within anthropological literature beginning in the mid 1990s. Lewin’s *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America* (1996) and *Female Desires* (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999) marked the beginning of an emphasis on female non-normative sexualities (Boellstorff 2007), although the amount of literature available on lesbian women is limited in comparison to the literature emphasizing gay men. Weston (1993) described a lack of data on “homosexuality and homoeroticism among women outside the United States” (345), which still remains true today.

More recently, anthropology has been influential in shaping theories of sexuality, specifically in its critique of gender and heterosexuality as recognized universals (Reiter 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Rubin 2002). Anthropology’s valuing of culture strengthens its ability to create a theory of sexuality. “A radical theory of sex must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history” (Rubin 1984:275).

Through an emphasis on “self-identity and intersubjective meaning-making, anthropologists have moved toward investigating the role of political and economic forces in the construction of sexuality” (Boellstorff 2007:22). Though, the majority of this work has been outside of the United States (Blackwood 1998; Carrillo 2002; Knauff 2003; McLelland 2000; Parker 1999; Wright 2004). This recent emphasis has marked a turning point from viewing non-Western cultures as the “other” to self-legitimate forms of self-hood while incorporating the influence of media, consumerism, and ethnicity, religion, and other factors (Boellstorff 2007). Work within the United States has focused
primarily on community formation, migration, religion, race, socioeconomic status, and youth (Carrington 2002; Levine 1998; Lewin 1998; Manalansan 2003; Newton 2000; Weston 1996). Overall, the importance of culture and its overarching complexity on the subjectiveness of identity has emerged in the anthropological inquiry of homosexuality.

Lewin and Leap (2002) describe a crisis in anthropology experienced through its allegiance to exotic field locations and overly cautious commitments to theory building. With this crisis has come a fundamental shift in anthropology from an emphasis on far off exotic locales to Western cultures. In 1993, Weston stated, “when only one or two investigators have studied homosexuality or transgendering in a particular region, it creates a situation in which the lone anthropologist becomes responsible for describing his/her people” (345). While in 2010, this is not often the case on a widespread geographic scale, there are still several smaller geographic regions where gay men are vastly underrepresented in the anthropological literature, such as within the rural American west. As the anthropology of homosexuality continues to grow, the importance of not only culture has become apparent, but also geography and the political economy.

Sexual cultures are closely grounded in the everyday experience of people and are thus socially, geographically, and historically situated (Herdt 1997). As sexual cultures are not static, nor isolated the importance of understanding and incorporating geographical influences into the research is essential. Far from solely influencing similarities within a culture, geography, politics, and the economy can influence disagreements or differences, reminding researchers that a participant’s identity is fluid and multidimensional. As regional publications grow, they provide a new way in which
to “problematize naïve and uncritical writing on globalization…and…enables us to think about how gender and sexuality are made and experienced in particular locales” (Johnson, Jackson, and Herdt 2000:361).

As globalization continues to increase, the size of the world continues to decrease. Previously untouched societies are now hours away. As people cross national, state, and local boundaries at an ever-increasing speed, cultural ideals are brought along. The once structured urban-rural divide has become more and more of an imaginary line. What is considered a deviant sexual identity in one culture may be a widely accepted practice in another. Through globalization, the instability of the identity/behavior binary is further threatened (Blackwood 1998; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Kulick 1998; Povinelli 2006).

The Role of the Anthropologist in Sexuality Studies

As gay and lesbian anthropologists began to come out, anthropology’s preconceptions about the homogeneity of its members was challenged (Lewin and Leap 1996). The notion of the lone anthropologist traveling to a foreign culture and immersing themselves in the unknown was uprooted as gay and lesbian anthropologists began objectively exploring portions of a world intimately familiar to them. The image of the “professional stranger” was no longer dominant (Agar 1980). The very heart of anthropology’s claim to “special cognitive authority” based on holism and relativism through long term participant observation in a foreign community was no longer a given when the foreign community became your own community (Stocking 1983:8).
Objectivity and distance were recalculated while acknowledging the advantages, such as less disruption to the community and an increased background knowledge, of working in a familiar community (Lewin and Leap 1996).

It was not until 1978 that the Anthropological Research Group on Homosexuality (ARGOH) was established. ARGOH was not officially recognized by the American Anthropological Association (AAA), instead it was described as an informal organization with a membership requirement of research focused on homosexuality in general (Lewin and Leap 2009). ARGOH’s creation came about from the larger debate within anthropology regarding whether homosexuality was a legitimate topic for anthropological inquiry. Eventually, ARGOH was incorporated in the AAA as an interest group and renamed the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOGLA).

This move from the periphery of anthropology to a recognized group within the AAA, is representation of the overall transition experienced within the homosexual community, the transition from the closet. This emergence sought to legitimize the anthropological study of homosexuality while furthering theoretical developments, methodology, and the overall presence of gay and lesbian anthropologists and gay and lesbian anthropology. In 1979, Newton published, *Mother Camp*, a culmination of research involving female impersonators. At the time, studies revolving around homosexuality were considered risky, and despite sparking a renewed energy to call attention to sexuality, specifically homosexuality within anthropology, Newton’s professional opportunities were limited because of her research interests. In the early 1980s with the emergence of AIDS, openly gay men continued to be marginalized in the
job sector and were often confronted with the struggle against social institutions to maintain employment (Adam 2009).

Gay and lesbian anthropology’s emergence has moved beyond the “us” versus “them” to more recent notions of the “anthropologist as halfie” (Lewin and Leap 2009:12). Today, within lesbian/gay studies, it is no longer always easy to separate researcher from researched, nor is it easy to separate “the products of ethnographers and natives or even ethnographers who double as informants” (Weston 1993:359). Yet, academics and graduate students alike, are still confronted with the question, to come out or not, as gay and lesbian sexuality is still seen by some as problematic in a way that heterosexuality never is (Lewin and Leap 1996). Today, even with the increasing social acceptance of gay and lesbian men and women, homosexuality can still be a liability in the field (Bell, Caplan, and Karim 1993; Whitehead and Conaway 1986).

Stigma

“In the United States today, lesbians, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men are stigmatized. They are subjected to explicit and subtle discrimination, marginalized or made virtually invisible by many of society’s institutions, and often vilified” (Herek, Chopp, and Strohl 2007:1).

Almost every society has struggled with the connection between sexuality and society, culture, and power (Sacca 2010). Focusing on the social construction of stigma, Goffman (1963) recognized that stigma reduces an individual “from a whole and usual
person to a tainted, discounted one.” By stigmatizing the behavior of an individual, the individual is often viewed as being inferior to those who are not stigmatized.

Stigma is a local, social construction grounded within a society’s power relations (Goffman 1963). Stigma and social inequality deprive disadvantaged social groups of a sense of well-being (Meyer et al. 2011). Structural-level sexual stigma is embedded in American culture further ensuring that sexual minorities have less power than heterosexuals. This sense of heterosexism is furthered through the promotion of heterosexual assumption, through which all people are assumed to be heterosexual, and through the belief that heterosexual relationships are normal (Herek 2009). Stigmatization occurs when a person possesses or is believed to possess “some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker et al. 1998). Stigmatized identities, despite remaining hidden, can still influence the overall well being of the individual.

The stigmatization of same-sex sexual behavior emerged in large part during the 20th century. During the 20th century, lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons were often condemned, pathologized, ridiculed, or attacked (Herek, Chopp, and Strohl 2007). The enactment of stigma directed at same-sex sexual activity has traditionally acted as a means to condemn homosexuality through the idea of immorality. Noting exceptions, the church has further supported the idea of homosexuality as a sin. Within the church, identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (LGB) is not often considered to be a sin, but engaging in same-sex sexual acts is considered to be a sin (Knowles 1997). Until 2011, LGB persons were banned from openly serving in the military. In a state like Montana,
which is notorious for sending a high percentage of its citizens into the armed forces, this
can have direct consequences for gay men or MSM living in the State.

Today, many of the civil liberties (marriage, adoption rights, end-of-life visitation
rights, and protection against employment and housing discrimination) afforded to heterosexual individuals are still denied to LGB individuals. While the latter part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century began to bring about gains in equality for LGBT individuals, many still consider homosexuality to be a stigmatized behavior. The General Social Survey (GSS), an on-going national poll has seen decreases in those persons stating that homosexual behavior is always wrong from approximately 80\% in the 1970\’s to approximately 50\% today.

Sexual minorities are at increased risk for mental health burdens as compared to heterosexuals (Cochran 2001; Hatzenbuehler 2009). Prior literature has shown that sexual minority adults appear to be at increased risk for depression and anxiety disorders (Cochran & Mays 2000a, 2000b; Cochran, Mays, & Sullivan 2003; Meyer 2003; Gilman et al. 2001; Sandfort, de Graaf, Bijl, & Schnabel 2001). King et al. (2008) found that MSM were more than twice as likely to experience lifetime depression and depression within the last twelve months as compared to heterosexual men.

Kleinman and Hall-Clifford critique anthropology’s reliance on psychological approaches in understanding stigma, while ignoring the underlying moral context (2009). While much emphasis has been placed on understanding the influence of stigma on individual behavior, how social life and relationships are changed by stigma has been largely overlooked. Recent anthropological contributions to the study of stigma have
begun to focus on the moral experience and influence of stigma, which is largely influenced by the person’s overall social world (Yang, et al. 2007, 2008).

Attempting to hide a stigmatized behavior can lead to an overwhelming preoccupation with thoughts of that stigma, which can lead to a potential decrease in the individual’s overall well being and social functioning. Research has shown that sexual minorities in general may be at higher risk for physical health problems compared to heterosexuals (Conron et al. 2010; Sandfort et al. 2006). In relation to the current study, closeted gay men are significantly more susceptible to infectious disease and impaired immunological functioning than those who do not conceal their identity (Pachankis 2007). This could have profound health effects on a population that is already socially marginalized within society. Individuals with concealable stigmas face stressors even when their stigma remains hidden. Stressors include: the decision to remain hidden, having their stigma found out, being isolated, and being detached from one’s true self (Pachankis 2007).

Sexual stigma is defined as the “negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek 2007:906-907). Sexual stigma is a culturally constructed and socially supported knowledge about homosexuality’s devalued status relative to heterosexuality (Herek 2009). The creation of the term homosexual is credited to Karl Benkert in 1869 and was used as a contrast to the normosexual (Dynes 1985). Stigma is said to result from being placed in a social situation influencing how a person is treated (Yang et al. 2007). Sexual stigma is reinforced through behavioral norms favoring heterosexual sex and partnerships within society. Sexual stigma both
influences and restricts the ability of a person to express his same-sex desires openly for fear of being negatively affected within society. Everyday exposure to sexual stigma results in chronic felt stigma leading to ongoing appraisals of social situations for possible enactments of stigma (Herek et al. 2007).

Stigma is perpetuated at both the individual and structural level within society. At the structural level, sexual stigma is manifested through the idea of heterosexism (Herek 2007), where homosexuality is seen as a deviance from normal behavior. Society perpetuates the idea that heterosexism is a normal behavior where as any sexual behavior deviating from the norm is seen as an unnatural behavior. At the individual level, sexual stigma is perpetuated at three levels: enacted or behavioral expressions, felt (the expectation a person will experience stigma), and internalized (acceptance of stigma) (Herek 2007). Internalized homophobia occurs when individuals begin to internalize society’s negative views about sexual minorities. Internalized homophobia stemming from felt stigma has been associated with high-risk sexual behavior (Bancroft et al. 2003; Canin et al. 1999; Meyer & Dean 1998). Felt stigma are the ongoing appraisals of social situations for possible enactments of stigma which can lead to coping strategies among LGB individuals (Herek et al. 2007). These coping strategies can have significant implications on the individual’s ability to interact with the larger community and can lead to larger health problems.

Homophobia regulates the behavior of gay men forcing them to fit the construct of the heterosexual community out of fear they will be socially marginalized if anyone finds out their true identity. Lichtenstein’s (2000) exploratory study found that the stigma of homosexuality affects a person’s ability to disclose same-sex sexual behavior.
and in some cases contributed to impulsive risky sexual behavior within closeted black
MSM living in Alabama. Stigma carries with it the potential to threaten a person’s
identity, their very sense of value at the basic human level (Yang et al. 2007). Gay men
living in rural areas face different challenges than those men living in urban areas,
especially those with well-defined gay communities (Shernoff 1996). While urban
environments have afforded more opportunities for risk behavior change in response to
HIV within the MSM population (widespread condom distribution, gay pride marches,
health clinics targeted specifically at gay men as well as many other opportunities), the
majority of rural areas offer few opportunities for behavior change. MSM living in rural
areas experience a whole range of challenges unlike the majority of their counterparts in
urban settings including living in a hidden subculture, fear of being ostracized,
difficulties with access to health care, health education, counseling, and a lack of
confidentiality (Preston et al. 2007).

Moses and Buckner (1980) identified clients’ isolation and fear of discovery as
gay or lesbian as major obstacles facing rural lesbians and gay men in need of social
services. Prior research into felt stigma has shown that persons experiencing stigma often
feel encouraged to hide their behaviors as a protective strategy. Goffman (1963)
discussed a variety of identity management strategies including the constant struggle to
control who knows about the individual’s stigmatized identity and or behavior. While
hiding behaviors may shield a person from an enacted stigma, it restricts their ability to
interact with the community and gain social support (Herek 2009). Men report
controlling when and how to be visibly gay is a means of survival in rural areas. Men in
William’s study reported believing that “acting gay” within their community would bring about physical violence directed at homosexual men by heterosexual men (2005).

The fear and victimization of “hate crime” related violence has been shown to inflict greater psychological trauma on victims than other forms of violent crime (Herek 2009). Victims of antigay violence are at heightened risk for psychological distress as these crimes are directly targeted at core aspects of a person’s identity (Garnets, Hereck, and Levy 1990; Herek et al. 1999; Mills et al. 2004). Herek, et al. (1999) found that gay men who had experienced a crime because of their sexual orientation manifested significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms, traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety, and anger compared to those gay men who had experienced comparable crimes that were unrelated to their sexual orientation during the same time period. To avoid being labeled as gay in small communities, many MSM have adopted heterosexual behaviors and appearances often taking these to extremes.

Many men describe being constantly aware of their surroundings, being “hypersensitive” or hyper-vigilant to who is around them and what type of environment they are in. Herek’s review piece (2008) of reported hate crimes among sexual minorities shows that as many as 78% of sexual minorities in prior samples have been the victim of a verbal assault, as many as 44% reported the threat of a physical attack, and as many as 33% had experienced a physical or sexual attack because of their sexual orientation. It is estimated that among sexual minority youth, 31% have been threatened or injured at school in the past year (Chase 2001). Nationally, Bart (1998) estimates that sexual

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2 Hate crimes are defined as actions intended to inflict physical injury, emotional suffering, or property damage to a person because of her or his race, sexual orientation, religion, or other comparable group identification (Levin and McDevitt 1993).
minority youth may hear homophobic slurs such as “faggot” or “sissy” up to 26 times during a typical school day. In William’s (2005) study, homosexuality was often clouded in silence, while heterosexual behaviors dominated social standards. Participants believed that talking positively about anything relating to homosexuality would be perceived as being gay. Most participants were able to recall hearing anti-gay comments leading to an acute awareness of the hostility towards homosexuality. This marginalization of gay men often leads to a loss of true identity where one becomes a stranger not only in society as a whole, but also a stranger to themselves. This loss of identity stemming from a disharmony between an individual and the hegemonic culture in which they live can be oppressive and can result in significant levels of stress (Allison et al. 1998; Clark et al. 1999; Meyer et al. 2011) leading to decreased well-being (Kertzner et al. 2009).

Emile Durkheim’s (1952) ideas on the mechanisms of social control state, “When people do not comply with the social expectations, even if there is nothing inherently wrong with the non-compliant behavior, then they transgress and are out of place and deemed to have no place”. Participants in William’s et al (2005) study in Wyoming reported being very aware of an overtly hostile environment for gay men whose sexual preferences differed from traditional heterosexual lifestyles. Social disapproval of homosexuality is made overtly clear in most cases within the imposition of a rigid standard of social interaction clearly favoring heterosexual persons. Sexual stigma reinforces social roles and expectations for behavior that are understood by all members of society regardless of sexual orientation (Herek 2009).
Meyer and colleagues have introduced the idea of minority stress theory, which is inclusive not only of major stresses, but also accounts for minor stressors and more subtle forms of stigma that still create a cumulative impact on sexual minorities. Minority stress theory suggests that sexual minority individuals are at risk for health problems because of the social stress that stems from their experiences of prejudice-related stressful life events, everyday discriminations, expectations of rejection, stigma concealment, and internalized homophobia (Frost, Lehavot, and Meyer 2011). The excess stress that an individual experiences due to their social position can have drastic consequences on their overall health status and can lead to overall health disparities among sexual minority populations. Together, internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and prejudice were found to significantly predict demoralization, guilt, suicide, AIDS related traumatic stress response, and sex problems among a sample of 714 gay men in New York City (Meyer 1995).

The emphasis on more minor acts of stigma or everyday stressors afforded by minority stress theory has special significance for the current study. Many of the men in this study talked about expected responses, and acts of stigma and homophobia that were enacted at others. These acts, while not directed at the men themselves, were powerful enough that they acted as motivators for the decision to remain closeted. Pachankis (2007, 2008) noted that expectations of stigma are strong enough to lead to increased vigilance in an attempt to ward of the effect of stigmatization, increases in avoidance and isolation, and rejection sensitivity. Meyer (2011) further surmises these minor events, or nonevents (anticipated experiences that do not take place) as they are sometimes referred
to carry symbolic meaning that may carry with them a more powerful impact than the actual occurrence.

Specifically, there is a need to further explore the stigmatization of same sex sexual orientation on closeted rural MSM’s sexual risk behaviors and their ability to access HIV prevention information and testing and HIV-positive programs and support groups. Traditional rural values can contribute to stigma toward men who have sex with other men, HIV positive individuals, and those persons seen as participating in risky sexual behavior (Dreisbach 2010). Preston et al. (2004) indicate an overall relationship between stigma and levels of risky behavior in “out” MSM. Preston et al.’s. (2004) study results showed approximately 47% of respondent’s practiced sexual behavior that could be defined as moderate to high risk.

AIDS drew attention to the vulnerability of sexually marginalized populations experienced through stigmatization and discrimination (Diaz 1998; Herdt 1997, 2001; Long 1997; Weeks and Holland 1996). Foucault (1980) and Bourdieu (1979) suggested that stigma be analyzed through a framework that incorporates concepts of power, dominance, hegemony, and oppression. When looking at stigma specifically related to HIV, Castro and Farmer (2005:54) suggest the following definition quoted from sociologists Link and Phelan (2001:367)

“In our conceptualization, stigma exists when the following interrelated components converge. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics – to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of ‘us’ from ‘them.’ In the fourth, labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation
of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.”

Gay/lesbian anthropology can contribute to the reduction of stigma through the better understanding of the social, political, and economic powers that contribute to the sustainability of stigma directed at HIV-positive persons and members of the LGBT community.

HIV serves as an almost constant reminder of the inequalities faced by sexual minorities by perpetuating sociocultural stereotypes which reinforce stigma (Farmer 1999). As anthropologists increasingly turn to ethnographic work on HIV, new questions on the influence of culture, governance, and a sense of belonging on behavior have emerged (Dowsett 1996; Junge 2002; Levine 1998; ten Brummelhuis and Herdt 1995).

HIV has influenced the manner in which a generation of men have chosen to be out about their sexuality (Feldman 1989; Herdt 1989; Herdt and Boxer 1993).

Identity and the Coming Out Process

In general, the term identity depicts how we imagine ourselves and how we publicly project that image. It is partially through our projected identity that we are able to portray ourselves including our gender and sexuality identity. Our identities are influenced in part, by the culture in which we live. Foucault viewed identity as a product or effect of the overall larger networks of power and discourse to which we are subjected (1979, 1980). Child development theorist, Donald Winnicott (1967) (as cited in
Greenfield 2008) states that it is critical to develop a true self in order to achieve positive self-esteem and a sense of wholeness as a person. This true self feeling requires a lived recognition of being the self one is, that this felt presence is one’s true being (Winnicott 1965 [as cited in Greenfield 2008]).

What we typically view as traditional ideas of gender, gender roles, and sexuality are products of the larger social and cultural influences in which we live within (Mead 1935; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Identities are multifaceted and throughout our lives we move in and out of them, adding new ones and removing or modifying obsolete ones. Losing the complexity of our overall individual identity is a concept that was discussed often in the current study. The fear of always being identified as a gay man or being seen as identical to all other gay men was a present fear that, in part, influenced many of these men’s decision to remain closeted. As Herek, et al. (2007:12) describe, once a person is known to be a homosexual, that fact is regarded by others as the most (or one of the most) important pieces of information they possess about her or him.

While some identities are more superficial there are identities that create our core-sense of self-definition (Seidman 2002). As our understanding of identities has grown, theorists have moved away from the traditional tendency to collapse gender and sexuality into one gender-dominated identity category. More recent work has strived to represent these concepts as separate theoretical concepts, while acknowledging their often close relationship (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). It is within this emerging field that queer theory has played a vital role in deconstructing our traditional views of gender and sexuality.

Identities such as race or gender can be harder to hide or manage, where as we are often able to conceal identities such as sexuality. The term down low was created to
describe discreet sexual behavior, particularly among MSM who continue to engage in relationships with women. The term coming out refers to the process of recognizing, accepting, and sharing one’s sexual and/or gender identity (Northern Illinois University [N.I.U.] n.d.:1). The coming out process is not defined by a single event, rather it is a life-long process and is different for each individual. Central to the concept of coming out, is coming out to one’s self or the acceptance of one’s own LGBT identity. Personal history, demographics, religious background, exposure to prejudice, family, and society all impact the process of coming out.

**Figure 1: Influences on the Coming Out Process (Greenfield 2008)**

While there may be many emotional and physical benefits to an individual who decides to come out, there are barriers to coming out including homophobia, stigma, prejudice, cultural influencers, and fear of changing relationships with others.
Contributing to our lack of understanding about the coming out process, large scale, population-based surveys inclusive of sexual behavior and orientation are still rare. The lack of data has impeded our understanding about how and if thinking of oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or experiencing same-sex sexual behaviors and telling others about one’s sexual orientation or behavior varies by sex, age, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment (Gates 2010:1). While ongoing since 1972, it was not until 2008 that the General Social Survey (GSS) included questions about a person’s sexual orientation. Among the findings from the 2008 survey, 5.8% of adults identified as heterosexual, yet reported same-sex sexual experiences and 13% of LGB adults have never told anyone about their sexual orientation or same-sex sexual experiences (Gates 2010). Men identifying as gay in the survey were more likely to be out than bisexual men. Bisexual men and women in the study were almost 8 times more likely to be closeted than gay men and lesbians with similar age, racial/ethnic, and educational characteristics. Men and women age 55 or older are 83.1 times less likely to come out than those individuals between the ages of 18 and 29.

Still, today, in American culture homosexuality is often viewed as a deviance from a “normal” sexuality (Caplan 1987). In an attempt to hide a stigmatized identity in a response to social oppression, some men who have sex with men (MSM) choose to remain closeted about their sexuality. This determination to remain closeted is often accompanied by a large magnitude of energy and focus to ensure the avoidance of exposure or suspicion (Seidman 2002). Gorman (1991) views the coming out process as the participation in gay collectivity and a gay social identity where one “becomes” gay. The coming out process presents the opportunity to refine the anthropological study of
rites of passage in complex societies (Herdt 1992). The changing of relations and identity formation can be seen within this process.

The decision to remain closeted is influenced on several levels. The closet can be viewed as a form of social oppression enforced by heteronormativity. The closet enforces concealment, social isolation, and fear. To understand the closet, it is necessary to understand the overall cultural influences that reinforce heterosexual domination (Seidman 2002). By supporting the concealment of identity, the closet perpetuates a sexual identity management.

While it would be hard to argue against distinct defining aspects of a gay culture, the persons belonging to the gay community, like the rest of humanity, are multifaceted, complex individuals. People are not solely influenced by their membership in one community, instead identities are constructed through the interface of several defining aspects of life. However, it is important to note that sexuality often plays a vital role in the formation of community.

To fully understand the concept of gay culture, it is necessary to understand the historical cultural influences that have shaped American’s attitudes about sex and sexuality (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio 1983; Newton 1993; Shokheid 1995; Weston 1991). Herdt (1992) describes four general cohorts of the openness of gay culture. The first cohort, dating from the turn of the century to the 1930s represented recognition of same-sex sexual attraction, but little to no ability for public disclosure. The second cohort, dating from World War II to just prior to the Stonewall riots (1969) represents the beginning of the ability to act upon same-sex sexual desires, yet the majority of persons were still restrained from coming out. The third cohort, from Stonewall to pre-AIDS
includes gay rights movements and the beginning of the shedding of oppression. During this period, more persons could be seen coming out. The fourth cohort, from the advent of AIDS to the present represents a time of sexual change among gay men accompanied with the increased ability to come out. Today, the concept of a sexual identity has moved beyond being defined solely by sexual acts and has become inclusive of sexual desire. Identity as viewed through a queer theory lens is acknowledged as an evolving, rather than static concept. Identities, including sexual identities are anchored in social and cultural settings that are continue to shift and evolve (Herdt and Boxer 1996; Savin-Williams 2005).

Homosexuality, unlike heterosexuality has been overshadowed by questions framed through the lens of heteronormativity, such as, what makes someone gay and what causes someone to deviate from “normal” sexual behavior rather than treating sexuality as a fluid or ever-evolving continuum (Rubin 1984). In the 1960s, we began to move from a culture of homosexuality, representing the disease/stigma discourse to the more positively referenced gay or queer culture seen in the present. Today, gay represents more than a sexual act, it represents an identity, a culture inclusive of community, rules, norms, attitudes, and beliefs (Herdt 1992; Leap and Boellstorff 2004; Weston 1991).

Researchers have begun recently to better understand the complex relationship between the rural environment, sexuality, and identity. Largely influenced by feminist theory, there has been an increased focus on the rural perception of masculinity in regard to self-perceptions of identity.
The Rural Environment and Masculinity

“Serene open spaces, farms, quaint churches, and self-sufficient hardworking young families are common stereotypical images of rural America…. Although these images apply to some rural settings, for the most part today’s rural America is incredibly diverse” (Rural HIV/STD Prevention Workgroup 2009:2). Borrowing from sociology, place is defined as spaces that people give meaning to as influenced by the experiences they have in them and in turn the attachment that forms to the places as created by the meanings attached to them. Incorporating Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity, it is possible to view space as a gendered and sexed act influenced by the larger culture.

Our understanding of place and our attachment to specific spaces are deeply influenced by our gender and sexuality as well as the larger culture in which we live. One of the earliest substantial works focusing specifically on same-sex sexual activity and place, specifically the rural-urban distinction was by Kinsey et al. (1948). Within the book, the authors explain same-sex sexual activity among rural men as devoid of affection, instead describing sex as purely a physical act.

These are men who have faced the rigors of nature in the wild. They live on realities and on a minimum of theory. Such a background breeds the attitude that sex is sex, irrespective of the nature of the partner with whom the relationship is had…. Such a group of hard-riding, hard-hitting assertive males would not tolerate the affections of some city groups that are involved in the homosexual; but this, as far as they can seem has little to do with the question of having sexual relations with other men (457, 459).

Kinsey’s description of hard riding, a hard-hitting, assertive male resonates today within ideas of rural masculinity. The rural place is seen as natural for masculinity, while the urban environment can be associated with a more effeminate male (Bell 2000a). Work
beginning in the mid 1990’s (see Bell and Valentine 1995 and Kramer 1995) reinforced the need for lesbian and gay studies to consider the influence of space and place. Bell and Valentine’s (1995) work highlighted the need to better understand the rural gay and lesbian experience rather than continuing to transpose urban experiences onto rural populations.

In 2000 Campbell and Bell advocated for a more thorough understanding of the symbolic interaction between the rural environment and masculine ideals. Little (2002) uses rural agriculture to explain traditional masculine ideals. The ideal rural farm worker is expected to be tough and strong, able to endure long hours and arduous weather, often under extreme weather conditions. To be successful in this harsh environment, the male must dominate his land and environment (Bryant 1999). In contrast rural women working in the agricultural sector are seen as nurturers of the land, gently cultivating their crops. Not all representations of rural masculinity are as blatant as the above. Campbell et al. state,

Images work—perhaps paradoxically—by making some aspects visible while at the same time making others invisible. Everything that an image shows excludes that which is not shown…. So too with the constructions of rural masculinity. Every image of rural masculinity renders some aspects of life visible, while obscuring those other aspects that contradict the message being created in the visible world (2006:3).

Published the same year that Matthew Shepard was found violently beaten, *Brokeback Mountain*, demonstrates this concept of inclusion and exclusion using the fictional account of two rural men, Jack and Ennis. While the book and subsequent film were fictional, “representations in popular culture can be read as concentrations of broader social and cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices” (Bell 2000b:548). Like one
of fictional characters, Matthew Shepard was killed for transgressing a sexual order of masculinity that dictates that country boys are decisively heterosexual. As the author, Annie Proulx points out,

To be a homosexual and a cowboy is to live a dangerous contradiction between the visible and acceptable rural masculinity of the cowboy and the invisible rural world of homosexual masculinity. The potential hazards of this contradiction mean that the two protagonists must live carefully guarded double lives, for when the invisible becomes visible the response can be violent (In Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life (2006:4).

As Gerard Wright states, “being gay in ‘cowboy country’ similarly involves tactics of sexual camouflage: To be gay in western states such as Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana is to know when and how to ‘butch up’ or ‘cowboy up” (1999:3).

Down low behavior has been associated with “communities in which traditional families and concepts of masculinity are greatly valued, so that being openly gay or bisexual could lead to considerable stigma” (N.I.U. n.d.:3). Bell and Valentine argue rural environments become synonymous with traditional moral (sexual) standards. “Rurality conflates with simple life, with hegemonic sexualities” (church weddings, monogamy, heterosexuality) (1995:115). The divide between expected and actual gender and sexual roles is further divided by the perpetuation of culturally created stereotypes of gay man as being passive, effeminate, and weak (Chauncey 1982-1983).

Past research has shown that attitudes towards homosexuality correlate with various demographics, such as location. Those people living in rural environments, those who identify as Republican, and those who identify themselves as being politically conservative are more likely to be supportive of traditional gender roles, less likely to support same-sex sexual activity, and are more likely to view homosexuality as a choice
Studies of gay rural life often reveal feelings of loneliness, isolation, unsupportive environments, and a lack of social services. As a respondent in Wright’s (1999:3) research stated, “to be gay in the American West, a land of pickup trucks, dipping tobacco, and concealed firearms…is to live two separate lives. I’m straight where I need to be and gay where I can be.” Perceived social support has been correlated with a reduced likelihood of depression and suicide, increased self esteem and lower sexual risk behaviors (Anderson 1998; Williams et al. 2005). William’s study found four broadly related themes about the social and sexual environment of MSM residing in rural frontier areas: social hostility, violence, assimilation, and social/sexual isolation (2005).

Bell (2000a; 2000b) critiques media representations of rural gay masculinities arguing that they eroticize the rural in a manner that opens up a space for same-sex sexual activity. In further arguments, he demonstrates these representations are at odds with the lives of gay men living in rural areas many of whom experience exclusion, prejudice, and rejection in the performance of their masculine identity. Bell’s arguments further describe the often conflating representations versus realities of rural gay life. By continuing to increase the presence of queer bodies in rural spaces, it in turn becomes possible to queer the rural space (Bell and Valentine 1995). The perceived norms of heteronormativity begin to be challenged simply by the presence of “invisibilized” sexualities. The lines between the rural and urban space become blurred. With this blurring the stereotypes and misconceptions that serve to perpetuate the divide between the urban gay space and rural gay space are further challenged.
Resilience

While resilience was not included in the original literature review, as the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed, a theme of resilience became apparent and its potential importance to HIV prevention became evident. Rural MSM live in an environment where adversity and marginalization are pervasive, yet not all have chosen to leave, some have chosen to stay. Resilience often refers to one’s ability to cope with a disadvantage. It necessitates the inclusion of two dynamics: exposure to adversity and the achievement of positive situational adaptation despite this exposure (Luthar 2000).

While some may argue that choosing to remain closeted may not be a positive activity, it allows the men in this study to reside in the rural environment, often near their families or sources of employment. Garmzey (1987:114) describes resilience as “an individual’s ability to take action to move from vulnerability to adaptation and survival.” Recent research has focused on differences among MSM which increase the likelihood of resilience to behaviors (e.g. alcohol abuse and drug use) associated with increased HIV risk (Herrick 2011; Mills et al. 2004; Stall et al. 2001). Fivush (2010:90) states that resistance narratives challenge the “explanations and moral imperatives imposed by the dominant narrative.” In the current study, this dominant narrative is the largely heteronormative rural environment.

While the gay community has been the subject of both physical and emotional attacks in this country, the community has not sat idle. In June of 1969, the now infamous Stonewall Riots began as a direct result of the relentless harassment against gay men and lesbians by the New York City Police Department. The riots, originating in
New York fueled the demand for equality across the United States. In the 1980’s the gay community allied itself with the civil rights, feminist, and crime victim movements to challenge the legitimacy of society’s complacency towards attacks originating from a person’s sexual orientation (Herek and Sims 2008). Also, in the 1980’s the gay community rallied against the stigma being placed on gay men originating during the early days of the AIDS epidemic. Gay men have been part of one of the most impressive and effective bids for civil rights in history, all while facing community-wide devastation from the HIV epidemic (Herrick 2011:94).

During the early days of the AIDS epidemic, in absence of a united federal government response many gay-based organizations became both first responders for those infected and advocates for increased research (IOM 2011). Many sexual-minority clinics developed partnerships with local academic institutions and public health agencies ensuring a sustainable response effort to the epidemic (Mayer et al. 2008). AIDS could have created indestructible boundaries within the gay community, but instead as Gerald (1989:450) notes, “far from destroying the gay community, the concern over AIDS has strengthened it.” The mobilization of and advocacy stemming from the LGBT community is directly related to the advances we have made against AIDS today.

**Sexual Minority Health**

Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a stressful social environment that can lead to a variety of health problems in people who belong to minority groups (Meyer
The emerging field of social epidemiology with its emphasis on the social determinants of health, provides a language in which to consider how life circumstances of sexual and gender minorities may create structural, financial, and personal barriers that interfere with healthcare access (Bradford and Mayer 2008:30). The Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines access to health care as the timely use of personal health services to achieve the best possible outcomes (1993:4).

The 2011 IOM Health of LGBT People Report identified several personal and structural barriers in accessing health care among LGBT persons. Structural barriers are inclusive of structural or institutional stigma, lack of provider knowledge and training, and a lack of health insurance stemming from larger policy implications. Personal barriers identified are enacted stigma, felt stigma, and internalized stigma, as well as various demographic variables that intersect with stigma resulting in unique barriers and challenges in the attempt to access high-quality care. Sexual minority persons living in rural areas are subjected not only to the barriers discussed above, but also documented health disparities associated with living in a rural area.

There has been a limited amount of research on health care access among sexual minority populations, but the research that has been done suggests that LGBT adults have different patterns of access and utilization of healthcare services than heterosexual adults (IOM 2011). LGB individuals in New York City who participated in a study by Sanchez et al. (2007) were found to have higher rates of emergency room utilization use than the general population. Utilizing data from the MIDUS survey, self-identified LGBT individuals were found to access mental health services at higher rates than self-identified heterosexual individuals (Cochran et al. 2003). Several studies have documented
perceived discrimination by healthcare providers on the sole basis of sexual orientation (Burckell and Goldfried 2006; Eliason and Schope 2001; Smith et al. 1985). Comfort level with physician has been shown to be associated with HIV testing frequency (Schwitters and Licon under review).

Social epidemiology reinforces the idea that various ecological influences can have a disproportionate impact on the individual life experiences of sexual minority populations (Bradford and Mayer 2008). LGBT health is not just an individual matter reflecting upon personal decisions, rather it is a complex web of public policy, community, institutional, interpersonal, and individual influences (McElroy et al. 1988). This model becomes especially relevant in the design of effective HIV prevention programs, which remove the sole blame from the individual, instead recognizing larger social determinants which influence sexual behavior.

**Figure 2: Social-Ecological Model: Spheres of Influence on Individual Health**
(Bradford and Meyer 2008:31 [Adapted from McElroy et al. 1988]).
As discussed earlier in this chapter, larger-level societal same-sex sexual activity stigma has the potential to influence internalized stigma, which can lead to individual questioning about one’s own sexuality, depression, substance abuse, and ultimately high-risk sexual behavior.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines a health disparity as population-specific differences in the presence of disease, health outcomes, or access to health care (HRSA 2000). MSM are a notable sexual minority population experiencing high levels of health disparities in this Country. Limiting the extent of our current knowledge has been the traditional lack of federal funding for large-scale population health trials and studies directly targeting sexual minorities. The majority of our knowledge regarding health disparities among MSM has originated out of the HIV epidemic, although an increasing amount of research has focused on differences in smoking rates, alcoholism, heart disease, and cancer rates. Research focusing on HIV among MSM has shown alarming disparities in depression, higher substance use, and higher alcohol use by MSM as compared to non-MSM and these factors have all been connected to increased HIV risk (Cochran and Mays 2000; Remafedi et al. 1998; Stall et al. 2001; Stall and Wiley 1988). Stall et al. (2003) and Mustanski et al. (2007) found that as the number of psychosocial health problems increase, so does a person’s risk for participation in sexual risk behaviors (e.g. unprotected anal sex and number of sexual partners).

As the research on MSM health disparities has diversified it has become evident that health disparities are often co-occurring and they operate in ways that are mutually reinforcing (Singer 1994; Singer and Clair 2003). Stall and colleagues have built upon
Singer’s theory of syndemics with HIV among urban MSM. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines syndemic as two or more afflictions, interacting synergistically, contributing to the excess burden of disease in a population (2009a).

The CDC estimates that males accounted for 73% of all new HIV infection in the United States in 2010 and 75% of all individuals living with HIV (2010). Despite only representing approximately 2% of the population, 53% of all new infections are estimated to be among MSM. In 2006 alone, more than 30,000 MSM and MSM-IDU were newly infected with HIV (CDC 2010). Even more alarming, between 2004 and 2007, there was an estimated 26% annual increase in HIV/AIDS diagnoses among MSM (CDC 2009b). In 2007, MSM were 44 to 86 times as likely to be diagnosed with HIV as compared to other men. MSM are the only risk group in which new HIV infections are steadily increasing in the United States (CDC 2010).

Thirty years into the HIV epidemic, we are still without a cure. As past researchers (Farmer 2003; Parker 2002; Parker and Aggleton 2003; Singer 1994; Wallace 1990; and Wallace 1988) have noted, ultimately social factors may be of far greater importance than the nature of pathogens or the bodily systems they infect. HIV is as much a social disease as it is a biological disease. To ultimately bring HIV from the present to the past, we need to focus as much on behavior change and cultural and social influencers as we do on finding a medical cure for HIV.
Rural HIV/AIDS

In 2011, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published their groundbreaking report, *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*, in which there was a call for an increase in research that seeks to better understand the influence of geography on the overall status of LGBT health. HIV prevention in rural areas can be especially challenging. Long-distances, hidden or closed-knit social networks, and conservative attitudes can make it difficult to access at risk populations. Similar to the national statistics, men comprise the majority of rural AIDS cases and over half of all new HIV infections are among men reporting male-to-male sexual contact (RCAP 2009).

AIDS arrived during a historical era when LGBT communities were making “their first gains in abolishing laws that criminalized their sexual and affective relationships, as well as winning basic protection from discrimination through human rights laws” (Adam 2009:209). While AIDS garnered the attention of the American public, it also sought to bring attention towards the need for anthropological research on homosexuality. Early researchers, while increasing the dialogue on homosexuality and challenging the biomedical approach, largely ignored the influence of erotic and sexual practices (Lewin and Leap 2009). Along with the fear that arrived with AIDS, so did the funding for sex research. When epidemiologists began to look into the sexual habits of those at risk for HIV it became embarrassingly clear just how neglected sexuality had been in the United States (Vance 2005). During the early years of the epidemic, it was
necessary to return to findings presented in the Kinsey Reports, the last widespread study on sexuality.

The focus on gay men during the early part of the AIDS epidemic represented a departure from the marginalization of sexual minority groups while emphasizing the sense of “otherness” placed on these individuals (Vance 2005; Voss 2005). By highlighting this sense of “otherness,” AIDS has shown the importance of culture on sexuality (Feldman and Johnson 1986; Gorman 1986). MSM in the United States experience great disparities in HIV. Farmer (1999) has called HIV a critical sociocultural lesson which reminds us of the “peculiarly modern inequality” faced by minorities. These inequalities serve to reinforce homophobia and stigma directed at men who have sex with men.

Conclusion

This chapter gave an introduction to the literature relevant to the current study. While it remains useful to continue collecting data on the lesbian/gay experience, it is necessary to use this data to expose the particular conditions which encourage the flourishing of homophobia and heteronormative societal structures. By exposing heteronormativity, we can begin to challenge the social structures, such as stigma and homophobia, economic, political, cultural, and historical powers, which act as means of sexual control. Lewin and Leap (2009) argue for a public anthropology, which acts to construct new alliances between scholarship and activism. This study seeks to answer this
call by furthering academic scholarship while incorporating the results into “real-time” policy change.

The interconnections between identity and community must be better understood, specifically, how does community influence the construction of gay identity (Kennedy 2002)? While anthropological research has been conducted among urban (Operario et al 2009; Rubin 2002; Singer 1994; Singer and Marxuach-Rodriguez 1996) and Southern (Lichtenstein 2000; Whitehead 1997) gay men, little research investigating the influence of the rural community on the construction of identity among gay men has been conducted. Anthropologists especially, can contribute to this need by portraying the “multiplicity of identity, and suggesting how life stories connect to identity” (Kennedy 2002:102).
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The anthropologist is a human instrument studying other human beings and their societies. Although he has developed techniques that give him considerable objectivity, it is an illusion for him to think he can remove his personality from his work and become a faceless robot or a machinelike recorder of human events. It is important to accept that this human instrument is as much a product of biological, psychological, and social conditioning as are the people he studies (Powdermaker 1967:19).

This chapter discusses the methodological process guiding this study. The theories that have shaped the approach to this study are introduced. The processes used during data collection and analysis are described. The role of the researcher and researcher biases are discussed and finally with a project that deals with a topic as intimate as a person’s sexuality, there are not only ethical concerns that arise, but also ethical obligations to the men who were brave enough to come forward and share some of their most intimate, personal experiences. This research introduced an unexpected reciprocity – to the men that I talked with I came became a confidant, a safe person to express fears, hopes, and dreams. To the men that came forward, there is a desire to give back including through the expressing of an often unheard voice.

The aim of this qualitative based research was to theorize and explore the experience of being an MSM on the down low in a rural environment, to give voice to those who often have no voice. It describes what life is like for closeted MSM living in Montana and explores the meanings that men attach to their sexuality and the reasons why men have chosen to remain on the down low. The influence of remaining on the down low on sexual risk behaviors is explored. While research on rural gay men has
slowly increased, MSM on the down low have remained largely absent in the academic literature. Qualitative research was chosen for this research for its ability to provide rich and emergent details, especially when approached from a phenomenological or schema-based perspective. Qualitative research allows the researcher to be descriptive, while still succeeding at theoretically guided research.

Qualitative research designs are appropriate for exploring personal experiences and meanings associated with living a closeted sexual lifestyle within a rural environment, because qualitative research aims to “understand and explain participant meaning” (Morrow and Smith 2000:200). It generally aims to holistically capture a range of major cultural characteristics that are present in a particular social group (Creswell 1998). Qualitative sampling assumes individuals within a culture can provide the major core beliefs, knowledge, and information that exist in a larger cultural group (Becker 1996; Boster 1986; Schensul et al. 1999). Qualitative analysis makes sense of individual responses by looking for larger patterns in the data (Seidel 1998; Sarantakos 1993). Qualitative methods provide rich and emergent results that typically involve a relatively small sample of participants (Morrow and Smith 2000; Patton 1990).

Hendricks and Blanken (1992) argue that survey studies in the general population that rely on closed questions are inherently limited by the data obtained. They may yield little understanding of the phenomenon under study, which is particularly problematic when exploring new fields of phenomena. The authors discuss three specific reasons why traditional random sampling is not a viable method when working with hidden populations: (1) possible social ramifications may deter respondents from cooperation; (2) an extremely large population is needed to achieve sufficient data for an accurate
estimation of what is a statistically rare event, and; (3) given the hidden nature of such populations, surveys tend to miss out important segments of the population of interest.

The incorporation of qualitative methods in research can produce findings that apply specifically to the population being studied, therefore caution must be taken when attempting to apply these results to outside populations. The uniqueness of each population becomes more apparent. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide “rich descriptions” of the data that cannot be obtained through quantitative research methods. Qualitative research in general, and schema-based approaches in particular, place value on the informant’s point of view and the meanings they give to their own lives and to the places they live (Green 2006). While caution must be placed on the over-application of qualitative research results, the depth of material and added understanding of a phenomena are often not possible to obtain through quantitative research. Yet, this level of understanding is necessary to accurately design and conduct larger scale studies.

The Researcher

Within qualitative research, the researcher plays a vital role. Charmaz (2006:10) states, “we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We collect our grounded theories through our past and present involvement and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices.” The potential always exists for researcher influence and bias in the analysis of the data. With the intimate nature of the material covered in
this research, there is a need for further clarification of the researcher’s perspective and place.

The researcher approaches research influenced by their own experiences. Denzin notes that a researcher’s “own experiences probably provide the most important sources of data for their theories (1989:61). As discussed in chapter one, my experience living in a rural area has allowed me to adopt an insider position on the difficulties and joys associated with this environment. This commonality helped to establish a rapport between the researcher and participant. My understanding of the rural environment influenced the creation and subsequent framing of the research questions in the interviews. Overall, I was provided with a rural background to the study before beginning the interviews.

I however, do not personally identify as a man and some of the experiences shared were foreign concepts to me. This aspect of the research initially worried me in that men would not open up to a woman about their intimate sexual experiences and behaviors. Prior to beginning the interview process, I was in meetings with a few gay men who doubted that a woman could do this research. My doubts and the doubts of others were soon proven wrong and now, looking back, I would say this actually became an asset of the research. As one participant stated, “the whole way here tonight I had my fingers crossed and repeated over and over, please don’t be a man, please don’t be a man, please be a woman.” When I further inquired as to why he hoped I was a woman, he stated that he would not have talked with a man in such detail that he talked to a woman. His answers would have been short, yes/no answers, rather than the lengthy, detailed, and intimate responses he provided me with. Throughout all of the interviews, not one man
seemed uncomfortable or refused to talk with me because of my gender, although some did ask how a woman became interested in this topic.

**Researcher Bias**

The potential for bias to enter qualitative research is always present to the degree that researchers have created steps to reduce this potential. As discussed in detail later in this chapter, several steps were taken within the research process to reduce bias including memo-taking, member checks, and through reflexivity. Throughout the course of the entire study, I engaged in a process of critical reflection about potential biases and predispositions. Through this process, I was able to become more aware of potential biases while attempting to monitor and control for them. Additionally, I have stated my position as a researcher in chapter one and the current chapter.

Qualitative research provides an intimate and personal research context that is often absent in the quantitative methods used by those who critique the unscientific nature of qualitative research. Today, this personal nature can be seen as a strength. A deeper level of sharing can be reached when there is a level of trust that is established between the researcher and the participant (Charmaz 2000). “Personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and admit others into their lives (Oakley 1981:58).
Research Methodology

The material covered within this research is deeply personal, intensely sensitive, and presents the opportunity to bring forward strong emotions from the men participating. Throughout several of the interviews, there were many tears shed. Accounting for the personal nature of sexuality, a phenomenologically influenced schema theory guided the research direction. Schema theory presents a process in which value is placed on the participant’s experience. It is through these “thick descriptions” of what life is like as a rural down low MSM that the researcher can begin to understand this experience.

The goal of schema theory at its most broad level is to better understand the intersection between culture, identity, and behavior. The aim of phenomenology is to describe as accurately as possible the lived experience. A phenomenologically inspired schema theory was chosen for this study for its ability to discover the meaning given to the lived experiences through the influence of the larger place.

Schema theory surmises that we all possess conceptual abstractions or scripts that help us to mediate between our interior world and our behavioral responses to the stimuli we receive. These abstractions serve as our basis for understanding and responding to the world in which we live (Fillmore 1977; Rumelhart 1980). Schemas tell us what is appropriate and how to act in social situations (Brower 2008). We know how to act appropriately within the world we live because of the knowledge we possess about that world.
Often synonymous with the rural environment is a sense of a heteronormativity and pervasive homophobia. These can lead to an overall sense of fear by those who do not conform to the perceived ideals of society. Heteronormativity and homophobia can profoundly influence attitudes and shape perceptions about one’s identity. In response to our cultural environments we are able to modify our schemata in an effort to maintain our emotional well-being and physical safety. In an environment, where it is still possible to hear the terms gay or queer being used as insults, rather than identities, the motivation to modify personal schemas, for example, keeping one’s sexuality or sexual identity hidden, can be a daily persistence.

Queer theory was chosen for its ability to challenge our traditional dichotomous ways of thinking about gender and sex – feminine or masculine, male or female – instead advocating for a continuum in which each individual is free to decide for themselves. Beyond the separate gender and sex dichotomy, queer theory further challenges the idea that gender and sex are inseparable. Instead, advocating that while sex is often determined at birth, a person’s gender is a fluid conception that is freely changeable.

Queer theory in its most basic form seeks to denaturalize “heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them” (Sullivan 2003:81). As queer is a term of opposition, queer theory often represents a challenge to power, more specifically, a challenge to the arbitrary definitions we define to sexuality and to values we assign to these behaviors. It offers the opportunity to question who benefits from these divisions (Sullivan 2003). As queer is a deconstruction of “normal” behavior, queer theory is a challenge to the idea that identities are stable, permanent constructions.
Sexuality is a social construction, its meaning differing from place to place and from time to time. How then do you compare an idea with no static identity? Queer theory doesn’t seek to concretely define sexuality; instead it attempts to expose the structures of power that influence our identity through the urge to conform to a desired “norm.” Queer theory seeks to attack the idea of a normal or natural identity. By deconstructing the ideas of homosexual and heterosexual, the values assigned to each are removed. Queer theory can be used in understanding men’s differing sexual identities, sexual experience, and sexual attraction through viewing these concepts as fluid continuums, rather than static constructs.

Combined, schema and queer theories not only complement one another, but also offer the potential to better understand differences in sexual and gender ideologies across and within cultures. Queer theory seeks to challenge ideas assumed as normal, while schema theory explains how we choose to navigate through our world and the meaning we place upon our relationships. Queer theory can be said to focus on the larger picture, the overall environment, while schema theory is interested in explaining how individuals organize knowledge about, and responses to, the overall environment. Queer theory is postmodernism applied to sexuality and gender. It “throws into doubt any grand narratives of sexuality -from Freud to sexology- that have haunted much of the modern world’s analysis of sexuality” (Plummer 2007:19-20). Queer theorists have helped to bring attention to the idea that sexuality as a separate “sphere of existence” (Halperin 1993:418) is fatally flawed.

Schema theory aids researchers in understanding how people understand the world around them, how we define our barriers and values, and construct our identities.
Schema theory can be used to study lived experiences and the ways in which we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. Queer theory helps us to understand the larger sociocultural factors, hierarchies of power, and systems of stratification, which influence our individual-level identity decisions. Queer theory challenges the dualistic, oppositional nature by which gender and sexuality are traditionally framed instead viewing them as complex, often contradictory collectives of existence (Cerulo 1997). Rather than looking at individual sexual identities (gay, lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual), queer theorists advocate an inclusive approach including considerations of identities, which fall outside of the heterosexual/homosexual categories.

**Collecting the Data – The Interview Process**

With the sensitive nature of the topic being studied, phenomenological-style, in-depth semi-structured interviews were utilized when meeting with participants. Semi-structured interviewing is best in situations where it is only possible to meet with participants once (Bernard 2006). This interview style was used to ensure an open forum in which men were able to express themselves while maintaining control over telling their story. Semi-structured interviewing allows the participants a largely open, conversational-style forum in which to express themselves in their own terms with minimal intrusion and bias by the investigator (Green 2006; Spratling et al. 2010). The lengthier, conversational-style of the in-depth interview allows for a more relaxed feel to
the interview process, rather than feelings of an oral interrogation by the researcher. With this method of interviewing, the researcher is able to use more everyday words, rather than academic words which can lead to feelings of stiffness and caution within the interview (Minichiello 1990). In-depth interviewing has been shown to ensure accuracy – people are more likely to tell “the truth” when they feel they are in control of their story (Corbin and Morse 2003; LaRossa et al. 1981; Minichiello 1990).

When talking about personal and potentially sensitive information, this type of interviewing technique can be less traumatic and confrontational (Corbin and Morse 2003; Kvale 1984; Minichiello 1990). Men can control the depth of their responses and questions can be phrased in ways better understood by the participants. In other words, the men assisted in the construction of the interview. Semistructured interviewing techniques ask the participant to describe and reflect upon his experiences in ways that seldom occur in everyday life (Charmaz 2006:25). By providing a minimal number of open ended questions, the researcher creates an environment that encourages detailed descriptions and unanticipated responses to emerge. In the current study, men were asked a minimal number of open-ended questions and encouraged to answer them by saying as much as they felt comfortable talking about. Occasional prompts were used to touch upon subjects that men did not bring up on their own.
Determining the Sample

Purposive sampling by nature is intentionally biased. By seeking to shed light on a specific subject matter, the researcher is actively seeking a select research population that has experienced the phenomenon of interest. Choosing to remain closeted about one’s sexuality in response to larger social forces is a cultural response. To study cultural processes, it is necessary to find people who can provide expert explanations about the phenomena – those who can provide lived experiences (Bernard 2006). It was necessary for the population sample in this study to be comprised exclusively of men living in rural areas. Men had to self-identify as not being out about having sex with other men. For ethical reasons and for the purpose of consent, all participants were at least 18 years of age. Montana is the 4th largest, yet 3rd least densely populated state within the United States. In the context of the rural environment in which this study took place it would have been almost impossible, if not impossible to have conducted this research among the current population without utilizing a purposive sampling design. Additionally, it was essential that each of the men had experienced the phenomenon of interest so they were able to openly articulate their experiences (Davey 1999).

The sample size for the current study was forty-five self-identified rural men who were not out about their same-sex sexual activity. To ensure an adequate sample size, prior literature, both within and outside of anthropology was consulted. Closeted MSM are actively working to hide their sexuality, they are a hidden, hard-to-reach population. Primarily, the only way to find closeted MSM is through men coming forward in response to research advertisements or through referrals from men in the community. As
men are not outwardly identifying as MSM, there is no way to get an accurate idea of the true population size of this sub group of individuals. Census-based sampling frames and other reliable framing sources are often absent with hidden populations (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). The more sensitive a phenomenon is the more difficult sampling is likely to be. As Lee (1993) states,

In many situations, there are well-developed strategies for realizing the twin aims of representativeness and cost-effectiveness. Neither however may be easy to obtain where the topic under investigation is a sensitive one. First, other things being equal, sampling becomes more difficult the more sensitive the topic under investigation, since potential informants will have more incentive to conceal their activities. Second and related to this, the less visible an activity the harder it is to sample.

In the literature, there is a lack of consistency on recommended sample sizes within nonprobability sampling. Marshall (1996) states that an appropriate sample size for qualitative research is one that adequately answers the research question. Morse (2000) argues that the amount of participants needed should be based on the amount of usable data obtained by each person. In another article, Bernard (2000) suggests that most ethnographic studies are based on 36 interviews. Bertaux (1981) argues that 15 is the smallest acceptable sample size in qualitative research. Kuzel (1992) recommends basing sample size on the heterogeneity of the population being studied. He recommends 6 to 8 interviews for homogenous samples and 12 to 20 data sources when looking to disconfirm evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation. Within purposive sampling, a certain degree of participant homogeneity is assumed, because participants are chosen because of common criteria. Despite the inconsistency among the exact number of individuals needed for a successful purposive qualitative study, (1) there is a general
agreement that successful studies of sensitive topics can be carried out with less than fifty individuals (Betancourt et al. 2009; Celik and Baybuga 2009; Fazio et al. 2010; Grudzen et al. 2009; Halkitis et al. 2008; Harawa et al. 2009; Kong 2008; Moneyham et al. 2010; Oliffe et al. 2010; Sayer et al. 2009; Smith and Seal 2008); and (2) nonprobability sampling is appropriate for labor-intensive, in-depth studies of few cases.

Montana, as a whole is considered to be a rural state. Of the 56 counties in Montana, 45 are considered to be frontier, 5 are considered rural, and 1 is considered to be metropolitan. As all of Montana is generally considered to be rural, the entire State was sought to be represented in the current study. To ensure adequate representation, men from each of Montana’s 5 HIV prevention planning regions were represented in the study.

Figure 3: Montana HIV Planning Regions
Accessing the Sample

A multi-site sample was utilized in the current study. A sample of men from across the state of Montana could potentially have methodological strengths and be preferable to having several men from a small number of Montana towns. The increased number of geographic sites enhanced the validity and reliability of this study through the ability for triangulation across the sites.

Men were recruited in large part through the personals section on craigslist.org. An IRB approved recruiting script was placed on the internet site with a phone number and email address that interested men could respond to. There was no effort to hide the researcher’s identity and a copy of the study’s IRB approval was made available to any many requesting such. In addition, two men from Montana helped recruit seven of the forty-five participants. One, an HIV counselor and tester and support group facilitator recruited two men in central Montana and the second, an adult bookstore owner recruited five men from Eastern Montana. Again, men were given contact information to call if they were interested in participating in an interview.

During the initial contact with potential participants eligibility was determined through the use of a short screening form. Eligible men were then invited to further participate. A location mutually agreeable between the researcher and participant was chosen. Locations included parks, coffee shops, library meeting rooms, Forest Service land, men’s houses, and a university office. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants and towns in which they lived.
Pre-Interview

While the large majority of interviews occurred in person, a few, because of the participant’s desire or distance, took place over the phone. For those interviews taking place in person, I attempted to arrive early enough to get a general “feel” for the town while exploring the location in which the interview was to take place to ensure an adequate sense of privacy was assured. The purpose of my visit remained undisclosed to all but the research participant, although it was obvious in a few towns that my presence as an outsider was noticed.

The Interviews

While the interviews were conducted in a largely conversational style forum, I carried a research packet with me that contained an information and consent form, the Outness Inventory questionnaire, a demographic questionnaire, a resource handout, and the larger overall questions that I asked every participant. As the interviews progressed, I began to expand the concepts I touched on as influenced by topics brought up in prior interviews.

Each of the interviews was conducted by myself and all interviews were audio recorded. The recorded portion of the interviews lasted on average, approximately ninety minutes, however there was generally conversation before and after in addition to the administration of the consent form and demographic and outness questionnaires. As this
was the first time I had met these men in person, the conversation before the interview
took place was of particular importance in developing a sense rapport with the men.
Reference has been made to the importance of gaining confidence with the participant in
order to obtain rich data (Berninghausen and Kerstan 1991; Dowsett 1996; Marshall and
Rossman 1995) and becomes even more important when talking about potentially
sensitive topics such as sexuality (Lester 1999).

The time before the interview was also used as a time for men to ask more
questions about the purpose of the current research. I was able to reinforce the voluntary
nature of these interviews and the men’s ability to terminate the interview at any time or
to refuse to answer a question without negative consequences. Despite this offer, not one
man terminated an interview or refused to answer a question asked of him. While there
was no interview that was terminated, there were several interviews that were halted for
various lengths of time allowing men the chance to recover from often overwhelming
emotions, including many tears. These moments were not only incredibly emotionally
painful for the man talking, but also for me as well. I often found myself moving
between feelings of anger towards larger social structures, sadness, and the desire to
reach out and comfort the man sitting across from me. The desire to reach across the
table and embrace the man across from me in a reassuring hug was sometimes almost
overwhelming.
Notes from the Field

To organize my thoughts during the research process, I kept a detailed notebook in which I wrote down questions as they developed, observations from the interviews I conducted and towns I visited, and my personal frustrations as I moved through the research process. While not an exhaustive account of the research process, there were many rich details contained within the journal’s pages. With the potentially identifiable information contained within my journal, I have chosen to treat it with the same mode of confidentiality as the interviews.

The journal proved to be an invaluable resource when retrospectively looking over the interview transcripts. Non-verbal behaviors and mannerisms that took place during the interviews were documented in the journal and triggered additional memories about the interviews when reviewed during the analysis process. The journal also served as a place where I could write down my own presumptions and biases.

Journal writing or “memoing” is an essential part of the grounded theory approach to research for its ability to serve as valuable middle step allowing the researcher to stop and analyze their ideas about the codes in any and every way that occurs (Glaser 1998). It increases the researcher’s ability to construct analytic notes about developing categories, making comparisons, and for articulating ideas about comparisons.

With the constant immersion in the data experienced by the researcher, memoing is important in controlling possible analysis distortion by alerting the researcher to his or her personal biases. Additionally, memoing provides the opportunity to ground the analysis by incorporating “raw data” into the identification of patterns (Charmaz 2006).
It serves a dual process within grounded theory research by serving as an integral part of the data analysis process as well as in countering researcher subjectivity. Memoing increases the likelihood of producing accurate research findings, provides evidence of researcher’s a priori assumptions, and eventually a researcher’s memos form the basis of their grounded theory (Elliott and Lazenbatt 2005).

The Data Analysis

Utilizing a modified grounded theory approach, the interview transcripts were analyzed while subsequent interviews were still taking place. This allowed for additional questions to be added to the interviews and for preliminary themes to be determined. After the completion of the final interview, the transcripts in their entirety were reviewed again.

Transcription

Each of the interviews was recorded using a digital audio recorder. After the interview, the audio recordings were transferred to a password protected computer and a flash drive and deleted from the recorder. Each of the forty-five interviews was personally transcribed in an effort to improve accuracy. Beyond the concern for accuracy, personally transcribing the interviews allows the researcher to immerse
themselves in the data (Davey 1999). By personally transcribing each interview there is the opportunity to add nonverbal behaviors and emotional sounds to the interview transcripts while becoming even more intimately familiar with the data that would not be possible when hiring an outside transcriptionist.

During the transcription process, all identifying information was removed including names of persons and locations. During all of the interviews there were times where detailed, personal information that was shared could potentially jeopardize the anonymity of not only the participants, but also others in their lives. When this information comes up in interviews, it is up to the researcher to determine if the inclusion of such information can result in personal or social harm, compromise the identity of the interviewee, or otherwise breach confidentiality (McLellan et al. 2003; Morse 1994; Punch 1994). Each of the men are referred to by pseudonyms within the research, while identifying organizations are described by the type of service they provide, and names of locations have either been omitted or reduced to state level identification.

By personally transcribing each of the interviews, I was able to add the emotions of the men that gave added depth to the meanings of their words. Each of the interviews was transcribed verbatim including the “ums” and the “uhs,” and the laugh and the tears. Despite the frustrations that occurred during the transcription process and the urges to remove the extra words, they remain in the transcripts for the added meaning they give to the research records.
Coding

Analysis followed a modified constructionist-based grounded-theory approach whereby a coding scheme was developed from interview transcripts based on major themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Constructivist grounded theorists often view the method as a set of core principles with flexible guidelines, rather than set prescriptions. Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes that theory offers an “interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (2006:10) through the realization that researchers are not separate from their theories, but construct them through their interactions with the people they are working with.

Within grounded theory based research, data analysis and coding begins as data collection is still taking place. It is through the simultaneous collection and analysis of data that themes begin to emerge, the researcher becomes grounded in the data, and that interviews can be tailored in an attempt to target additional sampling towards building upon “weak” themes and connections. As themes begin to emerge from the data the researcher becomes capable of creating codes and categories that enable further comparative analysis within and across datasets. Continual coding allows the researcher to gain a new perspective on the material and to focus further data collection (Charmaz 2000).

Codes can be described as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles and Huberman 1994:56). Coding refers to the application of codes to raw data and during qualitative research becomes an integral part of the interview data analysis. It is through coding that
researchers begin to make the initial connections between ideas and concepts (DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2011).

Coding began as the initial interviews were still taking place and served as guidance for the remainder of the interviews as well as a method to organize and make sense of the hundreds of pages of written text originating from the oral interviews. The data were manually coded using print-based text, rather than an electronic-based program. This process began by simply reading and re-reading each of the transcripts while underlining and highlighting key phrases of texts. To allow the participants voices to emerge as much as possible from the data, some of their exact terms were used as codes.

In accordance with grounded theory guidelines coding occurred in several phases. The initial or line-by-line coding originated from the data, rather than attempting to apply predetermined codes to the data. This method allows the codes to emerge from the data and ensures important concepts are not overlooked in an effort to apply a priori codes to raw data. As the initial coding took place, ideas were explored and areas where data were lacking became apparent allowing for additional inquiries into those areas. After the initial codes were created from the interviews, they were applied to the transcripts. In grounded theory, this process is often referred to as axial coding.

After the codes were created and the text was marked, topics that supported one another were piled together through a method of constant comparison. Each quote corresponding to the code was cut out and marked with identifying characteristics as to determine the original source of the quote. The text was then sorted into piles consisting of similar quotes and topics. During this theoretical categorizing, the open codes that
were derived from the data during the initial coding stage are reconnected to the data in a way in which they “give new perspective to the data” (Glaser 1978:72). It was in this stage of coding that larger themes begin to emerge and answers to the initial research questions can began to be seen.

The Emergence of Themes

Ryan and Bernard (2003) refer to themes as the, “abstract, often fuzzy, constructs which investigators identity before, during, and after data collection” The themes that emerged in this research came directly from the data and served as a more abstract method of grouping together the many codes that were created. While codes are intricately embedded within the text, themes exist on a more removed abstract theoretical reality. It is during this stage of data analysis that the emerging themes begin to be brought back to the existing literature, which serves to strengthen the findings by placing them within current theory and literature.

Opler (1945) and more recently Ryan and Bernard (2003) view themes as a necessary step in analyzing cultures. Opler stated, the “activities, prohibitions of activities, or references, which result from the acceptance of a theme, are its expressions… The expressions of a theme, of course, aid us in discovering it” (198-199). In discovering themes, Opler suggests the following principles: (1) themes are only visible through the manifestation of expressions in data; (2) some expressions of a theme are obvious and culturally agreed on, while others are subtler, symbolic, and even
idiosyncratic; and (3) cultural systems comprise sets of interrelated themes. The themes in this study serve as a more abstract way to link the codes that emerged directly from the data.

While it is the coding process that gives meaning to the participant’s words, it is the themes that connect these words back to the larger theoretical and literature bases. It is through this connection that findings are explained and discussed, richer themes are created, and validity is demonstrated.

It is the “inter-relatedness and linkages between the raw data, the theoretical categories, the findings, the development of the themes, and the explanation of the findings add not only to the coherence of methodology, but also to its rigor, its validity, and to the trustworthiness of its findings (Green 2006:137).

Validity

Despite the many inconsistencies in the terms used to describe validity in qualitative research, there is agreement over the need to demonstrate that qualitative studies are credible. It has been stated that when working with qualitative data, “there as many ways of seeing the data as one can invent” (Dey 1993:110-11). Validity within this study was approached from Creswell and Miller’s (2000) definition which relies on Schwandt’s (1997) explanation of validity as how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them. Validity was a major consideration in the current study and throughout the entire research process many procedures were integrated to ensure validity was achieved. Qualitative researchers, as Creswell states, “strive for understanding that deep structure of knowledge that comes
from visiting personally with informants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meanings (1998:193). With the importance of detailed meaning, it is common to spend some time worrying whether the researcher got it right. Howard and Eisenhadt state that a good qualitative study is one that contributes to our understanding of important educational questions (1990). Guba and Lincoln (1989) state that a good qualitative study is one that shares knowledge and fosters social action.

Lincoln further breaks down the components of valid qualitative research into eight essential standards: (1) the standards for each case of research should originate from within the inquiry community; (2) the standard of positionality should guide the researcher in that the text should display honesty about its stance and the position of the author; (3) the rubric of community standard assumes that the research is carried out to serve the purpose of the community in which it was carried out; (4) qualitative research must give voice to participants, (5) the research must be subject to a critical subjectivity by the author, in which his or her emotional and psychological states before, during, and after the research are understood; (6) a reciprocity must exist between the researcher and those being researched; (7) the researcher must respect the sacredness of relationships in the research-to-action continuum; and (8) the researcher should share the privileges gained through their research with those portrayed in the research.

In line with Creswell’s (1998) recommendations of integrating a minimum of two verification procedures to ensure a study is valid, I integrated a degree of triangulation, rich, thick description, and member checks into the current study. In triangulation, the researcher makes use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell 1998; Ely et al. 1991; Erlandson et
al. 1993; Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Merriam 1988; Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 1980, 1990). In the current study, the integration of queer theory and schema theory with a modified grounded theory approach to the data analysis resulted in what Geertz (1975) refers to as thick description, the difference between the observed and the experienced, in itself is a reflection of the accuracy of the data being presented.

Elaborating on Geertz’s definition of thick, rich description, Denzin (1989:83) states that, thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts… Think descriptions, by contrast, lack detail, and simply report facts.” It is this vivid detail of men’s lives that transport the reader from a removed account of the secondhand story to the feeling that they too, have lived this experience. Credibility is achieved through thick description’s ability to provide as much detail as possible ultimately bringing alive the words on the page (Denzin 1989).

The third method of ensuring validity within this study was member checking. This method “shifts the burden” of validity from the researcher to the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985:314) describe member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” in a study. Within this study, the original themes and resulting interpretations of the data were brought back to a few of the men who participated in the interviews with the goal that they could confirm the interpretations were realistic, credible, and accurate.

Beyond the three techniques described above, the issue of researcher bias has been discussed. Given the sensitive topic of inquiry, I have made my position known to the men in this study and the future readers of this work. As Ayala (2000) states, the
researcher position within the research is critical to understanding the lens used to interpret the data. Finally, as rural gay men’s voices are often absent from the literature and even more absent are the voices of rural down low men, this study is an attempt to validate the voices of these men. By giving voice to these men, their stories become part of the academic literature and a sense of legitimacy is given to these men’s experiences.

**Ethical Issues**

While everyone believes that researchers have certain ethical responsibilities, not everyone agrees on what those responsibilities should entail (Bernard 2006). The American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Code of Ethics states that anthropologists have an obligation to, “consult actively with the affected individuals or group(s), with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved,” while also remaining responsible for the truthfulness and factual content of their statements (1998). Two of the men who participated in this study agreed to review the results section before it is published. Both of the men initially asked to see copies of the report, expressed an interest in the results, and offered additional help if needed. Before the interview process was undertaken, the questions were discussed with various experts throughout the state of Montana to determine their appropriateness and sensitivity.

No man in this research was under eighteen years of age as to aid in the ability to give legal consent to participate. All of the names in this research have been changed as
to ensure the anonymity of the participant. Some of the men that have participated in this study have asked to see a final copy. These men were asked to choose their own pseudonym, so that they would be able to identify themselves in the final report. Identifying characteristics, such as landmarks, buildings, or street names, have been removed in an effort to maintain the anonymity of men living in rural areas.

Approval to conduct this research was given by the University of Montana Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting any of the interviews. Each of the men participating in the study had to give oral consent to participate in the study and additionally to be audio recorded. With the personal nature of the research material combined with the rural environment, it was decided that oral consent proved to be a more reliable option in guaranteeing men’s anonymity over written consent.

Reciprocity

It has only been within a few decades that we have seen homosexuality removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The 2010 fight to pass the Missoula Equality Ordinance brought with it the emergence of dialogues of hate to mainstream news coverage and it is still entirely possible to hear these gay and queer slurs being used on any given day in Montana.

Several of the men who participated in this study expressed a desire for their voice to be heard. Almost every participant asked detailed questions about the research and about me, both as a researcher and personally. While hinted or stated directly, men
wanted their voices to be added to the struggle to improve the overall quality of life for all gay men, especially men that were not out or who did not feel safe coming forward to talk. With my multidisciplinary background, it was my hope to contribute not only through academia, but also through advocacy. The results of this study have been given to individuals and agencies that possess the power to implement policy and change. This research can be used to challenge the institutions, structures, and individuals with power to implement policies that empower and enfranchise those who are marginalized, vulnerable, and silent (Green 2006; McRobbie 1982).

Conclusion

Qualitative research presents the opportunity to uniquely describe in rich detail the experience of being a down low man in Montana through the in-depth exploration of the influence of the intersection of culture, identity, and sexual behaviors. This study is an attempt to describe in detail the lived experience of being a down low man living in a rural environment by immersing the reader in the lives of the participants.

This chapter gave an introduction to the theory that guided this study. Queer theory and schema theory were chosen for their ability to highlight the influence of the rural environment on those living within it while challenging traditional ideas of sexual identity and power. Combined, schema and queer theories can be used to better understand the intersection of culture, identity, and behavior. Beyond theory, this chapter
discussed the research process and methodology including the codes and themes that will be detailed and discussed in depth in the following chapters.
Chapter Four: Findings
Reasons for Remaining on the Down Low

I hate the fact that I have to hide who I am. I don’t have to, it’s a personal choice of course, however, the repercussions I would be dealing with if I didn’t would be um, something that I am just not ready to deal with or feel the need to deal with it anyway. I want to live a free man, but at the same there are just certain people that I feel I just can’t tell, it would break that bond, cause I just know, I’m the same person its trying to get them to realize that I’m the same person, its trying to get them to realize that, that’s the hard part. It breaks up relationships and I care a lot about the people in my life you know, so I guess I would rather... Being a closeted man, I wish we could all be equal, I wish it wasn’t such that people had to live under the radar because of who they are (David).

Being in a rural area, that’s the hardest thing, I don’t know how any man being gay survives in a place like this unless you’re really comfortable and your family is very supportive, that would be the only possible way that I could imagine, cause I couldn’t live without my family, I would be real lonely. I don’t know, living somewhere like Montana has got to be one of the hardest places to be gay (David).

The above quotes from David, a man who participated in this study summarize the majority of the men’s experiences living in rural areas. For many men, the rural social environment has powerfully influenced individual identities and ideas about sexual risk. Many of the men in this study dreamed of a day when they could either be out “to the world” for the first time without fearing societal repercussions or for some, a time when they could once again live openly as a gay man. For men that had returned to Montana from the larger cities they had moved to, the return both represented coming home and returning to the closet.

Cultural narratives portraying rural spaces as restrictive to gay and lesbian identities persist. Popular media has further perpetuated the image of gay men and
lesbian women fleeing the restrictive rural environment for the freedom of urban life. These images, while often fictional, have helped to shape nonfictional narratives and expectations of rural gay life. As Gergen discusses, it is through narratives that people make sense of events, their life trajectories, and their own personal relationships. It is through these narratives that we begin to connect life experiences (1994).

The cultural environment in which we live influences our own stories, our sexual identities, and the method in which we portray those identities. They help to shape how we see ourselves within specific landscapes and cultures as influenced by the multiple stories circulating at the cultural level defining what it means to be gay or lesbian. That shared cultural narratives exist is important because they provide “a broad outline for the possibilities of the self” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:13). The findings from this study reinforce the importance of the cultural and geographic environments in shaping how men make sense of their sexual identities. The imaginary urban-rural border and the associated expectations of each continue to be a powerful influencer on men’s identities and the outward expression of those identities. In the largely heteronormative environment within Montana, it is possible to feel as if one’s sexual identity is excluded from the larger cultural landscape.

For the forty-five men in this study the rural environment represented freedom and restriction. For many men, the decision to stay close to family and home comes at the expense of having to modify their own identities. The men in this study are responding to their surroundings and actively engaging with the local environment through the modification of behaviors and identity, which allow them to remain in their social, geographical, and cultural environments.
The analysis of the data was carried out using a modified constructivist grounded theory approach. This approach was favored for its ability to highlight the experiences of the participants as told in their own words with their meanings attached to their stories. Quotes from the interviews will be referenced to further support the larger themes that developed from the interview transcripts as a whole. The quotes will be separated from the main text to further separate them from the analysis. Finally, each quote will be cited with the pseudonym of the participant from which the quote originated. In total, forty-five interviews were conducted with men representing each of the five HIV prevention planning regions in the State.

While each of the men in this study come from different backgrounds and unique situations, they share a common bond. The decision to remain closeted about their sexual identity has impacted each of the men in various ways. The men in this study volunteered to come forward and share their story. For many, the decision to come forward was influenced by the desire to help others and that men of future generations would not have to face the decision of whether to remain closeted. This chapter provides a voice to men that have largely remained voiceless in prior research while examining the influence of the rural sociocultural environment on sexual identity and behaviors.

**Demographics**

Forty-five men responded to advertisements for this study and completed interviews. The State of Montana, through contracts, provided $1000.00 in incentive
money for men participating in the interviews. Men who completed the interviews were each offered a 25.00 cash incentive as a recognition of the time it took them to take part in this research. Forty of the men accepted the incentive money, five men refused the incentive and asked that it be used to carry out additional interviews, and one man asked that his 25.00 be used to anonymously make a contribution to PRIDE Foundation on his behalf.

As shown in the table below, the ethnic/racial makeup of the respondents followed Montana’s overall demographic makeup and every effort was made to get a geographically representative sample of Montana’s population. The participant who identified as other in the sexual orientation category in the table below, stated he identified as all of the above (gay, straight, and bisexual). The majority of participants self-identified their current relationship status as single. Men who were married were asked to differentiate between being in a monogamous or open relationship. For the men who were in open married relationships, it was known to their spouses that they were having sexual relations outside of the marriage, but it was never explicitly discussed if their sexual partners were men or women. Each of Montana’s five HIV planning regions was represented in the current study.
TABLE 1: Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Demographic Information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Age</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (open)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (monogamous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating a man or woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Per IRB approval guidelines, it was not possible to meet with the participants on more than one occasion. To determine the men’s level of outness about their sexual identity/sexual behavior, Mohr and Fassinger’s (2000) Outness Inventory (OI) was used. As discussed in chapter three, the OI allows the participant the opportunity to self-identify how out they feel they are to various persons including family, friends, coworkers, and religious figures. The response categories range from (1) not being out at all to someone and never discussing sexuality with them to being completely open (7) and willing to talk about sexuality with the person. The average overall Outness
Inventory score was a 1.74 (1-4.7) with average sub-scores of religion 1.14; family 1.81; and world 1.68. All average scores support men’s self-reported closeted or down-low status.

**TABLE 2: Participant Outness Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ountess Inventory Scores</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>(1-4.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>(1-5.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>(1-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>(1-2.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reasons for Remaining on the Down Low**

Each of the men that participated in the current research had various reasons for not being open about their sexual identity. However, while each man chose a different way to engage with his community through individual scripts, men shared a common schema in which they perceived their environments unsafe to be out in. The most common reason throughout the research was related to fear of changing relationships with family, friends, or their community. Behind a fear of changing relationships other reasons cited for remaining closeted were: rural perceptions of masculinity; fear of employment security; the influence of the military; tribal influences, fear for physical safety, loss of personal or social identity; and religion. The figure below illustrates the most commonly cited reasons identified by men for remaining closeted. While each of the men had their own reason for not being out, there was a common pattern that
developed over the course of the interviews – the rural social environment played a vital role in that decision. The cultural expectations influenced men’s sexuality narratives. These larger socially influenced cultural narratives influenced individual-level identities and the outward expression of those identities.

At its most broad level, the ultimate goal of schema theory is to understand the intersection between culture, identity, and behavior. Through the phenomenologically inspired schema theory incorporated into this study, the goal was to better understand the meaning given to men’s lived experiences as influenced by the larger idea of place. This goal ultimately included giving better understanding to the reasons that men are choosing to remain closeted, in other words how they, through their own eyes and actions, interpret the cultural environment in which they live. Men living in rural areas must further negotiate their identities from traditional urban ideas of sexuality to include rural aspects of sexuality within the larger heteronormative environment. Stated otherwise, it becomes necessary to modify certain characteristics of cultural narratives while accepting others. In the following sections, men, in their own words, describe how the environment, both social and physical, has influenced their expectations of rural sexuality. It is these schemas that men possess that influence what they feel is acceptable rural social behavior and ultimately influence how men are acting within social situations.
Masculinity

It was during the beginning of the first interview that the topic of masculinity came up. The participant discussed both perceptions of masculinity directed towards gay men as well as internal struggles with trying to portray an external sense of heightened masculinity in public. The constant struggle of trying to conform to rural perceptions of masculinity in an effort to ensure that sexual behavior remained discrete was something that many men identified with. Gay identities are not restricted strictly to definitions of sexuality, but instead extend to include non-sexual ways of being and acting. For the
men in this study, who often lacked social support networks comprised of other gay men, their ideas surrounding a “gay identity” were often influenced by the dominating heterosexual culture. Managing their sexuality often included an attempted assimilation into the dominant culture as described by hyper-masculine behaviors of some of the men below. Men reported feelings of association between being gay and being less of a man as influenced by family members, friends, and societal expectations. While many of the men described a desire for a definition of masculinity that more paralleled a queer or challengeable description of masculinity, they often noted that rural sex and gender roles are more traditionally defined. Rather than feeling free to denaturalize traditional definitions of masculinity, men felt that not only did the traditional social construction of masculinity run too deep to challenge, but also that their own safety would be jeopardized if they openly challenged these traditional perceptions.

Men were afraid they would lose power within various aspects of their lives or that they would be viewed as being effeminate and therefore weaker than their more masculine male counterparts. Some men reported over-exaggerating their masculinity in the attempt to remain closeted, while other men discussed making up a girlfriend to talk about with family and friends or pretending to be interested in women when their friends were around or using a girl as a cover around certain people.

If I’m around a certain group of friends that are uh, definitely 100% heterosexual and they assume I am too, like if there’s a girl there, like I will make remarks, like I’m hitting on her or like, so they’ll hear, so like you know what I mean. They can think I’m attracted to her and um, and to me that’s pretending cause really, I’m not sexually attracted to her, I just feel that I need to put that out there, so that it remains so that I have a cover. So, that’s what I’m pretending, pretending to be attracted to females in front of my straight friends (Paul).
Expanding further on this idea of masculinity, men talked about the lack of masculine gay role models and the impact of this on their overall identity formation.

A gay male is so characterized; you know it’s so exaggerated, that I don’t identify with it. There aren’t a lot of male gay male role models that I could see myself identifying with, so um, that’s probably one of the reasons too. You know, most gays that you see are very are represented in a very cartoonish or exaggerated way. I just never and because so many people are in the closet, it’s hard to find one you can identify with. Without any kind of role model out there it’s hard for me to come out (Nick).

Participants discussed the role of the media in creating false stereotypes of gay men. The often flamboyant characterization of gay men in the media has influenced society’s idea of gay men and in turn, many of the men discussed this as a reason for remaining closeted. Men talked about the overabundance of stereotypical gay men on sitcoms, rather than allowing for what they called “real” gay characters that account for differences in individuals.

I think, um television has kind of sometimes represented, it’s more of a misconception because some of the gay closeted men I know, you could just never believe it. I mean they are so masculine or manly and that’s the way I am (Collin).

The character of Jack from the sitcom Will and Grace was brought up on several occasions as an example of the flamboyant characterization of gay men in the media. Men talked about the desire to see more characters that they could identify with, rather than the typical urban gay man that is often seen on television.

I don’t want to be that stereotypical gay man either, that’s why I never associate myself as a gay man, cause then there’s that stereotype, you know, the whatever that comes with it, but as you can tell there’s a variety of gay men as there are straight people, but some gay men are real flamboyant, some are like myself, I’m a man and I just happen to love men, but there’s no feminine bone in me (David).
Men reported feeling as if there are heightened expectations of masculinity within the rural environment associated with traditional gender roles. Jake talked about rural perceptions of masculine, the traditional cowboy image of rural men, and what it means to be a man in Montana. Contrasting this with his experience growing up out of state, he associated the negative views on same-sex sexual behavior with not only Montana, but rural social environments in general.

Oh, well yeah I feel that in Montana, definitely, so there’s kind of a big cowboy attitude out here and um, I’m originally from (name of state removed), so, I’m kind of used to a little bit of the same kind of you know attitudes and people towards uh, especially ah guys, I mean I think it’s a pretty accepted thing, as far as like you know girls who might be bisexual or gay, but for some reason its still, I think there’s still a large stigma towards um, towards men who would be, I would definitely make sure that you know, I wouldn’t be out about it here, maybe outcast here.

Supporting prior research within rural environments, there is still a strong sense of labor division by gender within certain industries that have traditionally been found in Montana such as logging and mining.

At least here in Western Montana that I’ve been able to experience, Northern Idaho, again it’s that men are men and its men that got a lot of that issue. A lot of the are loggers or have worked in the logging industry so they’ve got that whole, from what I’ve seen, you know a lot of them have that image of where they are men, they are big, they are strong, they just don’t do that (Aidan).

Many of the feelings of the men here reinforce prior research that has looked at rural perceptions of masculinity. The overall social environment inclusive of traditional gender roles acts as a larger influence on men’s identities and their ability to be out about their sexual identity. Despite the desire of several of the men to be out about their sexual identity, there was a consensus among the men that it was not safe to go against the traditional ideas of heteronormativity and traditional gender roles. Acting against
these larger ideals of masculinity was often associated with a sense of physical fear for the safety of the men in this study or their families.

Roger described the situation of a man who lived in his small town that had come out and was eventually driven out of town, despite the extended effort he had made to remain in his hometown. As he recounted the story of this man, Roger became quite emotional and stated that this was an example of one of the reasons why he could not be out. He lived in a rural area and was afraid at the possibility of losing his job and the potential negative outcomes that could be directed at his children.

I know a guy, he used to come into the store that I work at quite often and he’d complain about getting harassed quite a bit, I don’t know if it went as far as damaging his car or anything like that, but it wouldn’t surprise me if it did. You know it didn’t take long for the fights in the bars, you know when he went to bars and stuff like that to drive him out. I know a couple of fights that took place, they didn’t just run across him in the bar, they sought him out and found him. They probably got liquored up and decided, hey lets go have some fun and beat up the fag, you know. The ridicule eventually drove him out of town and he was a fairly nice guy, fairly easy going, no excuse to be run out of town, but that’s enough to keep anybody in the closet, I think.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, within the largely heteronormative rural environment, the male persona has long been defined by a rugged heterosexual masculinity. Many of the men in this study have described their same-sex sexuality as being in opposition to the traditional male sexuality narrative. With the importance of rural acceptance men have chosen to quietly challenge the dominant narrative by remaining closeted, rather than risk the loss of acceptance in their communities.
Personal Relationships

Following semi-structured interviewing guidelines and suggestions, interviews were started off with a broad question that allowed the participants control over which direction they chose to carry the interview. In addition to allowing participants control over the direction of the interview, the open-ended questions were most optimal for allowing the participants to describe how they understood the world around them, how they defined barriers and values associated with their cultural environment, and how they constructed their own identity. The first question that I asked men after the interview began was, “Can you tell about your experience remaining closeted about a part of your sexual identity?” For many of the men, their response included some of the reasons why they personally had chosen to remain closeted, the influence of the social environment on the decision to remain closeted, and how this decision has impacted their lives on a general level.

Um, I guess it’s difficult in a lot of ways, um the main difficulty being is of course you want it to be a secret and because of that there’s always the fear of the secret coming out, and um, I’m sure especially in my field and with uh, my family it’d be, I’d be on outs with everybody I knew if it came out, so keeping it a secret is probably the upmost important thing to me (Roger).

Men reported a fear of changing relationships, either with family, friends, or acquaintances in the community as the most influential reason for remaining closeted.Experiences growing up in households with parents who negatively viewed same-sex sexuality had lasting impacts on men’s decisions and feelings about their own sexuality. Nick recalled hearing ongoing conversations between his brothers and father while they were growing up that included negative portrayals of gay men.
I grew up in a very, my father was in the military and um, we grew up in a pretty strict household and uh, my father openly and my brothers openly joked about gays, mostly men, never really women and just talked about them in really negative terms and how they weren’t really men and how they were just basically women and that always stuck with me and um, its been very difficult to deal with.

Another participant, David, recalled how his sister’s coming out experience to their father has influenced his decision to not come out to his father and the lasting impact that not being out has had on his overall identity.

I just don’t want to come out to my dad and I never will. My brothers as well, they’re very judgmental. My sister came out and they were oh my gosh, jokes from left to right. It’s like okay, I’m not going to be the butt of that joke, I’m not going to do that. Yeah, that’s why my dad doesn’t know and never will, it’s just, just as far as I’m concerned when he dies, at that point I can be a free man. I can exclusively live as an openly gay man, I don’t have to live in fear of my dad finding out, that’s my biggest fear. I can live exclusively as me, which I wouldn’t mind.

Married men reported a fear of losing access to their children. Ian talked about the desire to be out while worrying about losing access to his children. Ultimately, he has decided to remain in the closet about his sexuality to maintain access to his children. As he states, “I don’t want to risk losing access to my children. I mean I would rather spend my entire life uncomfortable than lose that part of my life.”

Several men stated their family would disown them if they were to find out about their sexual orientation. For the few men in the study who had come out to their families, they were met with varying negative reactions initially. Some of the men have since begun to rebuild relationships with their parents and siblings, but for others their relationships remain broken. Kyle, who was out to his parents, talked about the experience of coming out and his parent’s reaction after he told them that he was gay,

When they found out that I had feelings for men they introduced me to Exodus, the church’s gay ministry… I get a two page letter about sodomy
in response to coming out you know they stopped interacting and I stopped, I put them on the shelf, because I was like I can’t deal with you, so my support system crumbled, like there was like months where I didn’t really have a support system.

While Leonard’s daughters have come to accept him as a gay man, he no longer has a relationship with his father and brothers despite several attempts to contact them. He discussed the emotional burden of loving his family without their acceptance in return.

I came out in, I wrote them a letter in 2006 and I haven’t heard, my daughters have tried to contact them to send pictures of their nieces and nephews and my dad’s grandchildren and all the letters have been returned and they, I’ve tried to call and uh, my dad did pick up the phone one time and when he found out who it was he hung up on me and now every time I try to call I just get a busy signal, so they won’t talk to me, won’t accept me and my dad’s 87 years old now, so and what hurts is once a month I go on the local, the internet and check the local newspaper over there where he lives to see if his obituary is in there because they will never tell me if he dies and it really hurts. I would love to be able to sit down and talk to my dad. I got a brother who lives in <town removed> and he won’t have anything to do with me. I’ve tried to contact him and he won’t, I don’t have a phone number for him and I’ve contacted his daughter and about three or four times, and the last time I contacted her, she said Uncle <name removed>, she says I’ve talked to dad and he she says there’s no point in trying to get a hold of him, he will not talk to you… I spent my whole life trying to make dad happy, trying to please him. I was never the man he wanted me to be, but I tried. I could act like the man he wanted, but I couldn’t be the man he wanted.

Men were afraid they would lose friendships or their status in the community.

I don’t know if it’s really had like a negative effect on me, its um, definitely been a little bit difficult, you know to just try and worrying about, you know, you definitely don’t want close friends or family finding out, um, I come from a pretty religious family and stuff and of course, you know, even if things have changed you know a lot in the last um, several years and stuff towards attitudes about sexual preferences and stuff there’s still a lot of um, you know, definitely, I would definitely be outcast from almost all my friends, you know, if I came out about it you know, but I’m sure (Jake).

One participant went as far to say that he was sure his current friends would do everything in their power to tarnish his public image if they were to find out about his
sexual activity. In response to my question about if friendships might change if Aidan were open about his sexual identity, he replied,

   Uh, yeah. I know definitely it would. They would be very disgusted over my choices and want absolutely nothing to do with me possibly one or two would be very spiteful and do everything they can to try and trash my name.

   This fear of changing personal relationships was strongly linked to a decrease in overall emotional health through feelings of depression and isolation. Tom talked about the difficulties of having to pretend around your friends and the distance that creates in the relationship. The fear of saying something wrong or getting caught looking the wrong way has led to feelings of isolation for him,

   Not being out kind of makes it difficult to really enjoy life and go out with friends especially when some of your friends will say, like, hey look at that guy, you know you instinctively say don’t look, you don’t have to, you don’t need to and then when one of your heterosexual friends who is a male says oh, hey look at that girl, you force yourself too even though sometimes you really don’t care. I mean sometimes you do and you’ll say oh wow, she really is cute, I’d go talk to her. Most of the time, for me specifically, its like I look and I don’t really see what they want me to see.

   In general, men felt that the communities in which they lived were not welcoming towards sexual minorities, yet for various personal reasons these men chose to stay within their communities at the expense of having to restrict their own personal identities.

   Paul has chosen to stay in his hometown because he wants to remain close to his family, yet he feels that in order to remain close to his family, he must remain closeted because of larger community values. Beyond the desire to protect his extended family that lived on his reservation, he was worried he would lose friendships.

   I don’t want my um, because it’s such a small community and because everybody knows everybody, or you know what I mean, like that six degrees of separation, well it’s like two degrees here, you know, everybody associates with everybody and I guess to come out and be like
that would um, I wouldn’t want my family to be questioned for that or ridiculed or bring shame upon them, cause that’s what happens with other families here… I really wouldn’t know what would happen, you know. I think that you know, a lot of my straight friends and the way that they talk about gay people they would, um, I’m almost positive that they will they will leave. They won’t uh; they probably wouldn’t want to remain friends with me because of that.

The main strategy for being able to stay in their current environment among all of the men interviewed was to remain closeted about their sexual identity and activity in their hometowns. By remaining closeted or not advertising one’s sexuality, men stated they were able to carry out their daily lives within their community while not bringing excess attention to themselves. When I asked Bryan about his decision to remain closeted, he expressed concern over losing his relationship with his friends and family before going on to talk about the overall lack of acceptance by society and the accompanying fear of being treated differently solely because of his sexual choices,

Fear of being rejected in the community and family. My family is probably the biggest factor by far. Basically, I want to fit in with the norm of society. Open gay guys around here are sort of shunned form society. They aren’t treated the same.

While the majority of the men reported an increased sense of isolation stemming from feelings of having to remain closeted, a minority of participants stated that their sexuality was just a part of who they were and they did not feel the need to flaunt or be open about it. As Gary stated, his sexuality is his business and it is not something that he feels is anyone else’s business unless they are a partner of his.

It’s with this as well as with anything else in my life that’s nobody’s business I wait until I know a person well enough to know whether I feel like trusting them with that information, but this is pretty much basic social behavior of anybody. When you first meet a new person, you don’t go out and say, hey I like this, I do this, and I do this, unless you’re going to a singles bar in which case that is the only information that is important or if you are dating online, you know, I gauge each person with what I
think they’re worth knowing about me and then as I know them longer and trust them with more intimate information. I figure the only person that has any right to any information about my sexuality is either somebody who is doing a study like you are or someone who intends to be a part of it, so if you’re not intending to be a partner or if you’re not asking me for counseling advice or you’re not doing a study, then it’s probably none of your business.

These men stated they live out the majority of their daily lives as they fit, rather than trying to fit their sexuality into the ideals of society. They viewed their decision to not be out as a choice, rather than forcefully necessary. While some of these men stated they would prefer to have the option to be out when they see fit, media portrayals of gay men and larger societal expectations make it easier to remain closeted.

Overall, the majority of men discussed having social support networks that were based on their identity as a straight man. The fear of rejection by family, friends, and the community was a motivator powerful enough to overcome the challenges of remaining closeted. Men were often struck with the dilemma of wanting to create a more inclusive, less homophobic environment that consisted of equal rights while not wanting to lose personal or community relationships.

Employment and Military

Some men reported a fear of coming out in their largely male-dominated work fields. This was often connected with a sense of masculinity and losing power or prestige within their chosen occupational field. A few of the participants had overheard conversations among coworkers or supervisors that included homophobic remarks further
influencing their decision to remain closeted at work. Several men noted that in various aspects of their lives, their place of employment included, that it was commonplace to hear homophobic slurs used to comment about negative job performance or behaviors in general.

It's um, just the perception that if you are more feminine acting you are more weak and only the strong survive kind of personality or trait that I have noticed. It seems like people try and exploit the weaknesses of other individuals (Charlie).

A few men saw their occupation as being male dominated and therefore it was necessary to maintain that masculine advantage in trying to move forward in their careers while others equated perceived femininity with “career suicide.” Dean worried about losing his job if his sexual behaviors were to become known to his boss or co-workers. He went on to talk about the stress of remaining closeted and the impact of that stress on his work performance on occasion.

The stress of it, having to worry about losing your job, worrying about what people will say, how good your friends are, are they going to walk away? The economy isn’t so good, so jobs are hard to come by and I’ve lost three jobs since I was in (name removed) because I was gay. You know people find out, they see something, and they have issues, um, and so when I moved back here it was just simpler to keep it quiet, to not tell anyone, and not have to worry about losing a job, its just mainly financial for me. It wears on me, it affects how I work, but I meditate. It helps me to stay focused and not get too worked up.

Walter did not necessarily fear for his job security as a gay man, but instead described the influence of his line of work on his decision to remain closeted, stating that it was just easier to not be out at work.

My line of work, I work in a very manly oriented job, credibility. Not that being gay is bad at work, but it is just easier to deal with issues if I present as a straight man.”
The majority of men that stated their place of employment or line of work were influences on their decision to remain closeted, made similar remarks to Walter’s comment. They felt they would maintain more credibility at work and be seen as possessing more authority if they were viewed as straight men by their co-workers, bosses, and clients/patrons. Gary had feelings similar to Walter’s, but expanded upon his statement with ideas about why such a work environment remains intact. He equated the differential treatment of employees and co-workers based on their supposed sexual identity as a means of social control, “Society will stigmatize various segments of the population, it keeps them from getting too out of hand or out of control, I guess.”

Traditionally, Montana and rural states in general, have a high percentage of residents that enter the military. Men with military experience reported that this was a large influence in their decision to remain closeted³. There were several descriptions of having to act tough and portray a traditional sense of masculinity, homophobic attitudes, and associations between combat roles and exaggerated male behavior in general within the military. As Buck described, “You know in the Army, everything is you know, you fucking pussy, you’re a fucking you know.” Many men had a fear of being dishonorably discharged from the military had their sexual orientation been revealed, despite successful military careers. David described the fear associated with the constant worry of being outed in the military.

I have a heavy burden, worse than my family, I have the U.S. government above my head, that if they found out about me at the time and place I was in the Army, you were gone. You were out of the military, you know, disgracefully at that, no matter how honorably you served and so, I did

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³ All of the men in the current study were interviewed prior to the repeal of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell U.S. Military policy.
have that in the back of my mind and I would wake up in cold sweats a lot thinking they found out.

Stories of hazing, attitudes of homophobia, and military personnel searching online sites for gay men served as powerful motivators for men to remain closeted about their sexual identity. Men who were in the military reported hearing stories or being directly told about men and women in the military whose job it was to scan through online gay dating or hook up sites looking for military men with postings.

I went in (Navy) when I was you know nineteen and spent fifteen years in there, you know a decade and a half in there having to deal with okay the fact that if anybody found out about my sexuality the fact that that is the end of a career right there. When I first was in there, yeah definitely was a bit on the nervous side on the fact that you know we have had a couple of reports of gays or people that have come out in the military you know being thrown overboard. I think the Marines you know worked one over a little too hard and you know ended up a fatality. Definitely in the beginning with the military and how things were going was definitely a little nervous on things like that (Aidan).

Ideas of masculinity permeated employment in that certain career trajectories were still viewed as masculine or being male careers, while others were viewed as “women’s work.” While the image of the lone, rugged, and masculine rural cowboy is seen less today, it still remains alive through images in the heads of many rural men. Men feared that coming out would limit their career opportunities by being viewed differently by coworkers of supervisors.
Religion

A lack of perceived acceptance of same-sex sexual orientation within religious communities was noted. Overall, men noted that religious and tribal expectations of what men should be and how men should act were powerful motivators for remaining closeted. Several men stated because of these views they were no longer actively involved with the church or religion in general. Some of the men talked about their churches or prior churches’ outlook on same-sex sexuality and the influence of those views on leaving the church or no longer actively participating in their religion. Leonard talked about his frustrations with people quoting the Bible in their beliefs against same-sex sexual activity.

They’ll hold tight to their interpretations of the Bible. They read what they want to hear. I was raised on the Bible…I firmly believe its all interpretation. Maybe we need a third testament now, an upgrade.

Gene talked about his frustrations with the exclusiveness of some religions, despite their preaching about love, acceptance, and open doors. While he has never been one to go to church every Sunday, he feels he has given religion a try.

I’ve never gone to a church where any kind of gay activity has ever been acceptable or acceptance of anybody else doing it. I mean, yeah, if you were to meet me I am a strong church-going individual and I have done the best I could to try and change perceptions that gay people are God’s children too and its not up to us to be judge and jury on this thing, so I believe in time it will get better and some churches are doing a better job, but strangely those are the churches that keep getting ostracized for I mean, um, being open. I mean, its like they’re not true Christians, but they may be more Christian, but I’m not here to know that, but it just feels like to me the one’s I have gone to have just kind of a stick in the sand and not moved beyond it. I mean some churches seem to be a little more open, but it seems they have been created to meet that need, they’re not a mainstream church that just anybody would walk through the door and that’s probably me, but I don’t believe that’s the way its supposed to be.
Collin still attends church, but has had a lot frustration over feeling like many churches single out same-sex sexuality, while moving beyond what they used to view as sins, such as children out of wedlock.

The church that I go to, they’ve changed some of their policies and stuff and I’ve just gone along with them because I don’t want to rock the boat or I don’t want them to think well he might be or maybe he is, so I don’t cause any waves, but its just, its my home church. I’ve gone there ever since grade school, I was baptized there. I’ve never changed memberships there, but I really don’t like it anymore because of that attitude and I guess that’s why I have sought out talking to another pastor because it, it’s a religious issue and that, but I guess with my own church, I guess that I figure you know if our church can um, our minster will, we’ve got unmarried mothers, you know, and babies baptized with no father there beside them and that kind of thing going on, but still there’s no room for other things, so I guess my church is kind of, I’m kind of discouraged by my church, but I don’t say anything, I just don’t say anything. I don’t say one word because to me, I just think to myself, all you people that I’m sitting amongst um, just thinking that you’re so self-righteous and pure, but really how close, really, or really how well do you know that. I mean I know we live in a different time than a lot of them older people did where when a girl got pregnant you either got pregnant or when I went to school, if a girl got pregnant she quit school and got married or went away. I mean it was so different than it was now and now unmarried mothers can bring their babies to church and everything’s fine, but at the same time if somebody’s son comes back from college has a friend with of the same sex and comes to church um, then that’s open for gossip or discussion or passing judgment and I think that’s unfair because the whole thing is we’re all people and that’s why I say love is love and to me it’s just that simple.

Religious views among family members have affected relationships between some of the men in this study and their family members. Ed has chosen not to come out to his family because of their of religious views and fear of changing relationships. “I think coming out would change my relationship, I think so, I come from a predominantly religious family.” In between tears, Anthony described the process of coming out to his fundamentalist Christian mom and the emotional devastation that occurred as his mom rejected him then kicked him out her house.
I told um, my mom, um that I was gay a few years ago and she broke down in tears and just completely you know, disregarded me as her son and didn’t really want me in the house anymore. So, she wrote this really long letter and she just left it on my bed one day and you know, uh basically telling me she is wanting me out of the house because you know, I am bringing demons into the house and you know all this satanic stuff that I thought was really ridiculous that she was acting like this and I was crying like the entire time I was reading the letter. So, you know just dealing with that and the stress about that, thinking what I am going to do, I have nowhere to go right now cause I was living with her at the time, cause um, and uh, so that was kind of like my first trying to come out experience you know trying to figure out what I am going to do with my life now.

Daniel talked about the lack of choice he had in choosing his religion as he was growing up and the associated feelings of confusion that came with knowing he was gay while growing up in a family and church environment that viewed same-sex sexual behavior as a sin.

We really don’t have a period where we can choose what we want to be, um, I guess the full extent for me is how scary it (being gay) is for my family. I didn’t know I had an uncle until I was eighteen because he is gay and my family disowned him and won’t talk to him. I feel like it’s really a ticking time bomb for me because I know as soon as if anything comes out I’ll be completely cut off from my whole family and stuff like that. So really, it’s a lot of stress, a lot of worrying all the time. I can’t really be myself ever because there are so many people from the church around here, so many people are just everywhere. It feels like you have to put on a mask all day long.

A commonality between all of the men who expanded on the topic of religion was the disconnect between preaching of love and acceptance and the lack of these directed at them solely because of their sexual identity. As Leonard talked about, much of this was blamed on interpretation of the Bible or religious book by church officials or parishioners, rather than the concept of religion itself. Ideas of religion as being repressive towards same-sex sexuality were not confined by geography. Men, however,
did feel that the conservative nature of church participants did influence the social environment of the rural church atmosphere.

**Tribe**

For men that identified as Native American, tribal influences and fear of no longer being accepted by their tribe if they came out about their same-sex sexual orientation were reasons for remaining closeted. For all, there is a hope that someday they will ready to come out without fear of repercussion by members of the tribe. Oliver summed this up through his statement, “Well since I’m Native American I can’t be out there yet, but hopefully one of these days I will be.” Paul and Sam talked about the stigmas within the Native American community and misconceptions about sexuality.

There’s um, um, I know its like a huge misconception, that like, homosexuality is like revered in the Native American, uh communities and that’s true in a lot of ways, but it can have a lot of repercussions, like what you did, a lot of slurs, a lot of insults, that are shouted at gay people. So, and for those who are openly gay here, they get it quite a bit and um, yeah, they’ll tease that person and like, so stop acting like (Name of openly gay man in town) and when people are going to, when people are teasing with one another they’ll call you (name of man removed again) as an insult and that means you’re acting gay (Paul).

I see a big difference in how people are treated in Montana, especially on the reservations versus the bigger cities outside of Montana. In bigger cities it’s a lot easier to just like come out and easier to find a relationship. Here, walking down the street holding hands, you can’t do that here in Montana (Sam).
Paul went on to talk further about the sense of isolation that he feels living on a reservation in Montana and his feelings regarding the sense of homophobia that arises from the lack of outside cultural influences.

There isn’t a lot of influence here, there’s not a lot of um diversity, people aren’t especially Native American, um, we um, there’s a majority, like 97% of the people that live in this town are Native American and a lot of them have not lived outside of the state or in a bigger city and have not been exposed to a lot of diversity and culture outside of their own, especially the gay culture and community and so um, for them, for you to be gay here, it’s something they aren’t going to understand and um, I don’t think they even have resources here to help straight people understand gay people. I think they were taught and all they see is that gay people are wrong, gay people are bad, and uh, you know that it’s okay to offend gay people. It’s okay to do that because um, everybody has done that and its don over and over and with really no repercussion, there’s no, nobody takes action there’s no laws here. Um, like on the street that protects, like you know a gay person from like slurs or even harm from straight people that don’t understand them. There is a lot of stigma here.

Paralleling the importance of acceptance in rural communities was the importance of acceptance by one’s tribe. Men talked about the small community feelings related to living in rural environments and living on reservations. Men talked about the speed at which news travels on the reservation and the caution that they exercised in an attempt to remain closeted.

**Physical Safety**

While few men in the study reported experiencing physical violence firsthand as a direct result of their sexual activity there was still a sense of fear for their personal physical safety if their sexual activities were made publicly known. Fears arose from
personal experiences, friend’s experiences of harassment, from threats made from members of the community, or in some cases from stories heard in other rural environments. While it was not something that was specifically asked about during the interviews, Charlie, a lifelong athlete talked about the internal struggle of whether to come out and the influence of the athletic community on that decision. Charlie sees lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women as being viewed as less athletic than straight athletes and has seen athletes singled out because of their sexual identity.

Being an athlete all my life, its, uh, the gay and lesbian community is looked upon in a negative fashion. It doesn’t seem like it is a manly thing to do to be interested in same sex relationships and I’ve had some friends who were openly gay and they were severely harassed both physically and verbally.  

Fear for physical safety ranged from meeting anonymous partners to meeting someone posing as a partner online with the intention of looking to beat up a gay man to threats in the community. When talking about his physical safety, Jason said this fear isn’t something that has prevented him from continuing to look for new sexual partners, but it is something that he has thought about.

Yeah, it’s crossed my mind whether I would get beat up, whether someone would try to, say like the Boogie Nights thing where Mark Wahlberg gets beat up. Yeah, I think about it.

Leonard talked about his fears not only when meeting a new partner, but also the fear of being mistreated or physically harmed in his day-to-day life. His frustrations with the laws that are failing to ensure his physical safety were evident and he went on to discuss a specific event, which resulted in his own physical harm.

You always have that fear in the back of your mind that you are going to go to somebody’s apartment and everything is going to be fine and then the next thing you know you are going to get stabbed or you are going to get shot, get beat up, robbed, whatever and there are so many gay and
transgendered prostitutes just because when their bosses find out that they’re gay, they can’t fire them for being gay, but they’ll find a reason to fire them. You can fire anybody for any reason and most places of work, they don’t have to have a reason to fire you, it doesn’t matter, but like in Montana, being transgendered, I can be denied housing, employment, I could even, technically, be denied healthcare because of being transgendered. Isn’t that wrong? I have my prejudices, but I still have to treat everyone fairly, I have to treat everyone equally, and be kind and be nice to them, and yet when it comes to someone being gay or transgendered people don’t feel that rule applies. You don’t have to be nice to them, treat them like shit, they deserve it, they’re assholes, they think cause you’re gay you’re asking to get hit, you’re asking to get discriminated against and we’re not asking for the prejudice, we just want to be left alone and treated like a normal person.

As you can see from my teeth, being transgendered and gay, I’ve been put in the hospital once, been beat up five times, uh, spit on so many times I couldn’t count it. Down in Southern Idaho, the guy that beat me up and put me in the hospital, the police refused to file a report on him because it was his word against mine and he said I started it. I was sitting in the city park on a Sunday reading a book and he said I started it. I was sitting in the city park on a Sunday reading a book and he didn’t like the fact that I was wearing a dress and he started beating on me, but in a small town like this he knew everybody, I was new in town, so they wouldn’t even file a report. I lost six teeth over it.

Steve recalls growing up being the “skinny, nerdy” kid who was picked on, especially in high school. While he was not out in high school, nor is he out today, he remembers being pushed and shoved and called names. He assumes this might have been because of the way he acted combined with his size.

Um, growing up, I was always the skinny geeky kid that would always get picked on, so there are some fears like that cause I have been called queer and fag and get shoved into the lockers and stuff, but I didn’t associate that all to me being gay, because I was a big nerd for may other reasons as well, but I definitely felt some fear because of that.

While the above men stated that fear for their physical safety influenced their decision to remain closeted, David felt completely different. When we were talking about concerns over his safety, he mentioned that rather than fearing for his physical
safety, he has found it refreshing at times to “put someone in their place” who has made homophobic comments directed at him. David, who is completely closeted about his sexuality in Montana, did live as an openly gay man when he lived in larger cities on the east coast. Recounting one occasion after a night of dancing, he tells rather than fearing for his safety, he is more the type of man that other people should be afraid of.

I’ve always been a man to defend my own, I’ve never had a problem with that, um, I’m one, like I have been known to like, I like to frequent the gay clubs in the city of course, obviously, um, not here, we don’t have any here, but in the city, that’s my niche, that’s where I feel at home, um, not exclusively, but uh the majority yeah, but uh, I’m one of those guys that likes to go outside you know, after the club closes, and wait for that one person to just snap off and say faggot one time, and then I just feel really good when I just beat the shit out of him, I feel really good about myself, not myself, but I feel relieved, there’s one more guy who just ate his words, you know, cause we’re minding our own business, we just had a good time, you know, you’re out here harassing us because you’re mad about something for some reason, but, yeah, I’m kind of that type of guy.

Men admitted that the fear of physical harm was more psychological, rather than an imminent fear. These feelings have been influenced by the culture of popular media through portrayals of rural gay life and violence (i.e. Deliverance or Brokeback Mountain), through stories that men have heard indirectly, or incidents that men have witnessed directed at others. While many of the more extreme portrayals of violence that men cited had occurred in movies, their effect has been powerful enough to influence “real-life” rural culture and narratives of those living within it.
Social Labels/ Social Identities

Behind changing relationships, social labels or societal perceptions of gay men was the second most commonly cited reason for remaining closeted. Men reported a fear of being identified solely by their sexual activities and the social difficulties they associated with being publicly gay as reasons for remaining closeted. Kevin summarized this fear that was shared by many of the men,

Um, I just, I don’t want to be perceived as only a gay male. Its like if you like to do something then all of a sudden it becomes you, but that is probably the biggest thing.

Men were afraid of losing their multifaceted identities and instead always being viewed as a gay man, or for example as a gay teacher, a gay doctor, or a gay soccer coach. Other men internally struggle with the process of coming to recognize their own sexual identity. Nick, a man in mid-life has long struggled with his identity, as he states,

I struggle with that (gay) label too, no matter what I do with a guy, I, I never classify myself as gay, I don’t why I just can’t bring myself to do it. Um, so, I struggle with a lot of those things on a regular basis, it’s always, my mind is always, it’s never peaceful, my mind is always working, its hardly ever relaxed and as a result, um, I put a lot of tension and stress in my life.

Carl talked both about a constant, but low fear for his safety – something that is always in the back of his head that he doesn’t pay much attention to and the fear that people will no longer look at him as a whole individual, instead looking at him through his sexual identity. In conversations that we have since had, he has talked about his frustrations with people just hearing what they want to hear and then creating the rest of the story or identity, rather than taking the time to hear the whole story or see the whole person.
You know it’s always kind of in the background. It’s like Nazi Germany if you are a Jew; you know any group of human beings anyplace on the planet could go berserk at any given time if given the right stimuli, as far as I’m concerned. People hear a little bit of information about somebody and they frame that person and it’s normally not entirely fair. There are a lot more dimensions going on than that. For someone like myself to come out would be like throwing raw meat to a bunch of hounds. They might just sniff it and walk off with it or they could go berserk.

Buck is a man in the second half of his life who did not come to accept his identity as a gay man until he was well into adulthood. As we talked, he mentioned the difficulty in always seeing yourself outside of the norm of society and the constant comparisons and drive to fit in with society.

I have pride in who I am, but uh, I never would have guessed that and then I can see how difficult being gay, I wouldn’t wish being gay on anyone. I think it’s uh, a very hard thing because you have to evaluate yourself compared to the community norms, churches, everything else. I was in the Army, I did all of that stuff an uh, who would guess I would be the gay guy, but here I am.

He went on to talk about the difficulty in trying to come out while working in a profession that involves interacting with children at times. Buck specifically talked about the impact of those persons in Montana who are still resorting to fear tactics in their missions to criminalize and demonize same-sex sexual activity.

If you are working with kids, because of the misperceptions of gays were that they are all out there attacking all these children, having sex, grabbing them from the baby carriage <laughs>, you know, that’s how bad these guys are, they are still telling these lies, they are desperate. I am sure many people think that same thing that haven’t spoken publicly because of these men. You know, sex is a very important part of life and it is a very important part, the joy and the fulfillment and the closeness and the intimacy. It’s the greatest physical pleasure that you can have and why we put so many restrictions and so much pressure, social pressure, on performance and all of that kind of stuff as well as the using the people and that kind of thing. If it’s mutual, I don’t see anything wring with that, so that’s where I am now.
Fear of being treated differently or looked at differently influenced the decision of men to not come out. Remembering an incident at a previous place of work where he was outed by a coworker, Anthony talked about how the images of that day specifically and the time following have to this day influenced his decision not to be out. He has since gotten a new job and has become even more careful to as he stated, “not even hint he might be gay” at work.

Um, its just really, people treat you different, they have this image of how they think all gay people are. I mean even at work, like me and this one guy were pretty good friends and you know, he came to find out that I was gay and he just kind of, you know pushed back a little, you know I really didn’t talk at him anymore, joke around a lot after that or anything like that and it kind of sucked and its like um, like he had this weird perspective of me, but I’m still the same person even though we were chillin out and stuff like that for a couple of weeks and then he found out and just kind of like pushed back and I was like that’s kind of lame, but it happens a lot, but yeah, I left that job and I think because of you know certain situations like that is why I don’t want to come out to other people. You know, I don’t even like, if I’m just hanging out with a group of friends, you know, um, I just try and stay silent about it. I feel like I’m trying to come out and tell people that you’re actually gay is probably one of the hardest things to ever do.

Bruce’s decision to not be out has been influenced by how he has seen gay men treated and what he has heard people say about other gay men.

I mean I guess how people feel about gay or bisexuality. I would say just because it’s not looked upon in, and I’m in a professional position where you know, in the community a lot of people know me, so there are those standards too plus a lot of people know either my family… so that yeah, those are reasons why.
Conclusion

While each man had his own unique reason for remaining closeted, there are larger themes that connected each of these reasons. At the most broad level, they can ultimately be connected through the sense of how each man interpreted his environment, his schema. Rural ideas of what defines masculinity and sexuality and gender were interpreted by each of the men in the study and ultimately each of the men in this study perceived their same-sex sexuality to be in contrast to these social expectations. Again, while each man interpreted his environment uniquely, the commonality is the interpretation of an unsafe environment to be out in.

Many of the men in this study struggled with the idea they would be treated differently if they came out. Most of the men acknowledged that they thought several of their relationships would remain the same and that some might even improve due to a higher level of honesty if they came out, yet they were not ready to risk losing the relationships that meant the most to them. Almost every man that I talked to dreamed of a day when they could be out, when they can live as one person, rather than two. For many, this dream was associated with a move to an urban environment. This association between the ability to be out and the urban environment further supports what Kath Weston (1995) refers to as the “get thee to the big city” narrative, in which the imagined urban space is associated with the place not only to come out, but to participate in larger queer communities. Urban communities were equated with less expectations about what it means to be gay or lesbian, while rural areas were equated with having a more rigid or well-defined narrative of how a male should act or who he should be. The urban-rural
sexual binary that still exists can lead to the feeling of being an outsider when one’s sexual identity does not reside within the rural projection of traditional ideas of sexuality. These feelings reinforce the importance and influence of cultural meanings of sexuality.

This feeling of living a double life was something that linked most of the men in this study. This feeling was closely associated with feelings of isolation, depression, and loneliness and for many men has led to negative coping mechanisms that will be discussed in the next chapter. Not one man in this study, said that he derived satisfaction from remaining closeted, yet for many the desire to live near family, a place offering steady employment, familiarity, or their childhood home was more powerful than their need to come out.

In the next chapters, the influence of the rural social environment on closeted men and sexual risk behaviors specifically related to HIV will be discussed further. As mentioned above, there is something in this environment that keeps men here despite the hardships they have identified. Men’s resiliency will be looked at further in terms of surviving in the rural environment.
Chapter Five: Findings
MSM in the Rural Environment: Hardships and Resilience

I honestly just want to go up to everybody and say, hey, what would you think any differently of me if I were to tell you I was a gay man and why would you think any differently of me, cause you’ve known me fifteen years, but you didn’t know I was gay and you counted me as your best friend and you counted on me, trusted me, everything, you know. I want to do that to everybody before I leave, but I really won’t. I just, I want to do that, you know. That would bring some validation to me, like, I’m not the bad person, if you can’t accept it that’s going to make you the bad person, cause you know I’ve been here the whole time. You knew me the whole time, apparently not well enough, obviously, but um, it doesn’t change anything at all. That would validate to me friends from phony friends, family from fake family, you know, it’s you know if they’re not open to accepting me. I would love to do that. It would be interesting, cause I’ve done a whole lot trying to prove that I am a man to society, you know, to myself and society, that they gay man is not incapable of anything. The gay man is the guy living next door, you might not even know he is gay, but he is the guy living next door, so really can’t we just all live together? Can’t we just be neighbors and friends <laughs>? That’s how I feel about it, it’s crazy. Its 2010, there’s no reason for a closed-minded; you know, really, there’s no room for it in society today. Those people are outcasts in my mind, those people that don’t accept homosexuals (David).

From everyday statements such as, “that’s so gay” to outright homophobic slurs, loss of acceptance, stigma, and homophobia remain real concerns in the rural environment. Homophobia continues to reduce sexuality and identity to mere sex acts further delegitimizing sexuality as a multidimensional, holistic, and emotional construct. It is through these rural homophobic stereotypes that the portrayal of gay men as overly sexualized beings engaging in endless one-night stands, rather than the committed relationships that many of the men in this study desired has endured. Rural areas have long been associated with more conservative, traditional values and a slower paced lifestyle. These values through their relation to sexuality have further been embedded through the perpetuation of the rural-urban divide as discussed in the previous chapter.
This divide has continued to portray urban areas as the desirable promise land associated with freedom, while painting rural areas as the undesirable and restrictive gay ghettos.

The larger rural cultural narratives that dictate what it means to be out and how to act upon your identity often influence our own understanding of sexuality. The importance of acceptance and traditional encouragement to be a “good person” remain real influencers on the decision to be out in a rural heteronormative environment where doing so can be viewed as challenging the dominant cultural belief system. Further complicating the decision to be out in rural areas is feeling more of a connection to society’s perceptions of the rugged straight male while trying to avoid the traditional gay male stereotype that many gay men do not view themselves as fitting into. This dilemma further exemplifies the idea that gender and sexuality are not intrinsically linked to one another.

While many areas within rural environments are slowly changing, change takes time and “old beliefs die hard.” As one man in this study pointed out, the new or younger generations are becoming more open to change. However, they are still influenced by the conservative households in which they were raised and few are in positions of political power that enable them to change the conservative system. While there is still the desire by many to make their way to the larger more accepting cities, for some the benefits of living in a rural area outweigh the negative emotional and physical consequences of having to remain closeted. For men that have chosen not to be out, the rural environment, inclusive of geographic isolation, social isolation, and stigma, remains a significant influence on emotional and physical well-being.
Despite the harsh environment, hints of resiliency can be seen by men staying in the rural areas. This chapter will present men’s views on the rural environment, both the benefits and the hardships while looking at the underlying commonalities that contribute to men’s over resilient nature allowing them to, at least for the moment, continue to reside in Montana. While each of the men in this study was an individual, they all shared a common resilience, a strength that enabled the continued residence in the rural environment. For several of the men that strength is derived from the hope that someday soon their rural culture will change, enabling them come out and continue to live in the place that many call home.

**Stigma / Homophobia**

The impact of stigma on the mental health of sexual minorities has been extensively studied and documented (see chapter two). The obstacles faced by rural Americans are vastly different than their urban counterparts. Increased fear of stigma or homophobia creates additional health disparities that further threaten the emotional and physical well-being of sexual minorities in rural areas. Living in an environment, where it is not often possible to remain anonymous in your town, the threat of stigma directed at you or your family remains a powerful motivator for these men to remain closeted. Within the current study the negative impacts of homophobia were evident as men discussed alcohol and drug use, suicide attempts, and depression. Stigma was a reason commonly cited for remaining closeted. Many men reported seeing or hearing negative
acts or attitudes directed towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. Men associated homophobia with decreased safety for LGB individuals. Every man in this study reported some level of homophobia, whether through first-hand experiences or through the experiences of others within the community.

Stories of homophobic acts of violence, verbal abuse, and larger societal stigmas were powerful influences on men’s decisions to not be out. The small nature of many of the towns in which these men resided in made it nearly impossible to be out. As one man stated, “my neighbors know what I’m doing, before I know what I’m doing.” Men often attributed sustained stigmas to the larger rural social environment and an overall lack of understanding. With the traditional heteronormative rural environment, some rural residents have not been exposed to a wide range of racial, ethnic, or sexual differences and thus acts of homophobia or stigma can be perpetuated through ignorance, rather than the desire to inflict a sense of fear.

David talked about the isolated nature of his town and described it almost like a bottleneck effect where few people come in and few people go out. This effect further leads to a lack of diversity and can potentially lead to a level of ignorance when making sense of the experiences of others. In other words, it becomes very easy to live a sheltered life within the rural environment. Exposure to differences often occurs through various forms of media, rather than physical face-to-face exposure. This form of exposure can further perpetuate stereotypes by focusing on fictional urban experiences, rather than allowing for individual and environmental differences.

While many of the men in this study had not experienced physical violence first hand, the threat of violence loomed in the back of their mind. Overall, many of the men
viewed the rural environment as an inhospitable environment for sexual minorities. They saw many rural residents, especially older residents as “set in their ways” and not as open as urban residents to change. Collin summed up the feelings of many men the best when he said,

I hope the day can come when everybody can be who they are without being judged because that’s what the whole thing is about. If people weren’t being judged about being gay, the world would be a lot better place.

As Leonard demonstrated, there was a lot of confusion over why people can not just let their fellow human beings live their lives in a way that makes them happy when that life is not hurting anyone else.

I have just never been able to figure out the reason for the discrimination and prejudice that people feel towards gays. It’s, maybe, technically a sin according to the Bible and according to a lot of people it’s wrong and yet it’s a victimless sin. We’re not hurting anyone; we’re not trying to change anyone else to our beliefs. We’re just saying accept me for who I am. If you want to hate me, get to know me first and then hate me for the right reasons, but don’t hate me just because I am different than you are. Its part of life, it happens, its who we are, accept it, get over it and move on to something more important, like how are you going to feed your family or where are you going to get the money for your next six-pack of beer. To me, those are just as important to someone as the fact that I’m gay. We’re not hurting anybody and yet we’re getting hurt and just having to hide is, we’re constantly on guard. You’ve gotta make sure you don’t slip and say something to somebody who might reveal the fact that you like men. You are constantly watching what you say, you can’t, it’s hard to do, it’s hard to maintain. I am going to live as a woman and I am going to come out as gay as soon as the world allows it.

Leonard’s comment reinforces the ultimate desire for acceptance, but at the very least a sense of live and let live. In other words, there is a desire at minimum to be free to live your life in a way that harms no one and makes you happy without having to fear for your own well-being because of someone else’s intolerance or ignorance.
Men reported feelings of non-acceptance directed at gay men in their communities and in Montana in general. While Nolan and Frank had not been victims of physical violence, when I asked him about homophobia in Montana Nolan talked about the frequency in which you can hear such statements or see such attitudes and Ian talked about how ingrained some of the terminology has become. In some instances it has become so commonplace that it becomes part of the everyday culture to the point where he felt sometimes people don’t even realize what they are saying.

Oh yes, absolutely. Mostly just comments, people’s attitudes uh, I haven’t seen like violence or anything, but I’m sure it’s out there (Nolan).

Uh, just like, how comfortable people are calling other people faggots and stuff. I mean, kids are doing that in like first grade now (Frank).

Gene talked about the influence of people’s attitudes on his decision to not be out. While he knew that he had nothing to hide from anyone, it was people’s fear and their negative responses that just made it easier to stay in the closet.

Um, well just with these things, I believe people that, I’m under no impression that I am a, hiding anything from God, but I feel like its uh, the people around here that have more negative, I mean the people here on earth and that go to church and those kinds of things are the real fearful.

The comments of Gene above and the men below highlight the structures of societal level power that create a system of places for people within their specific culture or environment. These systems perpetuate themselves through unequal balances of power driven by unsupported discourses of fear and homophobia. Wayne, Toby and Melvin talked about the influence of friend’s homophobic attitudes on how they felt about themselves and their ability to fit in with society. Their feelings further support the importance of social needs and more specifically acceptance in rural culture. While there
was a desire to be out it was overpowered by the desire to fit in and maintain their social support network.

I would say that uh yes, it does in a certain respect because you don’t want to have other people make fun of you or talk shit about you or continue to stir the pot. There are certain people you feel comfortable talking to about different things and others, you know you have your inner circle if friends, your circle of acquaintances, and uh, circle of partners and stuff, so I guess I would say that it does to a certain extent. Even some of my friends and ironically uh, some of the people that I know are gay or bisexual have even participated in the ridicule and teasing and offering slurs and stuff to people who are openly cocky about their preferences towards the male sex as well. I have definitely seen it here and there Society, some of the attitudes can be seen as starting to change a little bit, but you see it a little bit more in the media I guess (Wayne).

Right, it’s um, I know I hear a lot of things about everybody being a more open society and that people can’t be prejudiced and all of that, but they really are. They might not say it out loud or when people are around that they know are either gay or bi. The things that they say, you know darn well not to say anything to them because they’ll react to you that way or else they’ll start talking about you behind your back. It’s very uncomfortable (Toby).

Um, it’s really hard because I do kind of live in small town and there’s a lot of judgmental people out there and that’s pretty much why I don’t come out to people cause the friends that I have, that’s when they will totally like shut you out of their life and they don’t want anything to do with you or it’s just like, I mean like some men that might not be their opinion, but it might be the opinion of the group of people they are hanging out that makes them not want to be with me because they’ll be singled out as well, so it’s really hard to be a gay young male. There’s so many, not like bad people, but like really judgmental people out there and its hard to really even like get a job even though they’re not like supposed to judge you at a workplace, they do, and even going to a restaurant or something like that people just kind of like pick up on it and give you dirty looks or treat you differently, so its hard (Melvin).

Men talked about hearing negative comments directed towards gay men in various aspects of their lives ranging from a night out with friends as was Nick’s experience to the opinions of family members as was Buck’s experience to general attitudes and comments in the community as were Bryan and Ian’s experiences.
Yes, I definitely see it (negative attitudes/stigma) a lot and it has absolutely affected me, it’s so ingrained and so institutionalized that it you know just sitting at a poker game and somebody will say something like, “you’re such a fag” or you know things like that, it’s so taken for granted and just so common that the prejudice it’s at such a common level right now that um, it makes it very difficult to imagine being able to come out and be accepted by people that have those types of views (Nick).

My son-in-law is too, my nephew (name removed) here is not and kind of homophobic and derogatory and that, and (name removed) or (name removed) are a little that same way, you know jokes and knock downs, and you know that kind of thing. I see in my family that it (sexuality) does make a difference for some people and I think it’s not that they’re not good people, but they don’t understand. I think that’s basically the thing that the information isn’t out there, that they could understand that they don’t have the control over it, that they have the natural feelings that everyone has, they are just a little different and I don’t think they understand how difficult it is to be gay, because gays have to evaluate themselves against the whole society every single day (Buck).

Totally, especially in Republican central as in central Montana. I have friends that talk about fucking gays and so on and that, it’s just not right. There are a lot of people who are not in favor of gay guys and you have to watch what you say (Bryan).

There are the obvious um, jokes, you know the off-color jokes that people make that you really want to tell them to not make those jokes, but how do you defend your position. You know it becomes a little bit awkward that way (Ian).

During a few of the interviews, the conversations would start back up again as men were getting ready to leave. At this point, the recorder had been shut off long ago, but one of the conversations that really stood out surrounded the idea of acceptance. Despite reaching a point inclusive of having come to accept themselves, the power of society and a homophobic climate has the ability to begin to make men question their place in society and as Hereck’s research (see prior chapters) has pointed out can ultimately lead to feelings of internalized stigma.
Zeb acknowledged that while he knew most of the stuff he heard was just talk, it was still a powerful motivator to avoid certain situations and people, “There is a lot of homophobia in this area, so I just try to avoid getting into situations where it is a topic of conversation. Most of it is just talk rather than physical.” Zeb’s comments reinforce the work of Goffman and schema theorists that argue that we have the ability to navigate our social world and interactions. This ability helps to maintain our identity or in some cases helps us to maintain the secretiveness of those parts of our identity that we are attempting to conceal.

Jason first began to notice the stigma surrounding gay men while growing up. Making frequent trips to San Francisco in the mid 1980’s the level of fear and discrimination is something that impacts him to this day.

I was raised Catholic, um, you know growing up and seeing how everybody viewed gays, um, another big thing was I went, I used to go to San Francisco a lot for (medical reason). This was when the AIDS epidemic was breaking out and I was just a little kid, but you’d go down there and seen so many effects and saw hoe society looked at gays at the time and I didn’t want to be looked at like that.

As discussed in the next chapter, AIDS has increased the amount of sexuality research and funding occurring in the social and physical sciences more than ever could have been imagined thirty years ago. However, on the other hand, AIDS has fueled a level of stigma, discrimination, and fear against gay men that we are still battling today.

Some of the men in this study were able to recount to me stories of violence directed at friends, one of the participants told me about a time when his boyfriend was standing next to him outside of a gay club in a larger city and someone walked by and punched him, breaking his nose. For other men, their fear of personal harm originated from hate crimes they had heard through the news, such as Matthew Shepard, while still
for others, fears originated from stories in popular culture such as, *Brokeback Mountain*.

Men acknowledged that violence was not contained to rural areas, but for some they felt it was more likely to go unpunished in rural areas. For Melvin, thoughts of his personal safety often arise when he is looking for sexual partners online.

> Um, you know I have tried to meet people online before and you hear stories all the time about stuff. People meeting people who say they are somebody and they’re really not that somebody and all these gay hate crimes that go all around the world and you see all the stuff on the news and you never know, maybe this guy is just telling you, yeah, he wants to meet you and it’s a group of guys that really just want to beat you up or something. So, you really never know in that type of situation.

Acts of stigma and homophobia remain powerful motivators for men to remain closeted. Without a safe social environment, many men feel rural areas encourage men to remain in the closet. As Kyle stated,

> I know people have their choices, that’s what I would wish for everybody in Montana, the opportunity to have the choice to be out, especially because it’s not easy to be out in Montana, but you know it’s not impossible.

Men are responding to their social environments, modifying their behaviors and identity, as dictated by their culture, to allow them to remain in these areas. As Kyle stated, we all have our own ability to make choices, but we need to feel safe in our environment to feel as if we have the power to make those choices. Remaining closeted in the rural environment is a way to modify outside perceptions of the self that allow men to feel safe residing within the larger rural culture. As Goffman (1959) stated, it is through interactions that identity is produced. Looking at this same idea through a queer theory lens, identities are fluid and can shift from interaction to interaction. By consciously managing a stigmatized identity and through the negotiation of interactions, men can further ensure that certain aspects of their identity do not become known.
Geographic Isolation

The men in this study viewed the rural environment with mixed feelings. Some saw the rural nature of the area a blessing; it was someplace that allowed them to hide, to be themselves miles from their closest neighbors. Zeb described the joys of being surrounded by miles of trees on all sides of his house while being able to do what you want to do while never having to close your blinds. Other men viewed the rural environment as a vast and lonely area filled with expansive skies and great distances between towns, a lack of support, and an area that supported traditional views of gender and sexuality. Still, it was not the physical environment that men had come to dislike, it was the rural social environment that forces men to travel great distances to nearby towns or Montana’s urban centers to meet other men. David discussed the feeling of living within imaginary walls while living in a rural Montana town. The distance between the nearest towns and the lack of influx regarding new ways of thinking led him to his view of the rural environment as a hard and lonely place to live.

Being gay more so, um, and I found it in rural places like this, like Montana, more difficult, people are way more closed-minded, they don’t um, way closed-minded, they don’t, it’s kind of like old-fogy people that still have it instilled in them that, that for example blacks are bad or gays are bad and that’s something that they were born and raised with, it’s been in their blood for generations, it’s not going to leave.

Geographic isolation was associated with higher rates of stigma and was seen as a barrier to coming out. Some men associated their lack of access to partners with feelings of having to hook up, being less cautious about asking their partners about HIV status or date of last HIV test, and being less likely to turn down sexual opportunities they felt they would turn down if they had more access to sexual partners on a more regular basis. Men
also reported a decreased sense of physical safety associated with coming out in a rural environment. Many of Montana’s towns are geographically isolated from one another. The mileage between towns can make it difficult to traverse the distance in attempts to decrease the sense of social isolation. The lack of public transportation between small towns combined with the poverty and lack of personal transportation that some of the men in this study discussed work together to increase feelings of isolation. The lack of transportation and other structural level barriers impacts men’s ability to access medical treatment, gather groceries, or go away for the weekend. This lack of mobility intensified feelings of isolation and feeling shut off from the larger community. Feelings of isolation were intensified among younger men and single men.

For men that had lived in larger cities at some point in their lives, there was unanimous agreement that the rural environment felt less accepting than urban environments. As Roger stated, “it’s a monstrous difference,” while Tony felt that “gay people are less accepted here.” Wayne commented on the vast difference in social support between rural and urban environments.

Seattle, Los Angeles, um more mainstream, more urban, more domestic urban population, uh more diverse culture, more um organized activities, groups, and social communities. People are more open to that kind of lifestyle, that relationship because there is a greater population of people.

Some of the men felt this ideology was slowly changing as they did acknowledge that ideas were beginning to change, however they felt this rural environment had a long way to go before a sense of inclusivity could be used to describe it. Sam, who had lived on the west coast for several years, stated there was a definite difference in social environments between Montana and the larger city. Daniel also commented on the
differences between urban and rural environments and the overall feeling of acceptance and camouflage he felt in the urban environment.

Yeah, I see a big difference. In bigger cities it’s a lot easier to just like come out and easier to find a relationship. Here, walking down the street holding hands, you can’t do that here in Montana (Sam).

In (name of city outside Montana removed) it feels more welcomed. They have entire districts and restaurants for that. I really liked that because I lived alone there and that was just being able to be out and no worries, so yeah definitely. The community there is a lot more welcoming. Here it doesn’t seem, I don’t know. I did live in Oklahoma for a time and that’s probably the biggest place I felt the most prejudice, cause you would hear it on the news about gays being beat up all the time and being jumped and killed and there’s laws in Oklahoma against it being a hate crime and everything like that, so definitely there it was a lot more scary than California of course. It’s just totally welcoming, big time. Definitely here, its kind of seems like everybody’s too afraid to be out. Like I even go to the <club name removed>, which is the only gay bar here in town and it doesn’t feel like it’s welcoming you, it just feels like another bar. It has not like comfort for people who maybe are closeted or anything, still it just looks like a regular bar, like there is nothing gay about it that makes it feel like this is a place for you guys. Definitely here, I mean, and of course <town name removed> is pretty small, but regardless there’s just not much that’s welcoming here, that I feel like, is welcoming for gay people. I hear people are very liberal around here though and a lot of people accept it and are okay with it, but I don’t really see that much. I see a lot more people making fun of it and stuff like that, in my experiences here (Daniel).

For others, it was the ability to blend in that made larger urban environments more exciting. As a few of the men talked about, when you go against what is considered normal in a small town a lot of people notice and they notice very quickly. People have their ideals of what men should do and who they should be. These ideals have been supported by the desire for acceptance in rural areas. As Jake describes, the cowboy persona is used to describe the ideal rugged, straight, rural man. In the city, for the most part everyone minds their own business if you mind your own business.
It definitely different, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle its common it’s no big deal. These smaller areas, people are, I want to say uptight. I mean, it’s a different lifestyle for them. Various places overseas as well, you know male on male sexual contact is not a big thing. At least here in Western Montana that I’ve been able to experience, Northern Idaho, again it’s that men are men; a lot of people have that issue. A lot of them are loggers or have worked in the logging industry so they’ve got that whole, from what I’ve seen, you know a lot of them have that image where they are men, they are big, they are strong, they just don’t do that (Aidan).

Oh, well yeah I feel that in Montana, definitely, so there’s kind of a big cowboy attitude out here and um, I’m originally from (name of state removed), so I’m kind of used to a little bit of the same kind of you know attitudes and people towards, uh, especially uh guys. I mean I think it’s a pretty accepted thing, as far as like you know girls who might be bisexual or gay, but for some reason it’s still, I think there’s still a large stigma towards um, men who would be, I would definitely make sure that you know, I wouldn’t be out about it here, maybe outcast here (Jake).

For several men there was a strong link between living in a rural environment and an increased fear for personal safety. Going through high school with a small graduating class, Pete felt that his physical safety would be in jeopardy if he had come out during high school. As he put it, “Oh yeah, yeah. I grew up in a very small town and I think had thirty-six people in my graduating class and um, so it was, I definitely did not perceive it as a safe environment to come out in.” David, who had lived in several areas throughout the country, had seen discrimination in larger cities, but not near as blatantly as in Montana.

You can get hurt these days being a homosexual, I mean being anything really; you know discrimination is discrimination whatever… Being in a rural area, that’s the hardest thing, I don’t know how any man being gay survives in a place like this unless you’re really comfortable and your family is very supportive, that would be the only possible way that I could imagine, cause I couldn’t live without my family, I would be real lonely. Yeah, just I don’t know it was just so weird to me, moving back to Montana. I lived in the city for five years and had no problems. A lot of times I didn’t even think about the fact that I was gay, I just pursued men and you know, I wasn’t, I didn’t feel out of place or unnatural or un-normal in the city, where as here, no it is not so much like that. Like I
said, I don’t know how anyone who is gay would survive or even make a relationship with someone here, even Missoula I tried… I mean really, if it doesn’t apply to you, why do you care so much, you know, really. Just turn your cheek, turn your eyes it if doesn’t apply. At the same time though, we shouldn’t have to have our be have eyes turned on, we are people you know, gay, straight, lesbian, transgender, I don’t know where people get off thinking they can classify people and judge, I don’t know. I don’t know, living somewhere like Montana has got to be one of the hardest places to be gay.

Despite the connection between the hardship and the rural environment, a few of the men noted they have seen improvements over the last few years and many of them had hopes that the future would continue to bring positive change and acceptance.

Despite feeling as if he still had to live a secret life in his hometown, Melvin was impressed with the increase in visibility of gay culture in Montana lately.

Um it, like you kind of have to live a secret life, you can’t really be who you are or who you feel you are. You can’t be who you really are, because you will be judged and even though that sounds kind of pathetic, it’s just like reality you know. You don’t want to be the outcast, you don’t want to be. You know there’s not a lot of gay people here, so it’s just hard to be completely in the open even though you aren’t going to be like flamboyantly gay or whatever, but it’s just hard. I go to Seattle a lot and it’s obviously a bigger town and Kalispell recently got gay pride and you know I’ve gone to two years of it and um, it’s pretty small and I went to pride in Seattle and it’s a huge event there. It’s like amazing to see how many people come out to that and there’s this huge parade and it’s amazing how big the event is.

For Pete and Collin, there was acknowledgment of the changing culture of the rural landscape. Both acknowledged that there is a long way to go, but stated that the changes are being made in the right direction. Collin was able to contrast his experience living in a rural area and the restrictions he has encountered because of his choice to live in this environment with his experiences out of the State and with changes he has seen within Montana.
Well, yeah. It’s not as bad as it was. It seems like its even gotten quite a bit better over say the past ten years, but I don’t know if that’s because attitudes are changing or if friends that I’m around are getting more mature as we get older (Pete).

I live in a rural area. I live in a very extreme rural area where minds are very narrow, they have, you know people that I’m around haven’t exposed themselves to the world and I don’t want to say ignorant, because where I live in Montana its not like its down South where people can’t read and write where ignorance exists, but minds are a lot narrower in a rural area, um, there not as open to new and so I have a tendency to gravitate into <larger Montana town>. I spend a lot of time there just because the closer I get to <town removed> um, the lighter the weight is on my shoulders and I’m able to um, spread my wings and be more who I am. I think it’s something about um; the more strangers you’re around the more you find yourself being the person you really are… I’m actually I’m really feeling pretty good about how Montana, Montana is coming along you know, their a rural state, but I think Montana is moving along uh, you know, alright with it. I mean, I can look at <town removed> or other towns and I mean bigger towns and stuff and little by little college kids or young people are coming back home and there are, everybody knows, in this rural area of, some younger people that are gay and they come back with their friends or whatever and little by little it is whispered about, but they know its out there, its just not elaborate on and um, you get to a bigger town like <town removed> and that and uh, the workforce and everything, everybody knows um, some gay people or have some interaction with them and its alright. I mean um, I’m seeing that where as I have been some places where there is still a lot of prejudice you know. Nothing like New York or California of course, I mean we are still in Montana, we are still a rural state, but we’re further ahead than North Dakota. I know that, I know that for damn sure because <removed> and when the movie Brokeback Mountain came out uh, the city of <removed> would not let the movie theater show that movie and I don’t know if you seen that movie, but it was a sad, but it was a good movie and it was, so like North Dakota, they are really, really behind on things, so I think Montana’s doing alright, moving on you know with it, so I’m glad at that. I mean I just feel like, you know let people live, let people be themselves and not have to be ashamed or feel guilty about being who they are. I mean love is love, that’s, I don’t know, it’s just hard to explain.

David, a young man himself is calling on the younger generations to pave the way for change in rural environments. He feels their open-mindedness is what is necessary to challenge traditional points of view and sustain change. In other words, it the younger
generations that have the power to create social changes, to institute long-term cultural differences.

It’s the new generations that are coming up today that are more open-minded and understanding of the idea of homosexuality, its you know, its, that’s why its hard living in a small town, its just people have their opinions that have been instilled in them forever and their not changing you know. Society is not going to change their views, its going to be the generations coming up accepting society as a movement as a change, you know that’s going to do the thing.

Social Isolation

From the first interview to the end of the forty-fifth interview, the perceptions of living a double life, isolation, and dishonesty were evident. Without my ever bringing up the words, men would describe their situation as living a double life, having two identities, or living a lie. It was during these descriptions that the most emotional aspects of the interview occurred. Stories of pushing people away, living in a constant state of fear, turning to drugs and alcohol, or wanting more than anything else to “live free” emerged in great length and detail.

Men often reported feelings of having to live a double life, an identity they publically projected and a hidden identity that most wanted the opportunity to express openly. This constant state of hyper-vigilance was associated with feelings of isolation and physical and emotional exhaustion.

I am definitely more aware of how I behave and I don’t want to give anything away and make it seem like I might be bisexual to other people, um, it’s constantly on my mind, it weighs, it makes it very difficult if not impossible to be in the moment, and to be genuine, and to be emotionally available. You’re always or at least I am always, I’m always strategizing
in my mind does this person know, am I doing or saying anything where they might know… I also feel like I am lying to most people all the time, um, which makes it very difficult to form any kind of meaningful relationship. I don’t have many close friends, I don’t have many friends at all, um, I put up a lot of walls, a lot of defensive walls to protect myself and to prevent anyone from getting too close so that they would find out. So, I am always keeping people at arm’s length away and it, it definitely affects my daily life, it makes it stressful and it makes it exhausting a lot of times and uh, it makes it very difficult to appreciate simple things, um, it makes it very difficult to go into social situations without being fearful… So, I am always keeping people at arm’s length away and it, it definitely affects my daily life, it makes it stressful and it makes it exhausting a lot of times and uh, it makes it very difficult to appreciate simple things, um, it makes it very difficult to go into social situations without being fearful (Nick).

David often struggled knowing that he had the final say on coming out, but that he didn’t feel it was safe to come out. His sense of agency was limited by fear for his own well-being at the larger cultural or environment level. Feelings of independence and resilience become challenged by the continual reminder of one’s lack of power through not being able to achieve a sense of coming out.

I hate the fact that I have to hide who I am. I don’t have to, it’s a personal choice of course, however, the repercussions I would be dealing with if I did would be um, something that I am just not ready to deal with or feel the need to deal with it anyway. Being a closeted man, I wish we could all be equal, I wish it wasn’t such that people had to live under the radar because of who they are.

Melvin has long struggled with feelings that he is not being true to himself. He has accepted himself, but is afraid to come out because of society’s perceptions. This internal struggle has led to feelings of stress and never being able to fully relax.

It (remaining closeted) really affects how I even live my life. Like I don’t even feel like sometimes I can even be true to myself, like when I just want to say screw everybody else, I don’t care what they think, I am what I am, but then again I can’t really do that because it’s kind of scary, what if they all just turn on me. They don’t even want nothing to do with you, so it’s really affected my life, trying to be somebody that I’m not and I know that I’m gay and I know that I’m attracted to men and I’ve known
since I was a little kid. I mean it’s not like somebody made this way, I was never sexually confused, I was just always attracted to men, I mean, there’s no other way, so you know it’s hard to lie and just try and pretend everyday and to not be afraid. In the past, I kind of thought there was something wrong with me, but I mean there’s so many other gay people out there, that there’s, but in this little town they are so very closeted here, they don’t want anybody to know, most of them that I’ve met and I haven’t met that many, so, it’s really affected my life and I think it affects other people’s lives too… Oh yeah. I would say, that it’s added on stress and you know you’re always worrying about it, you’re always trying to not say the wrong thing, not look at that guy’s butt you know <laughs>, look at the girl when you’re around your group of friends or whatever.

Leonard too, would like to come out, but as he stated, while he can put up with the verbal and even physical harassment, he cannot put up with being jobless and homeless.

Leonard’s comments further reinforce arguments that the power of the state is reinforced through sets of perceived norms and the consequences for going against those perceived norms. He stated that he is counting down his days to retirement, which he equates with freedom - freedom from depression and the freedom to finally come out.

I’m hiding myself, I can’t let the people around here know I’m gay, I’m not ashamed of it, it’s something that I have to do in order to survive and it’s all about survival. I can put up with the beatings, I can put up with the slurs, with the hollering, and the comments that everybody makes, but I can’t put up with being out of a job and out of a place to live. I have to be able to survive. It’s lousy. I am so depressed all the time. I have to fight everyday to get up, get dressed, do my job. I’m not an idiot, I’m not a pervert, I am who I am, you can’t change the fact, you have to accept the fact, and welcome who you are and once you do, once you welcome who you are, it gets better. I just honestly think that if I had the opportunity living right here to come out as being gay, I would do it. If I could do it and know that I would keep my job, but if they fired me from my job, where would I go? I would have no place to go, no job, no income. I can’t do it, so I have to keep it in the closet, for now I have to keep very quiet about it and I spend a lot of time on the internet chatting with other people.

These feelings associated with remaining closeted were often described as walking around with a constant weight on your shoulders. When I asked Steve how remaining closeted has influenced his life, he replied,
It is hard and confusing. You feel like you have to live a double life. Growing up in a town this side it is scary, because some people kind of know because you fool around with them, but then you see them at the grocery store or whatever and it is nerve wracking, like you are a spy or something, but not that cool. It would definitely be better to be out and not always have that hanging over your head. It feels like a constant weight that I carry around.

Sam also referred to the sense of feeling like you are living a double life and having to lie to those around you.

Um, it’s kind of hard, it’s kind of like leading like a double life, it almost seems, like um, lying to people all the time.

Feelings of depression were often identified and associated with ideations of suicide and suicide attempts, sometimes on more than one occasion. Toby described the shame that he feels accompanies his decision to not be true to his self

It’s a weight that sits there cause you can’t do anything cause you have to hide it from everybody and everything. A lot of us don’t even want to admit it to ourselves. For me, mostly it’s shame, shame that I am lying to myself.

Men reported feeling isolated from friends and family and unable to reach out to support services such as counselors or support groups. Anthony felt that having to hide a part of his identity has led to the larger problems he has had reaching out to people as well as shaping his personality in general.

I feel like um, probably because I have been in the closet about it, with everything about it for the majority of my life, it probably has hindered my personality in a way as far as you know like being open with people and being expressive with people, I really have a hard time expressing myself like to people in large groups, um because I don’t know, I just always felt like I was either being shunned or didn’t feel like I belonged to any you know specific um, group or anything like that. I really felt like I probably or I know that it hindered my ability to interact with other people. It has made things really hard to be myself around other people and so I believe that is a reason too.
As Tom described his experience, you can never be yourself, you are always in fear that something you say or do will out you among your group of peers,

It (remaining closeted) does because I mean like sometimes I’ll admit I have like really gay moment where like my voice will shoot up or I’m just like totally hypnotized by some like totally random guy walking or whatever and then like when people are looking at you or you’re talking to someone there like there like what are you looking at and you’re just shocked and just don’t know how to respond and not only that you feel slightly embarrassed and you don’t want them to know and you get really scared cause you think, oh, they could find out or you start to become angry with yourself thing why am I doing this and I shouldn’t have looked and you always have this pressure on you to be who you’re not.

Several men reported the inability to relax around friends and family members for fear of letting saying something that may reveal their sexual identity. Anxiety was a common term used to describe how men felt having to hide a part of their identity. Jason talked about the desire to come out, to be able to live as his true self, but the fear of what would happen was too great to overcome for him.

Yeah, yeah, I get the anxiety cause I’m really kind of pushing it out there to where I’m going to get caught. That’s what I feel like, like I’m going to get caught, but, um, maybe self-consciously, it would be a relief. Yeah, it is a lot of anxiety and I worry about it a lot to where I keep referring back to hey, make sure you don’t say nothing. I ventured out there to where people can now and I think maybe some of my coworkers could know, cause I went out there a little bit, you know instead of being so much in the closet, I ventured out a little bit, went to the bars, you know was out in public a little bit, nothing too, no public displays of affection or anything like that, but been with certain guys who might be a little open about it. So, that gives me anxiety cause I feel weird like people might now, yeah it does bother me, it bothers me a lot.

I asked Jason what he thought it would be like if he were able to merge his worlds together and he replied,

I would love that, but I don’t really see it all working the best way. Like if I came out, I think some doors would shut, some friends, maybe something with the women who don’t approve of it and then I would be cut off from it. Eventually, that is what I want, I wish I could just tell
everybody, hey, this is my life, this is what I do, but yeah, the repercussions from coming out like that is what I fear.

Bruce talked about the feeling of disconnect from his life that arises sometimes as a result of remaining closeted. While he is able to go about his daily life the majority of the time, there are times when his decision to not be out impacts him, as he described, like something you just can’t get off your chest.

I think I’m discreet and closeted about that situation, but I try not to even think about it, but the whole thing is that there is always something on my chest because I completely hide it, you know I’m not open about it, I don’t know if it’s like an anxiety thing. It’s not all the time though.

Collin also talked about the feeling of disconnect from the larger community.

While he felt that he was a functioning member of his community, he also felt that there was something that was always holding him back, always keeping him from enjoying his community fully. The need for acceptance or belonging to community often remains unfulfilled because of the disconnect occurring from the separation or compartmentalization of identities and the associated increased state of hyper vigilance.

Because I’m gay and not out, um I have probably sacrificed a lot of things just to keep, um, from others knowing that I am gay and this goes all the way back to um, you know uh, junior high probably. You, you have your guard up a lot of times because you are continually having to guard your sexuality because you want to fit in with um, you know your peers as a straight guy and it continues onto your working years on the job um, you a lot of times find yourself alone on certain things… Um, well you know it’s somewhat isolated even though I consider myself um; you know a functioning part of the community and um, involved. There’s always that small part of me that I know is um, keeps me from, it keeps me from enjoying completely um, things because there is that constant reminder that sexuality enters into so many conversations, so many activities and that’s the part that is hard, but I’ve learned to deal with it, like others have too. Some things I am quiet about and some things I am alright about.

When I asked Collin about his feelings of isolation, he went on to talk about the powerful influence that peers can have on people and the desire to fit in with one’s peers.
It has to do with the people that you are around at the time or at the situation that you’re in at the time. That, um, well it has a lot to do with the people, because people are the biggest problem with being in the closet. I mean people have so much influence on a person’s life whether its good feelings or bad feelings, it has such a big effect on people and when you’re gay, you know it seems like there are more things against you then are in your favor, because society has you know, set those standards. It’s not fair, but it’s the way it is.

Men often expressed the desire to be open and to feel comfortable around friends and family, yet they did not want to risk losing relationships. Ian stated that despite his desire to be close to his family friends, he always feels that there is a distance between them that he attributes to his dishonesty about himself.

Um, it makes you a liar. It makes you have to lie all the time to people that otherwise are important to you and so you live this really off, really a lie your entire life and uh, be that good or bad that is the position you end up living in. So, you maybe just become a really proficient liar.

Pete expressed his desire to be able to be open with his family, to not always have to worry about saying or doing something that may out him.

Um, well a big part of it is having to remember who you are with and who they know and what the official story with that person is. I don’t really talk about it with my parents, I don’t think it would go very well, they would be disapproving in a moral sense. Um, we just never talk about it. It would be nice if it could just be out in the open and just be done with it. It certainly is another constant item of anxiety, um, you know.

For Paul, remaining closeted has impacted the relationships with his family and friends in his life to the point where he makes an effort to avoid certain people.

It’s been really hard. I’ve had to uh, use a lot of deterrence, um, a lot of. I’ve had to hide who I am. I’ve had to, um, not go around certain people. I’ve had to uh, almost pretend, it, I definitely, um, feel like I’m not being true to myself and it’s been pretty hard, its heavy stuff.
When I asked Paul to expand on what he meant by “heavy stuff,” he said that it feels like it drags him down to which I asked if it ever feels like a physical weight he carries around. He replied,

Oh man, Amee, that is what I am, that’s what is happening right now, more than ever in my life, right now is because I’ve always, since I could remember, since I was very young I’ve always had these feelings towards men and I’ve always, I told you about what happened in fifth grade when I tried to wash all of that out of me, um, and then, I, uh, last year, um, around Christmas time or Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving/Christmas, the holidays, um, I just noticed a lot of my friend’s families, brothers and sisters, aunt, uncles, cousins, were making all these huge plans with uh, their girlfriends and their boyfriends or husbands and wives and they were openly kicking and talking about it and it uh, brought all of that to a head inside of me, I thought why can’t you guys share in my joy if I were to tell you that I met a guy that makes me very happy and we’re going to go and travel here for Christmas or we’re going to eat Thanksgiving at his mothers, you know this is all assumptions, what I’m thinking in my head is that they’re not going to like it, they’re going to tell me it’s wrong, and a lot of them might even abandon me, you know, so I turn that into anger and I thought screw you people, you know I love you to death, but I have a life too, you know I can’t be cousin (name removed), uncle (name removed), brother (name removed), the one that I hear all about your relationships and the things that are taking place in your life and then I’m totally forgotten about you know, so it went like that from like mid-November to the end of December, uh that feeling of anger the feeling of being misunderstood, uh tired of living in fear, tired of not being uh, true to myself and true to them, so New Years Eve of 2009, I was out with a lot of friends and family and of course the clock struck twelve at night, it was 2010 and all of the females found a male to kiss and you know I kissed a few females because it was the New Year, but what I really wanted to be doing was kissing a guy and not just any guy, the guy I was in love with, but I wasn’t with anybody at that time, but I thought you know, I want my guy to be here, you know, so I thought okay, I’ve had resolutions in the past and I was usually pretty good about carrying them out, um, this year, 2010, is going to be the year that (name removed) remains true to himself and that he makes an effort to understand who he is and to let other people understand who he is, so from January until today, I’ve always, I’ve been uh, I’ve already accepted myself, that happened around April of this year, since April, it has been to where I am starting to kind of let my family know more about who I am, you know, and going to (event) this past weekend was another stepping stone to give me confidence that it does have to happen and um, so, my projected date, like I know you can never put a date on these things, but trust me I’ve been living with this for like
fifteen years, I want it to be honest with everybody and myself by the end of 2010 and December is rapidly approaching, that’s the way I look at it, yeah.

The inability to form long-term meaningful relationships that are inclusive of being able to be open with the other person or persons leads to a sense of social isolation for many of these men. They are able to discuss certain parts of their lives through these relationships, but a large part of them remains hidden. For Oliver and Craig, the decision to not be out has restricted their ability to form long-term relationships.

Um yeah I could be found out anytime and I can’t do it and it bothers me. I mean I can do it, but I have to be really quiet about it and sometimes I have to go long distances to go with somebody. I want to be in love, I want to have a man in my life and you know being closeted I can’t do it (Oliver)

Um, mostly for me it is, I am in kind of contradictory situation where I want a boyfriend, but I am terrified of anyone knowing I am gay, so I can’t have one, so that doesn’t help either (Craig).

For men that had lived in larger cities and had been out, the return to Montana and subsequently the return to the “closet,” was a painful reminder of power of society and something that these men struggled with on a daily basis. When I asked David to expand more on the comments he had made about differences between Montana and where he had lived previously as well as how his life had been different when he had been able to be out, he replied

Wow, that’s a feeling that I miss a lot (being able to be out), a feeling of almost like light as a feather feeling, I feel like I can just do it, anything is my way. I feel a lot more depressed living somewhere like here, a lot more emotional too, cause I’m getting older now and all my buddies are married with children and I’m still the single <name removed> you know, so it’s hard, but uh, um. I think the biggest perk to being able to be open is that I feel true at my heart, I feel like a whole person, I feel like, I feel like, I don’t have the feeling that anybody is judging me, I feel like confident, you know I’m a man, I’m doing you know, I’m doing what I’m doing. I feel very confident and very light as a feather. You know, I come
here and I have all this weight on my shoulders and all this um, confliction in my mind whether its right for me to live closeted or not for the good of the gay community, you know I struggle with that a lot too. Being the city, I can live gay and I can openly tell anybody I’m gay and here I can’t, you know. I can actively stand up and actively participate in the gay movement whereas here living here; there is really no gay movement. I think at one time, some businesses put a, um, like stickers on their front windows saying we support gay business as a promotion to try and bring in business, I guess though the gay community, um, but since then I think all those stickers have all faded off the doors, you know, but um, yeah, it’s depressing living somewhere like here, because nobody wants to be two people. Nobody want to, we all want to be accepted by everybody and then accepted for who we are. Currently, I have two lives, I have <name removed> which everybody know and then I have <name removed> that is gay and does his thing and um, one day, one day I will be able to live that way, I know it. I am going to do it, it’s not the fact that I can, it’s that I’m going to. I think I have to for personal, I think in the end every gay man has to come to terms with it, because if not it’s going to eat you alive.

Many men talked about realizing that at some point in their lives they will have to come out if these feelings are ever to disappear. However the struggle remains, that the environment needs to portray an area safe to come out in.

While the majority of men in this study reported a sense of social isolation stemming from their decision to not be out, a small minority stated they felt no negative repercussions stemming from their decision. These men identified as having sex with other men for fun, ease, not being out because other people’s perceptions of gay men, or just that it is no one else’s business, Kevin stated, sex with men was just sex,

Um, I don’t think it has any negative effects for sure. I suppose the way you go after other men is different. It is more of a naughty just for sex thing when you go after other guys where as with other women you can have a relationship with. Most of my times with guys have been about blowjobs and cuming and that’s it.

Aidan isn’t out because as he said it’s just easier not to be because of other people’s perceptions of what a gay man should be,
I mean mostly I just keep it quiet because I know you know it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, so you know if its not a real big burden on me, I just like to keep it somewhat on the quiet side mostly because it makes people uncomfortable especially if they see somebody you know my size like me a bog man you know a football player that likes to have everything. You know they get kind of weirded out by that.

Gary felt that his sexuality and sexual activity was no one’s business but his own and his sexual partner at the time. He equated his decision to not be out to safety and ease.

In modern society this is just pretty much standard operating procedure, uh, you know you can’t just go out and tell everybody everything about yourself or wear a sign that says these are the tags that apply to me, it’s just common sense you know. It’s like I wouldn’t walk down the street with a thousand dollars worth of hundred dollar bills hanging out of my pocket even in a good neighborhood. Its just information of any kind has different levels of priority and trust. I just class it with everything else that’s nobody’s business.

When I first asked Adam how remaining closeted influences him, he responded with it doesn’t, yet as we talked more his feelings of worry over people’s reactions to him began to come out and he did finally open up and stated that sometimes he felt a weight associated with having to keep his identity a secret. Overall though, he said that now that he has talked about it with someone he feels the same again as far as not really being phased by this.

It (remaining closeted) doesn’t really phase me any. I just tell her I am going to hang out with so and so or I’m going to go do this, I have to go to work and stuff like that…. To be honest with you - I love sex…A fifteen year old secret it’s getting to the point where I need to say something because, um, but then at the same time, I don’t want to lose my friends and I know I got a lot of homophobic friends and then like if I tell my mom she’d want me to go and see not a clinic doctor, but a psychiatric doctor.

Perceptions and expectations are words that were used when describing the hardship of not fitting into the rural heteronormative ideal. Within rural areas, being known as a good person, having a sense of connection with your community, and the
overall general sense of a rural close-knit community shape personal narratives about how acceptance, recognition, and visibility of sexual identity occurs in rural space (Kazyak 2010). It is through the better understanding of how and why some men are choosing to remain closeted, that we are able to better understand the ways in which these men continue to reside with the rural environment and ultimately how we can continue to challenge the traditional heteronormative cultural environment. The men in this study have constructed sexual identities that look very different than the cultural narratives constructed by out gay men living in rural areas. These individual narrative constructions remind us of the uniqueness of each individual in their ability to interpret and interact with their environment.

The idea of the ability to individually construct our own sexual identity is something emphasized by queer theorists. While our culture has come to refer to men who have sex with men as gay, many men have not embraced this identity. Some men have chosen not to embrace a predefined identity, while others have chosen to refer to themselves as bisexual, queer, or someone who “just happens to love men.” The ability to take on certain cultural characteristics or actions, while disavowing others further demonstrates our ability to respond to our environment, to create our own schemas. While an individual possesses the ability to modify their own identity or actions, this ability is limited by the culture in which we live as well as it’s accompanying culturally desired social behaviors and attributes. Within the current study, men have individually constructed their identities as influenced by the rural cultural environment in which they live.
Coping

The pressure of desiring acceptance, yet only achieving full acceptance by hiding a core part of who you are has led to feelings of depression, isolation, and hopelessness. Alcohol use, drug use, and suicide were cited as methods of coping with depressive feelings. Fighting back tears, Buck recounted thinking about suicide at two points in his life,

About three years ago I was becoming suicidal and was thinking of suicide and going to get guns. I was thinking about getting in a car and just speeding up and tried pushing my wife away, I tried pushing my kids away so that if I died they would be better off without me and I would be dead.

I have all kinds of friends and I am very good with my friends and I associate with them and I was cutting them all off, you want to do this? No. You want to do this? No. You want to do this? No. Do you want to? No. I don’t care. Even my kids, when we would talk on the phone, <name of child removed> and I talk almost everyday and I wouldn’t talk to her on the phone, yeah, alright, just cut them off, my son in law the same way and they’re going what the hell and they would call me, like are you okay and yeah I’m fine yeah, so I don’t care, well have a good day. You know, so I would cut them, all of the friends, associates at work, the same kind of thing I did and I planned getting the gun and uh, days before I told my wife I went and got the gun and that was the first time I actually got it in my hand and was going to go out in the field behind the house and just blow my head off.

Craig talked about the depression that accompanies having to lie about a part of who you are, especially those persons closest to you. The feelings that accompany the realization that many of your friendships and relationships have been built upon the illusion of a straight sexuality and the fear of losing those relationships should you outwardly express yourself as you feel inside is a sobering experience for many men.

I’ve had a lot of issues with coming out, thinking I will be rejected by my family and disowned and it will just be horrible. I keep it to myself, I lie
about it, and actually I’ve always had depression issues, but this kind of makes it worse. I ended up attempting suicide my freshman year of high school and ended up in counseling and because of that I have begun to come to terms with a bunch of things.

Collin talked to me about his long battle with alcohol that at one point almost cost him his life. While he attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings today, he still struggles with the desire to drink.

I um, I used alcohol a lot in my past to um, calm me or to relax me to make me feel better about myself or like socially, um if I was drinking um, I’ve probably came across to other people farmer bachelor guy that likes to drink a lot even though I’m a quiet person I still have that tendency, but it all came to an abrupt end two years and nine months ago, it was October 2008, um, I was taken into the emergency room and I nearly died and from there I was in intensive care while I was in the hospital there for ten days, then when I was released I checked myself into rehab directly from the hospital and spent thirty days there and so um, I’ve been alcohol-free for two years and nine months. I go to AA three times a week no matter where I travel to I go to my AA meetings. Alcoholics Anonymous has really helped me and putting myself into rehab has really helped me learn who I was and it explained a lot of things and a lot of it had to do with my sexuality and so I do a lot of things different know, but I still don’t talk about my sexuality and I feel like I don’t have to talk about it to anybody, but I know its alright with me. But, yes alcohol. Alcohol crept up on me and that was a big part of it, hiding a secret.

Toby relied on alcohol as a coping mechanism for several years, but has been able to rely on alcohol less now that he has been put on anti-depressants.

I used to do a lot of the drinking, but now I’m on medication for some of the other things that I have going on which includes the depression medication, so that does help.

David talked about his reliance on meth as a coping mechanism and suicidal thoughts that he had at one point in his life. When I asked him to expand on why he had chosen to use meth, he talked about the internal confusion of wanting to fit in, but not feeling true to his self by denying his feelings.
I had gotten really involved with methamphetamines. It really sucked me in, I graduated high school and I was just miserable, you know, really was lost…, I had gone, I was suicidal at that point. I had really come, like I said, I was the only one in my family that went to church. I was a ritual at church, I went to church every Sunday and every Wednesday and I used to pray and pray and pray to God that he would make me the right person, make me who I am supposed to be. Make me straight, make me this, I would cry, I’d pray, I mean I would spend two hours at night praying to God just hoping that he would hear my prayer that night ad change me to change my thoughts, change my feelings, but it never happened and that’s where acceptance comes in because you would be crazy if you didn’t accept it at that point, you know.

The story of these men above as well as those that were not told again\(^4\), demonstrate that we continue to live in a heteronormative culture that has perpetuated beliefs and desired attributes that have led individuals to a point where it becomes necessary to cope with powerful drugs or alcoholism. It is a reminder of the power of culture and the reinforcing beliefs held in place by the projection of fear and intolerance for diversity.

Over the years, Daniel has tried drugs, alcohol, and tobacco as means of coping with the feelings he has stemming from his decision to not be out, but as he stated, nothing has really worked. In the last couple of years, he has come to the realization the only way to move beyond the feelings of depression and isolation is to accept himself and live as an openly gay man.

Um, I think it’s one of the reasons I smoke cigarettes, I know that. Um, it’s really hard to cope with it, it’s just kind of like you have to suppress it and put it aside and forget about it and for the time period just believe you’re straight for the sake of it, like it’s easier, in my mind if I just pretend everything is okay, because it really gets to the point where I have panic attacks sometimes over it all. Yeah, um I’ve tried other things in the past like drugs, coke, alcohol, nothing, none of it did anything for me so, it really didn’t, I don’t know to me I don’t think there is any coping with it, I

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\(^4\) Some stories discussing alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, and suicide attempts were not re-told in this paper because of identifying characteristics and in a few cases because of either the graphic or extremely personal nature of the stories, I did not feel the gain by including them justified the potential harm to the men.
think until I can stop lying to my parents and be myself, I don’t think I’ll ever be okay with it, you know hiding.

The methods of coping with having to remain closeted as discussed in this section is further evidence that the majority of men that were interviewed in this study want to be out. While there were some men who I talked to who were simply having sex with other men because they found it more convenient than having sex with women or a associated a sense of thrill or excitement with having sex with men, for the vast majority of the men in this study, this was about far more than the “just sex” assumption that has arisen in the past. There is an internal struggle that exists between the desire to live openly on the outside as you see yourself on the inside and the desire to maintain one’s place within the community and family as defined by largely heteronormative cultural beliefs. It is both the influence of the culture in which the men in this study live and how men perceive themselves within this culture that have influenced the decision to remain closeted as a strategy for maintaining that place within the culture they know.

In a letter written to Jay Leno in response to jokes made on his show after the release of Brokeback Mountain, Jeff Whitty (in Patterson 2008) critiques the popular portrayal of gay men while describing his own view of the culture which perpetuates the need for a closet to still exist in society,

> When you think of gay people, it’s funny. They’re funny folks. They wear leather. They like Judy Garland. They like disco music. They’re sort of like Stepin Fetchit as channeled by Richard Simmons. Gay people, to you, are great material. Mr. Leno, let me share with you my view of gay people… When I think of gay people, I think of suicide. I think of a countless list of people who took their own lives because the world was so toxically hostile to them. Because of the deathly climate of the closet, we will never be able to count them. You think gay people are great material. I think of a silent holocaust that continues to this day…
The homophobic humor frequently heard in rural environments that is often seen as so harmless is in fact a powerful tool in “rendering invisible all of the problems of homophobia and all of the lives that are damaged and destroyed by it” while continuing to reinforce the cultural environment which perpetuates the tolerance of homophobic acts (Patterson 2008).

**Resilience**

The men in this study, while all unique, demonstrate a collective sense of resiliency. The participants have been able to continue their lives in an oppressively heteronormative environment. Some of the men have overcome suicide attempts, drug use, alcohol use, and severe depression stemming from the isolation that can occur within rural environments. The men in this study have managed to queer a small part of the rural environment.

While some of the men are just “putting in their time” before they will move on to more urban cities, others have every intention of “living and dying” in Montana. Despite the hardships and feelings of isolation that men have experienced the beauty of Montana, families, familiarity, and employment opportunities have influenced men’s decisions to continue to reside in Montana. Men have found ways to blend in with their larger sociocultural environments, although many dream of a day when they will feel safe coming out.
Beyond the forty-five men included in this study, I was contacted by a man who had recently come out. While he knew he did not qualify for the study, he still wanted to talk about his coming out process. He was married and closeted for several years, disowned by his parents while coming out, and has since gone on to major LGBT-related events in Montana. With his permission, I share his outlook on the coming out process in Montana.

It’s a lot of learning about how to go about it, you know if you walk into a men’s locker room with a towel around your waist and you’re handing out Pride flyers, it might put a few people off, but you know if you come, if you like people where they like to be met or in a way they like to be met, the coming out thing is so freeing, because I haven’t had one bad response other than my family, you know, simply because it’s the theology hang up. What’s happened with me since coming out is that I’ve really gotten away from the fear of just being myself around anybody to the point where I hopped on sort of casually to the Pride planning committee here this last year for Pride this year and because of different things that happened I ended up being put in charge, um and was kind of the energetic force behind doing Pride this year... I also have this energy like I have hidden for too long and it’s so not worth it and I want to give people locally the understanding that there is a community that is here for them whether they know how they want to be out or not... there’s actually a group of people that cares for one another and tries to get together and so I just, I’ve seen people in different areas of life say, you know really blow off the gay community for being proud of it... I have friends who aren’t out because they say things like I don’t want the stigma that comes with being openly gay and I really challenge those people in my life to say well, how is that ever going to ever change if you hide, yeah you have a right, complete ownership about who knows what about you, it’s your personal life, but if people around you, you know have intuition about who you are, but you put out an air of fear and embarrassment over the community then you know how is that community ever going to get over the stigmas it has, so that’s been my energy to see people feel comfortable in their skin the way I did that first night that I did when I figured out who I was.. You know, uh, I just hope that people understand that being gay is not the end of the world, as a matter of fact, I think it is the beginning of a new world and a new world that you will have a lot of joy and a lot of intimacy and caring and you will be at peace with yourself. I don’t know how that happened so quickly, it just absolutely astounded me that I could find peace.
Conclusion

What unites the men in this research is that they have engaged in varying strategies to improve their lives while facing unsympathetic community beliefs. These strategies have enabled them to take advantage of the positive aspects of life allowing men to stay in the rural environment. Despite reports of isolation, loneliness, and homophobia men in this study are staying in Montana, if not permanently, at least temporarily. Men in this study have shown they possess the capacity to cope with the disadvantages and discrimination they have faced. They have been able to overcome the challenges of the largely heteronormative culture that facilitates an environment where sexual minorities are still seen through heterosexual assumptions and beliefs.

Much of the prior literature has created an image of gay men fleeing the rural environment for larger urban cities. While some of the men in this study have every intention of returning to urban environments, many are choosing to stay in Montana. For the majority of men, it is not the physical environment that has induced feelings of having to remain closeted, it is the unwelcoming and conservative social culture. Descriptions of feelings of loneliness residing in rural conservative communities were contrasted with the desire to stay in a location that allows for familiarity, recreational opportunities, and the ability to find open land. The depictions of Montana by many of the men in this study were often filled with physical descriptions of a beautiful, rugged, and pristine land juxtaposed with emotional feelings of isolation, loneliness, and exile arising from one’s sexual identity. One set of feelings urges men to stay, while the other pushes men towards their sense of freedom.
Beyond loneliness and isolation, the men in this study often lived in fear of stigma, homophobia, and discrimination. Men enacted various strategies for avoiding homophobia including acting straight in public, not flaunting their sexuality, or over-emphasizing their masculinity. As one participant stated, a large part of “surviving in this area is knowing when and how to be silent.” Foucault’s work with agency and discourse suggests that silence is about choosing to speak rather than being forbidden to speak.

Silence itself – the things one declines to say … is less the absolute limit of discourse … than an element that functions alongside the things said … There is not one but many silences, but they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault, 1978: 27).

By using silence, men are able to exert a sense of control over the relationships with their larger communities. Men that had come out to certain people were very selective in deciding who to be out to. Others had stated they anonymously made contributions to various groups working to change the social environments that encourage homophobia. The men in this study demonstrated a great deal of resilience. Despite living in an environment that presents many difficulties and challenges, men are able to exert a degree of strength.
Chapter Six: Findings
HIV Risk: Personal and Environmental Factors

Oh yeah, it’s a risk anywhere. You just have to be sensible, which a lot guys aren’t (Steve).

It is a slight concern, but because I am in Montana rather than Los Angeles or New York, I probably am complacent about it. I am safe most of the time, but when I’m not, I’m like whatever it’s Montana. It’s more of a big city problem (Carl).

The above two quotes demonstrate the contrasting views of the men in this study. When asked about HIV, men either felt it was not a threat or a very low threat in Montana or that HIV was a threat no matter where you lived. This chapter will look at men’s perceptions of HIV in a rural environment, sexual risk behaviors, and the individual and environmental influences on the ability to practice safe(r) sex.

According to a surveillance report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2010 the majority (53%) of all new HIV infections are attributed to male-to-male sexual contact (CDC, July 2010). Epidemiological data indicate that not only are the rates of HIV infection high and disparate among MSM, but the trends in infection are alarming. From 2004 to 2007, there was an estimated 26% annual increase in HIV/AIDS diagnoses among MSM (CDC, 2009b).

Despite over two decades of prevention efforts aimed at men who have sex with men, the rates of HIV infection continue to rise. A 2008 report released by the CDC showed that MSM HIV infection rates among young MSM increased at a rate of approximately 12% each year between 2001 and 2006 (CDC, 2008c). This report further
noted that men who have sex with men were the only risk group who experienced an increase in infection rates during this time.

HIV prevention in rural areas requires an approach inclusive of the challenges unique to the rural social environment. Several prior studies have identified that rural residents commonly deny that HIV exists in the community (Dobalian et al. 2003, Petterson 2003; Foster 2006). Geographic location has significant effects on the physical and emotional health outcomes for LGBT individuals (IOM 2011). Traditional values contribute negative attitudes towards same sex behaviors and HIV. Along with conservative social values, MSM have been shown to be more likely to conceal sexual behaviors because of the associated increased levels of stigma often found in rural areas (Lichtenstein 2000; Preston et al. 2002).

LGBT individuals living in rural areas may have less access to providers who are comfortable with or knowledgeable about the treatment of LGBT patients and may be less likely to be out to their providers. This need to remain hidden in rural areas combined with a lack of rural venues for men to meet encourages a higher level of travel to meet potential partners than those men living in urban areas (Dreisbach 2009). For older men who grew up in the country, memories of anti-gay attitudes, negative remarks, and taunting remain very real. While LGBT populations are increasing in rural areas, there remains much room for improvement in the overall rural social culture.

Just as stigma influences the decision to be out, it also influences HIV risk factors including behaviors and testing. With the small nature of many rural towns, actions such as buying condoms, getting tested for HIV, or accessing HIV-related care become actions that can potentially out someone. This potential further encourages men to drive long
distances to meet partners, get tested, or access care. While the majority of new HIV cases are concentrated in urban areas, almost every man in this study stated that he sought out of state partners traveling in Montana or had traveled outside of Montana and had sex while doing so. When trying to prevent new cases of HIV, there is no longer an urban-rural boundary; state boundaries are easily crossed and are being crossed faster and more frequently than ever before.

**Individual Behaviors Influencing HIV Risk Factors**

**Not out to Doctor**

Reasons for not being open with medical care providers included fear of being outed by the providers (doctor, nurse, reception staff), knowing staff in the office, a lack of trust with the provider, refusal of care, or feelings of it being none of the provider’s business. As discussed in the previous two chapters, news travels fast in small towns. As one of the men stated, it feels like his neighbors know his business before he does. In some of the smaller towns in Montana, there are not dedicated HIV testing clinics and to get tested involves either a drive out of town or a visit to the local doctor where there is a good chance of running into someone you know. It can also be embarrassing or hard to talk to a doctor, who you see outside of the clinic or who knows friends or family members, about risky sexual behaviors that you are partaking in. Ensuring that medical
records remain confidential remains a real fear in many small towns, especially in relation to what is still a highly stigmatized disease.

With rates of HIV in rural areas are lower than those commonly found in urban areas, confusion about HIV transmission remains, as do false stigmas regarding male-to-male sexual contact that can make discussing sexual behaviors or testing difficult. Additionally, there are a limited number of openly gay doctors living in rural areas which can make discussions regarding sexual behaviors less comfortable and doctors may not know the specifics of safe sex as applied to gay men. Men may fear coming out to their doctors in rural areas because of an increased fear they may be homophobic. Men who are not out to their doctors can be at higher risk for certain medical conditions that their doctor may not know to screen them for.

Men who are out to their doctor, often reported feeling comfortable being tested for HIV by their doctor as well. Nick’s comments demonstrate the feelings of several men. These men felt comfortable asking general questions about sex with their doctor, but did not feel comfortable discussing anything that might lead their doctor to question whether they were gay or bisexual. As mentioned above, many men in smaller towns are recognized by their doctors outside of the clinic setting. Buck discussed playing golf with his doctor on a regular basis, while other men talked about running into their doctors or nurses frequently around town.

I’ve always lied (about sexual orientation to doctor)), you know, I’ve given blood or something like that I always lie. What’s funny is cause I’ll say anything openly to a doctor about heterosexuality, but I won’t even hint to anything, uh any kind of gay lifestyle at all (Nick).

Tom had an overall discomfort talking about his sexuality with males in general. As we talked, he stated he has always felt more comfortable talking to females. When I asked
him if he had any ideas about why he is more comfortable talking to females he thought it
might have something to do with his home life growing up and the constant machismo
push by his father and the tension that created in their relationship.

It weirds me out when like I go see my male doctors because it just does
whereas if it’s a female doctor it’s no big deal. Like when I meet someone
like today when I was walking here I was really hoping that you would be
a woman and I was like I hope it’s a girl, I hope it’s a girl, because it just
makes it easier to talk to you, whereas if it’s a guy I’m not as open and I
don’t really elaborate on stuff. I just say I do this or no I don’t do that.

Other men, such as Jason feared that despite medical confidentiality agreements in
doctor’s offices that an employee of the doctor who he would know from the community
might come across his records. He talked about living in a small town and the speed at
which gossip travels.

No, and that’s been one hard thing because of medical records and stuff. I
went down to <name of organization removed> and uh, you know, I
would rather be totally open on stuff like that, but I can’t and then I was
nervous about the nurses. My ex used to work there, you know and I just
don’t trust it, so yeah, I lie about it.

Men such as Collin, were comfortable talking to their doctors. Despite living in a
small town, Collin was confident in the privacy laws that protected his personal
information and stated, “I’m very comfortable with my doctor.” Men who were
comfortable talking with their doctor about their sexual behavior were often comfortable
getting tested for HIV by their doctor as well, because as one person stated, “you can
one-stop shop.” Men liked the convenience of being able to get their HIV tests at the
same time they were having their blood drawn for other tests.

For many men in this study, their first choice of places to visit when they did have
questions about their sexual health was the internet because of the anonymity associated
with it. Unfortunately, there remains a large amount of misinformation on the internet
and the majority of the men who reported using the internet relied on the first returns provided by a Google or Yahoo search, such as Wikipedia. Steve feels as if he does not gain much by seeking out HIV information on the internet anymore, but if he does come across a new study or information, he goes to the internet to find out more information.

    Usually online and you know I’ve read so much on that now that I don’t really seek out that stuff anymore because it is the same stuff you read over and over. If I’m reading the news and see a new study, I will read it, but I don’t go out seeking it. If I ever seek it out though, it’s online.

    Paul utilizes the internet to avoid having to come out to his doctor. He talked about visiting several internet sites to make an informed decision about the behavior or symptoms in question.

    I go online, I go to, um, the body.com or I’ll go to avert or CDC or WebMD, yeah. Um, I think because to talk about my risks, I’d have to, if I was to go see a person to get that type of information, I would basically have to tell them I was gay, you know, they’d know the type of sex I was engaging in and that’s not something I want people to know, you know even in a professional setting. Even though they’re bound by confidentiality and that HIPPA act and different things like that, even then um, I’m scared to tell them, you know, so yeah online definitely.

Frank talked about going to the internet because of its accessibility and ease. When looking for information, he often relies on the first websites listed on his Google search or Wikipedia.

    Um, well, generally, everything I look up through Google, I go to the Wikipedia answers or um, I’ll look it up through WebMD if I can’t find it there.

There were some men however, who sought out more reputable sites such as WebMD or those sites sponsored by local HIV testing and outreach organizations, hospitals, and county health departments. While Toby and Pete rely on general internet sites, they will also consult people through the internet or go to blogs to find answers to his questions.
The internet. I normally just do a search and then look at all the different options and then if there is something that I’m really worried about or really thinking about I’ll look at several different areas and just not like a WebMD, but also other areas including those that have the somebody to talk to about it, blogs and those kinds of things (Toby).

I would say the internet. Um, I would do my own research and um and then maybe ask in a chat room or forum if I was looking for someone’s personal experience, but um yeah, the internet would probably be where I went (Pete).

When I asked Jason about where he goes when he has questions about his sexual health, he told me about a scare he had with Chlamydia. Before going to the doctor, he tried to self diagnose himself on the internet. Despite not having the internet at his house, he still chose to go to a public place to access the internet because of the increased level of comfort and anonymity it provided over a face to face conversation with his physician.

The very first place I went to was the internet and got right up to the library checked to make sure nobody was looking, looking over my shoulder and was looking up Chlamydia and that was the first place.

Other men in the study reported a lack of home internet access as well. Mike, who had limited internet access, often chose not to seek answers to questions about his sexual health, rather than having to ask someone in person.

Overall, there remains a large amount of fear about coming out to one’s doctor. For many of the men, not being out is equated with not having a reliable person in which they can discuss their sexual questions or health. This has led to the use of the internet and with it the use of questionable sites. Particular care within the medical community needs to be given to ensure that providers are able to run an inclusive medical care practice, especially in towns where there are only one or two provider options. The continued promotion of sites that contain reliable sexual health and HIV information as
well as ones that offer gay friendly providers throughout Montana is a necessity in a rural state, such as Montana.

**Seeking Partners on the Internet**

Men reported favorable attitudes towards finding sexual partners through the internet because of the added sense of anonymity. Every man in the current study reported using the internet to look for sexual partners. Men reported looking for out of town or out of state partners as an added precaution against protecting their identity. Men did not want to risk answering an ad by someone they know from other parts of their lives in town or to have their ads answered in the same scenario. Some of the smallest towns that men were living in at the time of these interviews had populations of under 500 people. With a town that small, it makes it very hard to even try and find potential partners in your hometown, let alone someone that you do not run into on a regular basis. Even in some of the larger towns, especially for men that were currently married, it is possible to run into someone more than once when you are trying to avoid them. Beyond fears of seeing sexual partners again, it can be difficult to find a discrete place to meet when one’s home is not an option. Several men reported relying on their partner’s written HIV status that was posted on the hookup website. Men reported driving long distances to hook up with sexual partners and expressed a desire towards hook up sites outside of their hometown if at all possible.
Steve preferred to answer Craigslist postings from men visiting from out of town, so that he could go to their hotel room and not have to worry about ever running into them again. By traveling to nearby towns to meet out of town partners, the likelihood of being seen by someone who knows you is diminished.

Yeah, I like to answer personal ads from younger guys who are traveling for work so I can meet them at a hotel and I know they won’t be somebody in town.

Nick talked about his preference for finding partners from out of town or going to nearby towns, but despite this preference he said that cost often made traveling prohibitive. After a recent sexual encounter, he stated that he broke down emotionally realizing that he had just had sex in a bathroom because he didn’t have enough money for a hotel and did not want to be seen by anyone in his hometown.

You know the last place I was in was a bathroom, a men’s room. It was in a bathroom and when it was over, I was like really, this is what I am doing, I am having sex in a men’s room, like what the hell is wrong with me. What level of self-loathing does it take to reduce yourself to something like that? Um, but at the same time, it was the most convenient place, it was the cheapest place after driving for so long.

The internet has created an entirely new way of finding sexual partners. The older men in this study talked about the ease in finding partners, especially those from out of town, in comparison to pre-internet days when people relied more heavily on advertisements in written print, bookstores, and bathhouses. As Gary stated, “speed dating has never had it so good.”

You used to have to put personals in newspaper type magazine things and I remember the first time I saw a personals ad thing in Los Angeles, I could not believe the things people would say and yet it was still all anonymous, it’s just the communication now is a lot faster. I can get on here and see who’s horny in the last twenty four hours. There’s no ego or emotional involvement in talking to somebody because if you get turned down online, so what, you’re peer groups haven’t seen it, nobody know
except you and the person who said no, not interested and they’ve moved on and you’ve moved on and who cares, speed dating never had it so good.

As Gary stated, the internet has greatly increased the speed at which someone can find a potential sexual partner as well as broadening the geographic area in which someone can find a potential partner. During the course of the interviews, a man who resides in the South contacted me after seeing a posting on Craigslist. He was curious how my research was going and also wanted to thank me for the research. He stated almost immediately that he knew he was not eligible for the research. He thanked me because he felt the research was important for many reasons, but for the one applicable to this study, because of the relative ease at which he could find sexual partners in each of the towns he traveled through on business each time he came to Montana. His story reaffirms the ease in which sexual partners can be found and the geographic vastness of sexual networks that are taking place.

The conservative cultural climate of Montana has led to feelings among the men in this study that it is not safe to be out here. To satisfy sexual and social needs, men have turned to the internet to look for social support through virtual chat rooms and have turned to various online hookup sites to find sexual satisfaction. The internet has given men a tool in which to discretely find sexual partners while reducing the risk they may beouted when either looking for or meeting new partners. This tool has allowed men to remain in their rural environments near their families and sources of employment. However, the internet also sustains an avenue for anonymous high risk sex.
HIV Testing

A sense of hostility towards the HIV testing and counseling process was identified in some of the interviews. Men reported feelings of animosity towards being counseled about their sexual habits and “being preached to” by counselors that “had nothing in common with them.” These feelings support the need for both HIV testing staff and physicians to be as diverse as possible in a largely homogenous state like Montana. They also support Montana’s reputation for having a population of individualistic persons living here. There is a need to provide discrete testing options that allow men to get tested without fear of outing themselves or having to run into their nosey neighbor while going in or coming out of a testing location. This fear, in many cases, has forced men to travel outside of their hometowns to get tested.

The desire for a testing process which involved the ability to go in and get tested without the accompanying counseling was stated. Ian stated these feelings impacted the frequency in which he gets tested,

Um, somewhat regular (testing frequency). Um, I tend to do it when I’m not in town and actually the problem with getting tested, while its in theory anonymous you really kind of have to jump through a lot of hoops to get to it and that’s just odd and they want to do a sexual history, why do you want to know, well none of your damn business, so that has a tendency to want to make people, to make you less willing to get tested. I mean I went to the health department in Missoula awhile back and I thought it was really odd. There were just weird hoops that you had to jump through, like guys, this is supposed to be anonymous, don’t get, I’m an adult you don’t have to give me a lecture on you know behavior or be safe, trust me, I know this stuff. I rather resented it.
However, a few of them men stated they actually liked being able to have a conversation with someone for twenty minutes, although this included a change in the subject from sexual behaviors to more everyday conversation.

I think that (specific testing agency in Montana) is a great idea, the anonymity and the counseling you get when you go in. I think there was one other time in a different venue that was for an insurance policy, but I haven’t no. I’m a firm believer that people have to take responsibility, so maybe if I didn’t feel that way I would be a little uneasy about some of the ways that people go about getting tested and if nothing else it’s a good time to B.S. with someone and you can learn a couple of things too (Carl).

The differing desires of men represent both the desire for autonomy for some and social interaction for others. However, even those men that did not mind the counseling part of the testing process, stressed the desire to be treated as an equal, rather than participating in the traditional hierarchical testing process.

Testing frequency ranged from never to every couple of years to once every three months. Leonard, along with several other men gets tested once a year. Each of the men have different reasons for choosing this number. For Leonard, this is because he feels he is able to “pre-screen” his partners before having sex with them, yet he realizes that the majority of them have most likely had sex with other people and may not have been as “picky” as he is.

Usually once a year. I’m very, very particular about who I sleep with. For one thing, I don’t want a reputation as being easy and for another thing there is too much disease out there and I don’t want to be going from bed to bed. Like they say, you’re not only sleeping with him, you’re sleeping with everybody he’s slept with, so I’m very selective with who I get together with.

David and Melvin stated they get tested frequently because not everyone knows their HIV status and because of the window period.
Yes, um maybe once every three to four months. AIDS can stay dormant for up to three months, so you never know.

I still frequently get tested because like people have said, you can have HIV for ten years and not even test positive, but the army maintains every ninety days blood tests for HIV and all that and I have come out clean every time to this day I have…. It’s because, testing labs should be as frequent as freaking gas stations. If there were as many testing labs as casinos around this place, we might not have an issue with STDs, you know what I mean. That is one really scary thing and for a gay man that is probably the biggest fear on a gay man’s mind is that of HIV, you can get it from any sex, but it’s a lot easier to contract it being a man having sex with another man and we know that, scientifically proven. Yeah, that is definitely one thing that weighs on a gay man’s mind is HIV (David).

Despite David’s desire to be tested frequently he said that it can be hard sometimes especially anonymously in the smaller towns. He would like to see more testing locations. Walter echoed David’s concerns over the accessibility of anonymous testing in some of the smaller towns in Montana. Several of the men, like Paul who reside in smaller towns often waited to get tested when they were traveling to larger cities or towns within Montana, rather than risk being the source of town gossip or even worse potentially being outed while trying to do something positive for their physical safety. Men were wiling to spend the extra gas money driving to a nearby town or more frequently, put off testing until they had a trip planned to another town, rather than having to face not only the anxiety that often accompanies an HIV test, but also the anxiety of being seen or questions arising by someone in town. Men such as Walter, would like to get tested more regularly, but because they are waiting to get tested out of town are not tested as often as they would like. As Walter stated, “I would like to get tested about every six months. However have not been tested in a year.” While many people think of gossip as being somewhat innocent, in the case of many of these men, the
gossip could drastically alter their lives and in some cases could possibly lead to lost friendships, changing relationships, or divorce.

Craig also talked about the importance of getting tested anonymously, “It just seems like it is a better idea in a place like Montana,” he stated earlier in the interview that sometimes “it feels like everyone knows everyone.” Roger felt that because he practiced safe sex, was picky about his partners, and lived in Montana that he only needed to be tested every three years.

Men who were tested on a regular basis employed various strategies to remember to get checked including scheduling tests during routine medical examinations at their doctor’s offices. For Collin, who is out to his doctor, HIV testing was a simple as asking for an additional test during routine blood draws at his wellness appointments.

Um, I have it done, well I have regular doctor’s appointment <for another condition>, um so when I’m having blood tests done I always just have them do that one also. I just have them throw it in there with the rest of my blood tests. My doctor does know that I’m gay.

About every six months just on regular medical checkups. Just at the same time as my standard medical checkup (Zeb).

Haden and Oliver mentioned getting tested when they got their oil changed. Oliver remembers to get tested when he changes his furnace filter. Although he blushed a little as he told me, Randy mentioned his reminder to get tested was when a new shipment of videos arrived or when he drove into (name of town removed) to pick up more supplies at one of the adult bookstores.

Men who had previous “HIV scares” were more likely to report getting tested on a regular basis. Paul, who is part of a magnetic couple, (one partner who is HIV positive
and one partner who is HIV negative) talked about the influence of an HIV scare several years ago that still influences his regular testing.

Well, I’ll tell you this right now, okay, I’m part of a magnetic couple. Um, the guy that I’m dating, he is positive and um, I had an HIV scare in 2005.

Anthony gets tested every four months on average, unless he has been to several parties or is unsure of his partner’s status after having unprotected sex.

Um, probably um, after I’ve been to a couple of parties, I feel like I want to get tested after that. You know, you just always want to make sure, I always ask the person before, just to make sure, you know before we have you know, sex, but um it goes both ways, you know if they ask me, I’ll ask them too, it’s just kind of one of those two way things. I try to look, I’m a pretty good judge at reading people, so I try to look at a face, you know facial expressions, body language, that kind of thing. I’m not crazy worried about it, I can get tested later (Anthony).

A few of the men talked about being asked to show proof of their last HIV test. Gary, who gets tested at his doctor’s office has kept copies of all of the results of his HIV tests and requires that anyone he has sex with show him a copy of their test. If they are unable to provide a copy of their result, he is willing to pay for them to go get a test first. As he stated, this is because of a latex allergy and his choice not to use condoms. While spontaneity is reduced, he feels safer about his sexual health.

I can demonstrate that I have a history of clean health records going back almost thirty years. I have my complete records and if requested my partner says I’ll get a health check now if you will, I say pick a doctor you trust, I’ll pay for it and we both come up clean we can have some clean good fun. I’m latex intolerant, so I can’t wear anything to protect, you know when you are deciding to engage in sex today for any reason you have to think about those things cause you know when I was a kid, you know okay if you messed up they would give you a shot and in a week or ten days later you would be okay. These days, this shit kills you. Uh, yeah, like I said these days it’s like playing Russian roulette with five chambers loaded or using an automatic.
Despite educational efforts encouraging testing every three months, the decision of when to get tested varied greatly by the individual. Although testing frequency is ultimately an individual decision, larger influencing social factors such as accessibility, anonymity, comfort, and risk played into men’s decisions of when to get tested. To empower men in their ability to get tested cultural level influencers such as stigma and homophobia need to be addressed as well as structural influencers such as accessibility and anonymity. By changing the cultural environment and reducing stigma directed at HIV testing, communities would make it easier to get tested without the fear of being seen by someone who is known to the individual desiring testing.

When seeking out testing services, many men stated they preferred to visit testing sites that are targeted at the general public, rather than predominantly at gay men. Anonymous testing sites were favored by the majority of the men in this study for their affordability and ability to “get in and get out” with no exchange of identifying information.

Yeah, like the free clinics seem, you know, they ask the least amount of questions and you can just pay with cash, and you know, it’s usually an in and out procedure. They seem to be the most understanding and they don’t want to know that much about you and they seem to be the least invasive and the least permanent, you know in terms of keeping records and things like that, at least that’s my perception anyway.

Beyond testing in anonymous clinics, men were tested at their doctor’s offices, county health departments, military medical check-in appointments, some used home testing kits, and one participant was tested in jail. Although it was not required to be tested while incarcerated, Jason said it was a relief to feel you had some sense of control over something while you were “locked up.”
I was locked up for awhile and we did testing in there and you could if you want or if you didn’t, so I chose to and that’s where everything came up negative. (It) was good to know.

Since being released from jail, Jason has not been tested for HIV on a regular basis, it is as he stated, ‘‘No, it’s not regular, it’s as I can get it.’’ Jason does not have a car and feels that that a lack of transportation and little disposable income sometimes influence his decision to get tested.

For many men who were not getting tested at their doctor’s office, anonymity was their primary concern when going to get tested. However, cost played a role in where men decided to get tested as well.

I go to a place that’s like a sliding fee clinic here in town that does reproductive health and um, so they test a lot of people there and I think I’m just under my name there. I don’t specifically look for anonymous testing, but its good to know that it’s there (Pete).

In rural areas, where many residents believe that the risk of HIV is either extremely low or non-existent, testing sites must be easily accessible while guaranteeing a level of discreteness. Physicians may be less likely to recommend HIV testing for patients who they believe to be at low risk for HIV, especially in light of recent federal funding cuts in low incidence states. Continued prevention programs and testing campaigns aimed at a general population could enable more men to be tested without having to publicly disclose their sexual activity. Recent studies have shown that rural persons continue to be diagnosed with HIV at a later stage (Weiss et al. 2010). This later diagnosis is often equated with worse outcomes than persons diagnosed early as well as the increased likelihood of unknowingly transmitting HIV to partners. For men that are engaging in risky sexual behavior, such as anonymous sexual encounters or unprotected anal sex, an increased focus on rural HIV testing remains essential.
Lack of Communication Skills

Men reported varying levels of comfort when discussing their partner’s HIV status or date of last HIV test. These varying levels of comfort resulted in differences in the frequency in which these discussions occurred. Among men that did discuss their partner’s status or testing frequency, this conversation ranged from brief to in depth. Nick felt as if there was a pretty standard or routine procedure for finding out about your partner’s testing and HIV status.

Yeah, it’s (talking about HIV status and testing) pretty standard. Um, when you, when someone will send you an email and the progression pretty much goes something like this: you want a couple of pictures to see what they look like, mostly to make sure you don’t know them. You want the stats on them; you know their height and their weight and all those kinds of things. Um, and sexual history is right there at the top, where I’ll ask or I get asked all the time, um, are you clean, do you get tested regularly, uh do you play safe, meaning do you wear condoms, um, things like that, that’s pretty much like number three, you know it goes like, your location, what you look like, and what’s your status.

Alternatives to directly asking sexual partners involved relying on their online profile, their physical appearance, whether they looked like a good person, or waiting for their partner to bring it up first. In addition to feeling uncomfortable, men reported their partner’s status was none of their business. They were looking for discreet hookups and did not want to pry into their partner’s lives and potentially risk losing a potential partner. Men who did not feel comfortable talking to their partner’s about their HIV status or last testing date often acknowledged that they should be doing so. Despite the desire to do so, the perception of the independent Montanan won over. As one of the participants talked about his decision to remain in Montana he stated that while there were more hardships than benefits, the main benefit of remaining in Montana is the ability to “get lost.”
I asked him to expand upon this idea, he stated that with the large area of the state and the small number of people it is still possible to live several miles from your neighbors. This geographic separation allows him to remain isolated from his neighbors and from the larger community. Men reported not wanting to intrude too much into their partner’s personal information or space. To avoid in depth discussions, HIV status was often brought up briefly or a partner’s status as revealed online was used rather than a face-to-face discussion.

Adam and Toby mentioned that because they were looking for anonymous sexual experiences they did not want to ask too many questions about their partner’s status and make them uncomfortable.

If they felt comfortable I would (ask about last HIV test and HIV status), but if they didn’t want to talk about it, because it did say discrete, so I don’t want to get too involved in their personal life (Adam).

Um, not usually, we might in the very first email or something or contact talk about a little bit about it, but once you get the basics, no I’m clean, we pretty much leave it at that, nobody wants to make someone uncomfortable. I’m never been with anybody that I stay with for any length of time or anything usually it’s a one time thing or something like that and for those you’re pretty careful what you do to begin with, so its not one of those things I worry about all the time enough to talk to them about it. Part of that is the area that I’m in is such a small area that I’m not overly worried about that much of the STDs or HIV out here (Toby).

Carl found that some of the men he meets feel uncomfortable talking about HIV with him, so he does not bring up the topic much.

No. I find most guys don’t want to bring it up, don’t want to talk about it, they will reluctantly.

David finds it hard to talk to the men that he finds online. He feels that most of them are on there strictly for sex and do not want to have conversations before or after having sex. He struggles with this, especially as he said, coming from being out and having a partner
where he lived before to an area where he feels he is forced to use these websites to find partners currently.

Honestly, I don’t. I guess that’s um, should be, it should be easier to talk about that kind of stuff. It’s weird because as a gay man the focus is on. I can’t speak for every gay man, I can just speak for the gay men that I’ve encountered and that I’ve understood as a gay man okay, but uh, it just seems to me more that men, gay men are like really horny and their focus isn’t about getting to know you, they just want to have sex, cause obviously men are the horny ones of the man and the woman. The man would be the more sexually active. Um, yeah, it’s hard to find a male in the gay community for more than sex for that simple reason. Most guys are just out to have sex and that’s, gay.com where you found me on, that website is like disgusting, absolutely disgusting, you will never meet a legitimate person off that site and I’ve been on that site for like five years and have never met somebody legitimate, real, you know, never have, it’s a joke.

Buck, like many of the men who stated they did not always ask about their partner’s status or date of last HIV test, realized he should ask more, but sometimes it just did not happen.

Not as often as I should. I’m getting better at doing that. You know, manhunt, that is one of the things and uh, it sometimes puts it on there, but I don’t sometimes read it and lots of HIV positives want to have sex and so forth. I have had sex with some, but always protected and then I’m thinking probably a lot of others wouldn’t tell you and I have another equation in that, my wife. I do not want her infected. Have I had sex unprotected? Yes. I get carried away and get tested, wait, and get tested again, but I have done that, but it has been awhile now that I am very careful now, using a condom.

Tom uses the internet profiles of men to prescreen them, often avoiding men who do not have their HIV status listed, but will still ask briefly in person.

Yeah. I mean like there’s this site online where you basically have like your profile where you say what you’re into, what you’re not into and then you include your stats and for the majority for a lot of people post their stats and they post their last know HIV testing status and post like negative as of so and so and there are other people who just say ask me, ask me, but I don’t really talk to the ask me people, but even when I talk to the people who say like they’ve been checked whenever I like talk to them
like when did you get checked, why did you get checked like were you afraid you had something and like follow up and make sure that everything is okay and even then if we do decided to hook up its still protected sex as much as it can be.

Aidan and Yuma felt that they briefly covered the topic of HIV with their partners, but relied more heavily on their actions to determine if they were being truthful.

Basically find out you know if they admit to any diseases or admit to being with someone who had anything. Usually how prolific are they, how active are they, anything. I mean if they are jumping to a different person every other day much higher risk than casual every once in a couple of months need to scratch an itch (Aidan).

What I look for is how people respond to questioning. Many people are evasive by habit and often refuse to answer simple questions 3-4 times. These kind of people cannot be trusted (Yuma).

Jake feels comfortable talking to his partners about their testing and HIV status, but again he feels that a person’s body language, rather than their actual words is a better indication of whether they are telling the truth.

Um, yes, I’m definitely comfortable asking them about that, cause I think that if you can’t come out and ask you know, just come right out and ask if they have been tested or of they look down at the ground when they answer you or if they stutter or if they look like they aren’t giving you a straight answer, uh, you know chances are they haven’t been tested, but uh, yeah, I definitely feel comfortable asking. I mean I think it’s worth at least asking, you know, just to see what they say or um, to see if they actually have been tested, maybe they have their test results.

Several of the men felt that is was not necessary to ask their partners about their HIV status because they felt they practiced safe sex. Vince, Larry, and Ed all stated that because they practiced safe sex they did not feel the need to go into depth about their partner’s status or date of last HIV test. Daniel feels that there is enough awareness of HIV in the community in which he lives, that most people are comfortable at least briefly
bringing up the subject, but that there isn’t a big need to talk about someone’s status in depth.

Um, within the crowd I know, I don’t think I’ve met anyone here yet that’s openly says they have it. I know that a lot of the gay community around here is big on being against it, big on getting tested, they’re really big on that, so I actually think that the AIDS thing around here is still pretty big, like they are still highly concerned about it, because most of the time that’s what meetings will be about, discussions about it from my knowledge (with new partners). They do promote a lot of safe sex on campus all the time, so I would say its pretty good here, not so much in other cities that I’ve been to. Here, I would say that people are pretty smart about it.

While many of the men were reluctant to talk about their partner’s HIV status, testing, or sexual risk behaviors, other men felt completely comfortable talking to their partners about these topics. Kyle felt he might even come across as pushy sometimes, but for him, as he talked about, being around to watch his son grow up was more important than his own sexual satisfaction.

I never have a problem talking about that and you know I really kind of maybe push sometimes and I’ve had some people maybe be a little vague with me and I just basically put my place as a father in front of them and say you know what, I have a son and I cant just be careful, I have to be and its because I value his future more than my own, so I want to be there to see it and boy some people aren’t afraid to go about.

For Frank, talking about his partner’s status is an important part of his decision of whether or not to use condoms.

Yeah, we usually talk that over before we decide whether or not to use condoms.

For other men who stated they felt comfortable talking to their partners about their status, they felt the conversation tended to be as brief as possible while sharing as little personal information as possible. Overall, there seems to be a collective feeling that you should ask at minimum your partner’s status and date of last HIV test, but many men
did not feel comfortable bringing up the topic with their partners. Men shared a common fear of losing potential partners if they made them feel uncomfortable and many men just didn’t know how to start up the conversation with their partners initially. In an environment, where men have already invested time and money, whether in driving to a nearby town, renting a hotel room, etc., the risk of losing a potential partner by asking too many questions is sometimes more powerful than men’s desires to ask more in depth questions about their partner’s sexual past, date of last HIV test, or HIV status.

**Anonymity**

Several reasons, ranging from being married to societal perceptions to tribal influence were stated for wanting to ensure anonymity during sexual encounters. Men often went to great lengths to maintain their anonymous status including the use of pseudonyms, multiple email addresses, meeting with out of town or out of state sexual partners or traveling to different cities. Multiple email addresses were created to ensure that anonymity was maintained with potential partners as well as an added precaution from someone getting into a more frequently used email. Pseudonyms were used to create these email accounts and were used when first talking with partners. Some men admitted to never using their real names, though most would eventually give a first name to their partners during a face-to-face meeting. Again, out of town meeting sites or meeting with out of town partners was preferred as to protect the men’s anonymity.
Tom and Aidan talked in-depth about creating multiple email addresses and pseudonyms they use when looking for and meeting partners, a topic that was mentioned briefly by some of the other men.

Um, it sometimes, like I have two separate email accounts that I use for like hooking up with people that I think are okay to know who I really am and then there’s a different email account that I use for like people who I don’t really know or don’t really trust and then uh, before we even hook up I usually talk to them for like one or two days to get a feel for like what type of person they are like if they are just really slutty and want to do something I don’t really talk to them for very long whereas other people will ask you like, where are you from, how old are you, what are you into, and strike a conversation, then those I talk to. I find that it’s those guys that are like legit and actually look like who they say they are and are safe kind of like me (Tom)

Typically in town you know the alias names, the specific emails that you use until you know who or what’s going on. You know I’ve been talking with this fifty three year old man who really isn’t getting the hint that I’m not interested, but he the only way he can contact me is through you know is one of the various anonymous emails, no phone numbers given out, no address, no description of oh I live near, you know this or this is kind of what, I mean you give a description of what you look like, like six foot three hundred pounds brown hair that’s a pretty ambiguous in logging country, so that could be just about anyone here. For the rest of the state, no not really as far as anonymity, again just keep the false email until things are going start talking with them get comfortable with how things are um, and I’ll usually share a picture with out of area people before I would with locals (Aidan).

Nolan talked about utilizing neutral meeting spots as an added measure of anonymity when meeting new partners. He mentioned using various public places for initial meetings such as coffee shops, bookstores, or restaurants as well as locations like hotels or bookstores when meeting men for sex.

I don’t exchange names; we usually meet in a neutral place, that kind of thing. Separate email accounts.

The use of the internet was cited often as a means of ensuring anonymity. Men reported frequently asking for pictures of their potential sexual partners before meeting
them as a means to ensure they did not know them in other areas of their lives. Yet, while many men wanted pictures, they were reluctant to give pictures of themselves that contained any identifying information. Again, while many men stated they had asked for pictures of potential partners, there was a lack of trust surrounding the pictures that were sent. Men reported receiving on at least one occasion pictures of potential partners that were either old pictures or pictures of someone else entirely. A few men talked about actually “googling” the name of their partners, cross-referencing their phone numbers and addresses, and sometimes even driving by their house or hotel before meeting them in person. This was done to find out about their partner, make sure they did not know their partner, and to ensure their own physical safety.

I really don’t trust the internet sites and or pictures people send. I try to figure out who they are where they work and see if I can view them before meeting. You can get somewhat of an idea by talking to them on email etc. I am athletic so ask questions about that and see if they are interested or if they are really over weight (Bryan).

The majority of men in this study did not fear for their personal safety when meeting anonymous sexual partners, but as David sums up, it is often something that does cross your mind at some point or another.

I can’t be out here, it has to be anonymous even though I would rather be in a relationship but, I’ve thought about that many time, like could I meet somebody one time and then go to meet them and they’re like this KKK of gays, yeah of course, I think about that, but I guess that could be the same for anybody in any relationship, gay or straight.

Overall, many men worried about remaining anonymous with their sexual partners and this was often influenced by the larger social environment in which they lived. Regardless of the method men chose in their attempt to remain anonymous, it was of high
importance to many evidenced by the great lengths that some of these men went to ensure their anonymity.

**Condom Use**

Inconsistent or no to low condom use was often attributed to being in the heat of the moment, feelings of lost sensation, low perceived risk of HIV in Montana, and partners looking physically healthy. As demonstrated by some of the men in this study, the perception of small town traditional life still exists in rural areas. Men felt that living in a rural area, people were more honest and respected one another more than their urban counterparts. The rural environment is still equated with a sense of innocence in that many people believe bad things do not happen in rural areas or that people who live in rural areas are good, honest, hardworking people. This perception is carried over to HIV risk. There is still a misperception among many rural residents that HIV does not happen here and a false sense of safety is created through the assumption that everyone who lives in a rural area is honest. Even if people who live in rural areas are more honest than their urban counterparts, the barriers to get tested and belief that HIV does not happen here can enable the spread of HIV unknowingly from partner to partner.

Not all men reported hesitations with condom use. Those that did report condom use could generally be divided into one of two categories, those reluctant to use condoms, yet had chosen to wear condoms out of fear of bringing an STD home to their female partner or wife and those men who chose to wear a condom for their own personal safety.
Of the men choosing to wear condoms because of female partners, the most common explanation related to not wanting to be outed bringing home an STD. As Nick began telling me about his reasons for wearing condoms, he paused, and stated that for as terrible as it sounds one of the reasons he wears condoms is to protect himself from being outed to his female partners. Even though Nick identified as gay in this study, he was not out. He continues to date women as a cover with his family. He felt that if he were to be outed, he would be looked at as a gay man in his community and would no longer be able to date women as part of his cover with his family.

Yeah, it’s (physical safety) a definite concern for me, you know, I take precautions, I wear condoms things like that, but nothing is 100% safe and um, the biggest thing you worry about is catching something and then, this is going to sound terrible, and passing it on to a female partner and then her being able to figure out where it came from.

This idea was seconded by Nolan and was also one of the reasons why he gets tested for HIV. He didn’t perceive HIV to be a big risk in Montana, but used condoms and was tested regularly “just in case” as he did not want to bring something home to his wife.

Oh absolutely, I think it’s important to be careful. I use condoms. I don’t want to bring something home to my wife.

Among men that had been married for several years, there were some reports of having to re-learn how to use condoms, which was usually done through the internet or with male partners.

Despite the perceived HIV fatigue seen by some of the men in this study, there is still a general fear about contracting HIV. While medical advances have greatly increased life expectancy rates for those persons diagnosed with HIV, the quality of life is often diminished by side effects of medications. David was very passionate in his response when I asked him about whether or not he used condoms. An interesting note to
point out in his response is the misinformation that still exists about HIV in Montana. The prevalence of HIV cases he talked about his closer to the annual number of cases reported for all of Montana.

I’m totally paranoid of STDs. AIDS is like getting a death sentence by a jury to me, oh man, just the scariest thing ever. I don’t ever want to deal with that in my life and the only way I’m not going to deal with that in my life is to obviously use protection. It surprised me because last year, because there were 22 new HIV cases that popped up in one month in Somewhere this small, can you imagine on the scale of Seattle or something, how many people on a daily basis contract HIV, its crazy.

Beyond fear, men stated they used condoms because they were more sanitary or less messy than having sex without them.

Well condoms of course. Sometimes the physical contact, you know you get a little too intense, but uh, cleanliness if one thing for me that is a must, uh that’s one thing about having them come here is I tell them you know, tae a nice long, good, hot shower. Clean everything, clean everywhere real good before I come down and I always have condoms with me so that I don’t, but you do what you can, but you take your chances.

The cost of condoms was only mentioned once as a barrier to using them, but laziness or complacency was mentioned a few times as demonstrated by Steve’s response when I asked him about his comment that he “should wear them more, but he doesn’t.” He blamed it on being lazy more than anything else. “Um, not really cost, but laziness.”

Men that reported not using condoms were often somewhat reluctant to initially admit to not using condoms and often began somewhat similar to Charlie’s response of, “I just uh, no.” A few of the men relied on the appearance of their partners when making the decision of whether or not to use condoms.

Well, you know just the appearance of a person. You kind of get some kind of a feeling when you meet up with them whether you feel comfortable or not (Zeb).
Sometimes, sometimes you don’t. Um, sometimes, it really depends on if I know the or not. I mean you develop a higher level of comfort with some people (Ian).

For sure the person’s appearance and their cleanliness and all of that, um, and just the whole entire situation. I would say there has been a couple times when I would of, I still would have used them and I just didn’t have them and I just kind of left it up to them to decide, you know we didn’t use them, but uh, yeah, I would say that, yeah, the person’s appearance definitely influences it a lot, I know that is a pretty dangerous statement. It really doesn’t mean anything when it comes to STDs, but I guess that has influenced my decision (Jake).

Um, it depends on the person. Sometimes I will, sometimes I won’t. It really just depends on the person and if I’m, you know attracted to them more or not. I prefer not to use condoms of course, but um (Anthony).

I’m fairly confident how I go about dealing with, judging people and I put myself at very low risk. I have a confession, I have been fairly active my whole life mostly with women, but with women and men and I’ve never used a condom, I’ve never contracted an STD, I’ve never gotten anybody pregnant. I’m a bad advertisement for what one should do (Carl).

Condom use greatly varied among men in the study. While the majority of men stated they knew that condom use was safer than bare backing or not using condoms, each man had his own personal reasons or justifications for using or not using condoms. Condoms seemed to be readily available to men whether at testing sites for free or at the store or online for a fee.

**Environmental Factors Influencing HIV Risk Behaviors**

Prior syndemic-based research (see chapter two) has shown an association between decreased emotional health and substance abuse among others and increased
risky sexual behaviors. Social isolation leading to a decreased sense of emotional health and substance abuse were commonly cited throughout this research. There is a need for both an increase in the availability of anonymous or confidential support services in Montana in general as well as an increase in HIV prevention services that specifically target larger environmental factors that lead to a decrease in social support and an increase in substance abuse.

Low Perceived HIV Risk in Montana

Despite actively looking for partners outside of their hometown or outside of Montana, many men stated they felt that the risk of contracting HIV in Montana was quite low, in part because Montana is a rather rural state. They felt “safer in Montana” (Frank).

Well I think that like most things, there are real hard numbers that show us that certain populated areas that certainly have a lot more you know, HIV/AIDS, you know population and people that have it and all that, but I do feel that in the sense that the population in Montana there is definitely less of it here, maybe not percentage-wise, but more that there’s just less people and all that (Kyle).

Tony and Leonard were two of the only men to mention that while HIV rates are low in Montana, people are having sex with men outside of Montana where rates are higher.

Uh yeah, I do, it’s a concern all over, cause it can spread from there to here, like I came from a different state, so you know. I don’t think that people realize it could be bad here. It happens here, we just aren’t as big as some of the other cities, it’s not put out there enough I guess (Tony).

Uh, I don’t hear much about it in this area. In Montana, I feel it is getting to be more of a concern. Um, we’re getting more, more students are
traveling to other areas, more people are coming in, traveling through, coming to this university from other areas, so there is a lot more influx of the possibilities of it coming in and just in the average you’re going to get more of it in here, the more people that travel through, the more people that settle here, and the more chance you’re going to have AIDS. I grew up in <town removed> in the late 60s and I know now all STDs, from what I’ve read and heard on the news, all STDs, of course AIDS wasn’t around then, but AIDS and all the others are a lot more prevalent now, per capita, than they were back then. I think its something that definitely needs to be worked on and needs to be more education and more care taking by people to make sure that it doesn’t spread (Leonard).

A small minority of men felt their HIV risk was as high in Montana as in more urban areas. When I asked Melvin about his thoughts on HIV risk in Montana, he replied,

I think we’re at as much risk, I think there’s a lot of people do just do the hookup scene or whatever and they’re not really upfront about it and I think HIV is a very big thing that’s going around right now.

However, married men often reported being quite paranoid about contracting HIV, because they feared passing HIV onto their wives and because they feared being outed about their same-sex sexual activity. Montana continues to be dominated by a heteronormative culture that places a high degree of importance on marriage and family life. Men are still seen as the providers for their family. This ability to provide for one’s family is often a large part of the concept of masculinity in this cultural environment. The fear of being outed is associated with a loss of place within the community as well as the fear of a loss of masculinity for many of these men.

For some men, there seemed to be fatigue felt towards the HIV epidemic. As Nick stated, living in a rural area HIV often seems to be blown out of proportion especially within the gay community.

It (HIV risk) seems to be more blown out of proportion in the gay culture, it seems to be the gay culture has been hit with the label with being the carrier of AIDS, um, which I’m not really sure what the statistics are, but it seems to be less of a concern for heterosexuals when I am not sure
specifically what it is, but it just doesn’t seem to be a big deal for heterosexuals. That’s another thing too, if you label yourself, if somebody were to label me gay, I know that’s one of the things they would probably think, like you know, he’s probably got a disease or something because somehow gay sex is unclean or disease filled, strange.

Dean feels that he has seen more of an HIV fatigue during recent years. Comparing Seattle and Montana, he talked about friends of his that have purposefully exposed themselves to the virus in hopes of getting infected, so they no longer have to worry about trying to prevent transmission.

Hmm, guys are getting into sort of a fatigue. They are tired of all the safe sex. They are tired of having to wear condoms, you know tired of having to worry about it. You know people are either careful or they’re not. But, there is a sense of fatigue here and when I lived in Seattle there was too. People just get tired of trying to be safe all the time and they quit and some people get infected. My old roomie, might have, I don’t know, but I know he exposed himself, he exposed himself knowingly, just because he was tired of it and decided not to worry about it for a few weeks and then he got a phone call and found out he had been exposed.

Gene also brought up the idea of HIV fatigue. He felt this has increased as people are now living longer once they are diagnosed and the move from viewing HIV as a “death sentence” to more of a chronic disease. He wasn’t sure about his thoughts on HIV risk in Montana specifically, but he did feel like people do not want to hear about it here.

I don’t know, uh it’s interesting to me that all of the signs, like I drive on highway XX between <name removed> and <name removed> and there’s a sign there that says get tested for AIDS on the reservation, I don’t know where that comes from. Generally, it seems like people bury their heads, it feels a little like okay, but the same way with the drug use, I don’t know about that and I’m kind of putting those two things together. If people are using syringes and sharing those, that can be a similar kind of thing. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t have a sound opinion… I think some of it has come from reclassifying HIV as a chronic disease anymore. It feels like twenty years ago, it was really looked at like a death sentence, now it’s just one of those things you endure and people for whatever reason have accepted the thought that yeah, I’ll just endure it and its like well really you should avoid it. People wanting to contract HIV purposefully anymore, to me that’s scary and to me that’s really societal in like what a
fatalistic sort of way to live life… My general fear is that it feels like the urgency has dropped off. It seemed like ten or fifteen years ago there was much more vigilance. I personally am so vigilant, I don’t feel like other people are and it feels like an awareness of, no, there have been some increases like, you know you can live longer and some other stuff, but that’s through medicine, it doesn’t mean that they have any kind of a handle on the illness itself.

Sam felt that HIV was less of a risk in Montana, yet he had come across men who were not tested because of this same feeling. While he continues to feel that HIV is less of a risk in Montana, he has thought more about testing lately because of the increasing number of men who are not tested.

Maybe less of a risk as opposed to the bigger cities. Here in Montana, I know a lot of guys here don’t get checked and you can’t talk about HIV or anything, they don’t like to talk about it, they won’t say anything about it, you can’t even talk about it. They probably haven’t even had an HIV test before as opposed to the city they all get checked; they have all the STD/STI checks and everything.

Men such as Toby relied on the idea that men in Montana are more upfront and honest than men in larger urban areas. He perceived HIV to be less of a threat in Montana in part because of people’s honesty and in part because of the rural nature of the State.

I would think it’s less here. People here are more of the, my understanding, what they call the rednecks, I mean you are pretty much straightforward and if you’re not then you don’t want anyone else to know about it, so I think people here, society makes them a little bit more careful about what they’re doing and how often they’re doing it and where. Just the kind of society that is in an area like this.

Men responded differently to their views of low HIV risk in Montana. While Pete realized that HIV was still a risk in Montana he stated that he was tested for HIV irregularly and that he did not use condoms when having sex.

Um, it um, it should be um, but um, but I guess it isn’t really much for me personally. I know that it’s out there.
Zeb acknowledging that he felt HIV was less of a risk in Montana than in other areas, noted that was still necessary to be careful.

Oh certainly. I don’t think it’s a serious in this area as it is in others, but it still pays to be careful.

Overall, there seems to be a disconnect between feelings of being at a lower HIV risk living in Montana and purposefully seeking partners from outside of Montana passing through on business. Men reported wanting to see new or “fresh” campaigns for HIV prevention that would help refresh the current feelings of fatigue.

Long Distance Travel

While a level of discreteness was a concern for the men in this study, not all men saw having to travel long distances to find sexual partners desirable. Paul discussed the financial and emotional hardships that accompanied having to travel to find sexual partners.

That is one of the things that I’ve lived in (name of state removed) for awhile and I’ve lived in (name of states removed) and um, here, that is Montana’s, I feel, biggest disadvantage is distance. You meet a great person and then they tell you where they are from, you know what I mean, and like (name of town removed) and you’re like where the hell is that at, so you have to head over to Google maps and Google where they are from and you are like okay that is like four hours from me. Um, so that’s going to be an eight hour drive on the road and the time that we’re going to spend together, you know, do I have time to drive that far, are you going to meet me half way you know how are we going to, you know I’m in between pay days, I don’t have the money, you know what I mean, so there’s a lot of different elements that play into having to go that distance, um, but, I guess if the person is worth it and most times because it is Montana and because we do have to travel both people, uh, like I’ve done this about six different times and five out of the six times, they’ve offered,
either they’ve offered or I’ve offered or we’ve both agreed to help cover the gas and the lodging, you know, so we kind of meet each other half way as far as financing the hookup or the venture, yeah, but is sucks.

Trying to maintain a relationship or find a partner becomes more difficult for the men in a rural state like Montana. Several of the men talked about wanting a relationship, but because of the small size of their towns it was too hard to remain discrete about it. The small towns combined with the speed in which gossip can travel makes it difficult to go out and enjoy activities in town with a partner. When looking outside of men’s hometowns, the miles between towns was often a hindrance in maintaining long-distance relationships. Geographic distance, combined with weather conditions, economic strains, and time can make it difficult to see long distance partners and maintain those relationships. Tom talked about the difficulty in trying to find someone who lives nearby and who is his age that he could try and date.

It really just sucks and I’ve only ever met one other person who is about my age who like actually cared about the same things I did and we both wanted long term relationships, but we don’t live by each other at all, so it kind of sucks because the way they were describing it there wasn’t anyone else where he was and everybody was just trying to hook up and there’s no one here cause everybody is trying to hook up, so it’s really hard to find someone who really wants to have a relationship instead of just sex.

Many of the men in this study did not feel comfortable being tested in their hometowns and thus waited to get tested when they visited larger nearby towns where their anonymity could be better guaranteed. The distance also created difficulties in trying to establish support networks that men felt comfortable accessing when they had questions or health scares and often resulted in men turning to the internet to find answers to their questions. While geography is something that cannot be changed overnight, an
effort can be made to begin to change the larger homophobic environment that makes men who want to be out feel uncomfortable being out in their own town.

**Conclusion**

The men who participated in this study came from many backgrounds, some have made the conscious choice to remain closeted because of their own personal preference while others feel forced to keep a part of their identity hidden. It is important to remember that the majority of the men in this study would not be closeted if they truly felt safe coming out. Not only did men feel unsafe coming out, they also felt as if they were viewed negatively from openly gay men, or as one participant stated, “I don’t want to be viewed as less gay just because I haven’t come out yet.” This idea further illustrates feelings that men do not fully belong in their communities. Men felt that they would not be fully accepted by the gay community, because they were not out and did not take the same risks as someone who was out. On the other hand, men felt that their relationships built upon the illusion that they were straight were superficial and lacked a true sense of meaning and belonging.

Some of the men that are married chose to get married because they wanted children, especially older men, and some wanted the security of a life-long partner. A few of the men who are married talked about the responsibility they felt to decisions made long ago, they felt obligated to remain in their marriages because they had made that commitment. Men that had repressed their feelings because they grew up in a “different time” are coming to terms with their identity and several of them see a day in
the not so distant future where they can be out. With a traditional importance being placed on marriage for men that grew up with previous generations, there was a pressure to get married and to have children. While every man that had children, stated they wanted children, they also stated that their children were one of the reasons why they are still married. For some of the younger men, there is still a pressure to get married or settle down, but they did not feel the pressure was as strong anymore and many believed that some day, Montana will become a more accepting community. A few of the men believed that some day down the road Montana’s definition of marriage would be expanded to include everyone.

As the last chapters have identified, there are various reasons for remaining closeted and the decision to remain closeted has impacted each man uniquely. Men have utilized various coping mechanisms, and modified their interactions with their social environments to make living in a rural environment easier. What all of the men in this study have in common is the feeling that it is necessary to modify a part of their identity to remain in and engage with the rural social environment. Men had modified their personal narratives in a manner that enables them to engage with the rural culture. Not only did men have to figure out how to navigate through the rural culture, they also had to negotiate how they understood themselves and their own identity in relation to rural cultural ideas and expectations of gay identities. During our interview, Buck described the hardships of trying to define himself in relation to society’s misperceptions of gay men. In geographic areas or small towns where someone might not know a gay or lesbian person directly, it is easy for the media to direct ideas of what it means to be gay or lesbian. It is the same scenario that many men discussed in not wanting to be
associated with the very effeminate gay male stereotype or as stated by Buck, “not wanting to be thought of as a drag queen.”

The rural environment presents the opportunity for both anonymity and visibility. There remains the opportunity to distance yourself geographically and socially from your neighbors in the large, yet sparsely populated state of Montana. However, those narratives that are seen as different from the heteronormative narratives that dominate Montana are noticed quickly. While these differences are not always explicitly acknowledged they are often recognized. A few of the men in this study noted that while they were not out, they figured some people in the community or within their family had begun to question their sexuality, although nothing was ever directly said. Though feelings varied in intensity, men in this study felt a lack of general acceptance directed at same-sex sexuality and an overall feeling that the rural environment is still a largely heteronormative environment emerged from this research.
Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion

Imagine a different world.

Imagine a different world, where homophobia, racism, and sexism do not exist.

It’s hard to imagine, because so much of who we are is defined by these and other prejudices. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, like other minorities, need to learn to adjust to the world as it is; to not do so would make it impossible to function day-to-day. In our own lives we are, of course, aware of gross injustices and events that have happened to us – rejection by family or friends, a violent attack, or being fired from a job or not receiving a promotion because of homophobia.

What would your life be like without homophobia, racism, and sexism? (Meyer 2011)

Introduction

This dissertation has examined the lives of a group of closeted gay and bisexual men living in Montana. It sought to understand through theory, literature, and empirical study how the rural sociocultural environment influences sexual identity and in turn how the decision to remain closeted influences sexual risk behaviors. This dissertation wanted to understand some of the reasons that men have decided to remain closeted and why they have chosen to remain in an environment that they sometimes perceive as unwelcoming. The question of how the rural social and cultural environment influences sexual identity needed to be explored and understood. From this question, emerged views of the rural environment as one dominated by traditional ideas of heteronormativity and masculinity. These views in turn shaped men’s personal narratives in a way that enabled them to remain in and function within their environment.
Summary of Findings

The stories of these men have painted a picture of a rural environment where homophobia and stigma still persist. Traditional ideas of masculinity and family have influenced men’s decisions to remain closeted. A desire for acceptance, which can be seen throughout rural culture has further encouraged men to remain closeted about their sexuality for fear of exclusion from their families and communities. Feelings of exclusion remain and men continue to modify their narratives in response to the environment and in their desire to stay within that environment. These modified narratives have included remaining closeted, outwardly projecting an image of being a straight man, and attempting to control social situations to minimize discomfort and fear. As discussed later in this chapter, the familiarity and beauty of Montana create a strong pull for these men despite the often hostile social surroundings that accompanies rural culture.

The stories that have emerged from this research are some of the first stories to be documented within the academic setting. As there remains a shortage of research on rural down low men, there is little to compare the results of this research to within similar cultural settings. Much of what has been done has focused on urban black men living in the South. A large amount of this work has centered itself around trying to actually define the term, down low.

The work done with urban black men has described a hypermasculine subculture that has attempted to distance itself from the effeminate gay male stereotype (see Denizet-Lewis 2003). While some similarities may be found surrounding ideas of
masculinity, urban Southern regions and rural Montana are extremely different environments with differing idealized images of masculinity. Differences in the cultural environments, resources, and opportunities between Montana and the South greatly influence the opportunity for comparison between the results of each research.

Urban environments continue to have more resources and support networks for sexual minorities. Research that has been done looking at down low black men in the South has focused on the role of the male in black communities, acceptance of same-sex sexuality, and ideas of masculinity. The latter two ideas appeared in this research, but can not be directly compared when accounting for the vast differences in the cultural environment. There has been a common misperception that down low men are simply straight men looking for quick and easy or no-strings attached sex. Perhaps, the most important similarity to emerge out of the current research and research among urban down low men is the reinforcing idea that down low identified men often privately identify as gay or bisexual. For many of the men in this study, this identity was about far more than just sex. This research further supports findings from a 2011 USDHHS survey among men, which showed a discrepancy between sexual attraction, orientation, and activity. Findings that demonstrate the need to better understand the relationship between each.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the majority of research that has been conducted focusing on sexual minorities has focused on urban regions. This focus has perpetuated the ideas that sexual minorities are absent in rural environments or that all sexual minorities are counting down their days until they can flee to the more accepting urban environment. Even though many of the men in this study talked about moving to a
more urban environment, there was still an underlying desire to remain in Montana for its familiarity as discussed later in this chapter.

Within the anthropological literature, it can be argued that until recently there has been an uncomfortable atmosphere surrounding the study of Western homosexuality in mainstream anthropology. It was not until the late 1960s that seminal anthropological works began to be published. One of the more prominent recent anthropological works to focus on rural gay and lesbian men and women is Mary Gray’s *Out in the Country*. Gray’s research was focused on queer youth in rural eastern America. Unlike, the current research, Gray found that many of her participants were openly out and involved in queer activism. These men, while desiring to be out, did not perceive the environment in which they live facilitating their coming out process. Much of the activism by these men was quiet activism – monetarily contributing to organizations that are fighting towards equality. Sondag et al’s recent study of out gay men throughout Montana as well as Gray’s and William’s work reported feelings of conservative attitudes that made it harder for gay men to feel a part of their community. This marginalization of gay men often leads to a loss of true identity where one becomes a stranger not only in society, but also a stranger to themselves. Men in this study reported feelings of homophobia and heteronormative ideals as reasons for remaining closeted.

The findings from this study reinforce the importance of the cultural and geographic environments in shaping how men make sense of their sexual identities. Rural expectations of masculinity, stereotypes of gay men, and a rural drive for acceptance were all powerful motivators for remaining closeted among the men in the current study. In chapter four, reasons for remaining closeted were explored. The most
commonly cited reasons were ideals of masculinity, changing social relationships and loss of acceptance, stigma, and misperceptions or false stereotypes of gay men. There was a struggle between cultural expectations of masculinity, internal perceptions of one’s own masculinity, and the outward portrayal of an often hypermasculine identity in response to cultural pressures. The idea that there is still a need to display the traditional masculine identity as described in this study supports prior research in rural areas, such as that by Bryant (1999). Bryant found descriptions of masculinity associated with males dominating their land and environment, while descriptions of females were associated with being nurturers of the land, gently cultivating their crops.

Stereotypes of gay males persist, and for some in rural areas, media portrayals of gay men may be the only exposure for some residents. This exposure forms biased opinions and in some cases has created expectations for some of the men themselves in how they should acting. Fear of changing personal relationships and loss of social acceptance or acceptance of place within the community motivated several of the men to continue to create a heterosexual publicly displayed narrative, despite identifying privately as a gay or bisexual male. The ideas about private-public narrative discrepancies within this study mimic Wright’s (1999) statement about, “being gay in ‘cowboy country’ similarly involves tactics of sexual camouflage… To be gay in western states… is to know when and how to ‘butch up’ or ‘cowboy up.”

Despite persistent homophobia and hostility, men have chosen to stay. They have actively engaged with their environment through the modification of their personal narratives enacting a sense of resilience that has enabled their ability to live in this often, oppressive rural culture. Men in the current study, like men in William’s (1995) study,
found ways to modify their narratives in a way that allowed them assimilate into rural culture. Reinforcing the ideas behind schema theory, the men in this study have ultimately developed ways of interacting with their environment. Men have responded to the social environment and modified their schemata in a way that enables them to remain in Montana. Ultimately, rural culture has influenced men’s identities – creating a divide, as described by the men in this study, between their public and private identity. The rural environment has influenced behavior through the modification of schemata in a manner that enables men to remain in their hometowns. Even with reports of isolation, loneliness, and homophobia men are staying in Montana, if not permanently, at least temporarily. These men have shown they possess the incredible capacity to cope with the disadvantages and discrimination they have faced. They have been able to overcome the challenges of the largely heteronormative culture that facilitates an environment where sexual minorities are still seen through heterosexual assumptions and beliefs. Ultimately, while each man had his own unique interpretation of the rural environment and resulting reasons for remaining closeted, the larger themes mentioned above emerged and connected the men together. Each of the men has modified their personal schema in a manner that enables them to live in the rural environment.

It is this sense of resilience that directly contradicts the traditional image of the gay man fleeing the rural environment for the freedom of urban life. This image of fleeing that has long dominated rural sexual minority research has inhibited our understandings of the impact of rural culture on sexual minority health. This idea was recently challenged again through the release of the NIH’s 2011 Health of LGBT People report, in which there was a call to better understand the impact of geography on health.
Not all men are leaving, some have every desire to “live and die” in Montana. This is where they were born and for the large part raised. Family and familiarity along with the physical beauty of Montana and all of the accompanying recreational opportunities are enough to keep men here despite feelings of hostility. Varying strategies of agency have been adopted including strategies of silence, the modification of narratives, and quietly fighting for equality. Although, some of the strategies of these men may not be what is typically thought of as activism, men are quietly advocating for equality in a way that ensures their place in the community remains. Living in an environment that presents many difficulties and challenges, men remain capable of exerting a degree of strength over their own identities. Men are quietly working to queer the rural environment.

Beyond resilience, chapter five explored some of the hardships that men associated with living in a rural area. Rural areas have long been associated with more conservative and traditional values. These values supported by a sense of heteronormativity continue to legitimize stigma and the homophobic attitudes that seek to reduce the holistic idea of sexuality to a mere act of sex. Many men reported seeing or hearing negative acts or attitudes directed towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. These findings support research that has been done with out gay men in Montana (Sondag et al 2011) and among William’s et al (2005) Wyoming participants. Both of these studies were conducted in similar rural cultural environments further showing the influence of the environment on sustaining homophobic attitudes. Men in the prior studies and current study associated homophobia with decreased safety for LGB individuals.
Stories of homophobic acts of violence, verbal abuse, and larger societal stigmas were powerful influences on men’s decisions to not be out. These stories and actions combined with the small nature of rural society are powerful influencers on men’s decisions to remain closeted. Trying to escape the confines of one’s small town often involves driving long distances to nearby urban centers. Some men associated their lack of access to partners with feelings of having to hook up, being less cautious about asking their partners about HIV status or date of last HIV test, and being less likely to turn down sexual opportunities they felt they would turn down if they had more access to sexual partners on a more regular basis. For some, the physical geographic isolation was equated with a sense of social isolation, in that they felt new ideas or more inclusive ways of thinking were slow to make into their towns.

Social isolation for many of the men led to feelings of having to live a double life to remain in their current environment. This split private-public identity and the resulting state of hyper-vigilance is exhausting, both mentally and physically. This sense of living a double life was a concept that differed from prior research among gay men who are out in Montana and should be looked at further in differences of mental and physical health outcomes. Future research could further be influenced by minority stress theory. As demonstrated by the men in this study, isolation and a constant fear of being outed were associated with severe feelings of depression, loneliness, and hopelessness. These feelings were in turn associated with an overall perceived decrease in one’s own health as evidenced by thoughts of suicide ideation, substance abuse, and a constant elevated level of anxiety. Men’s own sense of agency became limited by fear for their own well-being at the larger cultural or environment level. Feelings of independence and resilience
became challenged by the continual reminder of one’s lack of power through not being able to achieve a sense of coming out.

The struggle for and between internal acceptance and acceptance by the community has led to negative coping mechanisms for some of these men. The stress that stemmed directly from experiences of prejudice, discrimination based on sexual orientation, the expectation of rejection from friends, community, and family, the constant act of stigma concealment, and the resulting internalized homophobia by men in this study further support Meyer’s theory of minority stress. It is both the influence of the culture in which the men in this study live and how men perceive themselves within this culture that have influenced the decision to remain closeted as a strategy for maintaining that place within the culture they know.

As supported by minority stress theory, there were direct negative physical and emotional consequences that stemmed from the constant fear of being outed combined with living in an environment that perpetuated gender and sexuality expectations of discrimination and stigma towards behaviors that fall outside of traditional heteronormative expectations of sexuality. Recent work that has been informed by queer theory has demonstrated the complexity of sexuality. This work continues to challenge the traditional idea of sexuality as a static concept, instead showing sexuality as a holistic, multi-dimensional, and fluid concept inclusive of sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. The combination of queer and schema theories within the current research allowed for a unique view of how the larger rural heteronormative environment influences social culture and in turn how that culture influenced men’s own identity and schemata in a way that enabled them to remain in the rural environment.
Chapter six detailed the influences of remaining closeted and living in a rural environment on HIV risk and sexual behaviors. While most men acknowledged that HIV transmission can occur anywhere, many men felt that the threat of HIV was less here than in urban areas. The idea that HIV risk is less in rural areas is a concept that also emerged in William’s (2005) study among Wyoming gay men. Societal-level stigma and misperceptions about HIV transmission influenced men’s decision to remain closeted and in some cases avoid being tested at their doctor’s office. In contrast to the results found in this study, urban Hispanic down low men were shown to use more HIV transmission precautions including condom use, HIV testing, and partner communication (see Bond et al. 2009). Several men remained closeted to their doctors for fear of losing care, refusal of treatment, or concerns about confidentiality.

With geographic distances and conservative social climates every man in the study reported using the internet to find sexual partners. The use of internet sites added a sense of safety because of the anonymity that it provided when seeking new partners. The internet enabled men to find partners in towns outside of their own and allowed for communication to occur before exchanging identifying information. However, the internet also facilitates anonymous sexual encounters and in some cases reduced communication about HIV testing and status as men were more likely to rely on their partner’s written status.

Men were less likely to get tested in a facility that threatened their confidentiality. The majority of men preferred to be tested anonymously in a discrete location and there were varying views on the testing process itself. Again, this idea has emerged in prior research among rural gay men (see Williams et al. 2005 and prior work by Sondag) who
also stressed a desire for not only anonymous testing, but testing facilities that were located in discrete locations. Men ranged from having hostile feelings arising from feelings they were being lectured by a tester who knew nothing about them to looking at the testing process as an opportunity for twenty minutes of conversation. There was a collective desire to be treated like an equal during the testing process though, rather than, as one man put in, “being lectured like a little school girl.” Even when discrete testing locations are available, many men living in smaller towns that were being tested outside of their doctor’s offices preferred to be tested outside of their hometown.

Like testing preferences, there was a wide range of variance on men’s confidence in their communication skills. There was an underlying fear of losing a potential partner by asking too many questions. For men that were comfortable talking to their partners, there was an acknowledgement that the conversation was often brief. This hesitancy over discussing HIV testing and status often derived from not wanting to interfere or delve too deep into a partner’s personal life. Men were taking many precautions to remain anonymous while looking for sexual partners. These precautions included creating multiple email addresses, using pseudonyms, and meeting in neutral locations.

Environmental factors that influenced perceptions of HIV risk included a low perceived risk of HIV in Montana and geographic isolation. Whether relying on stereotypes that Montanans were honest, hardworking people, that HIV does not happen in Montana, or feelings of immunity from HIV, several men felt that HIV transmission was less likely to occur in rural areas. Despite looking for out of town and out of state partners the use of condoms varied. For men that felt HIV was a risk in Montana, they
also noted there was a lack of attention and prevention efforts paid towards HIV anymore as well as a sense of fatigue by the gay community.

Stemming directly from the geographic isolation of many towns in Montana is the long distance travel to meet partners when looking for partners outside of your hometown. Trying to maintain a monogamous relationship becomes more difficult when seeing your partner is an infrequent event. Within Sondag et al.’s (2011) study, geographic isolation was identified as contributing to increased risky sexual behaviors among gay men who were out in Montana. Beyond just physical distance there are financial and emotional hardships that accompany having to travel to find sexual partners. Men acknowledged that with the time and money spent traveling these distances, there was an added sense of having to hook up because you are never sure of when the next opportunity might arise.

There were several similarities between the current research with closeted gay men and Sondag et al.’s research with gay men who were out in Montana. Themes of geographic isolation, homophobia, a lack of social opportunities, and concerns over confidentiality with HIV testing and medical providers arose in both studies. There were however important differences. Men who are out are able to access to social support networks or support services targeted at gay men. Men who are closeted felt they were unable to access these resources without risking their anonymity. Men who were not out often relied on questionable resources, such as the internet, to gain answers to HIV-related questions and overall sexual health questions. From the interviews, it became evident that a great deal of misinformation about HIV risk factors and HIV in Montana still exist. Closeted men’s emotional health tended to be less than their out counterparts.
This was often attributed to the stress and anxiety that accompanied remaining closeted in a close-knit rural community.

As the chapters highlighted, there are many reasons that men choose to remain closeted and their decisions impact each man uniquely. However, each of these men have the common bond of modifying their sexual narratives in a way that enables them to remain in the rural environment. While this dissertation provides many previously unseen insights into the lives of rural down low men, there are also other questions that this dissertation did not address and other questions that have been discovered throughout the course of this research that are just as in need of being explored and better understood.

**Unanswered Questions and Further Research**

This dissertation has attempted to bring voice to a previously silenced population in Montana. In doing so, it has tried to fill the “large gaps in our understanding of lesbian and gay lives as lived in history and represented in culture” (Crain 1998:3). This is not to suggest that all of the gaps have been filled by this dissertation, rather an effort to create smaller gaps and a better understanding of a specific population has been undertaken. The lack of a comprehensive literature concerning down low men living in rural areas suggests many unanswered questions and new directions for future research. This dissertation is a contribution to the subject of rural gay life.
Several men talked about thoughts of suicide and a few men discussed one or more suicide attempts. There has been a recent increase in attention paid to suicide in relation to gay bullying, but most of this emphasis has occurred in the urban environments. Suicide among rural gay men remains an understudied subject in the literature. Much of the talk surrounding suicide in the current study originated from feelings of isolation and a sense of having to remain closeted because of an unsafe cultural environment.

Much of the research on coming out has focused on urban lesbian women and gay men. While the phrase coming out has come to mean many things, an idea central to the various definitions is the idea of a rite of passage. This rite of passage is different for each person that decides to come out, but more research needs to be done looking at the coming out process in rural areas. Many of these men dream of a day when they can come out, but many do not feel safe in the current rural environment that is sustained through a system of heteronormativity. More emphasis on the influence of the rural environment on the coming out process needs to occur. Research is needed on the factors that encourage or restrict coming out conversations with friends and family members within rural social environments. Coming out is an individual process, but why many men have felt safe coming out in the rural environment while others have chosen to remain closeted remains unanswered.

Men in the current study talked about the influence of rural ideas of masculinity on their decision to remain closeted about their sexual identity. While there is no concrete line that can be drawn between urban and rural environments there were vast differences in perceived acceptance of same-sex sexual behavior felt by the men who had
lived in both urban and rural environments. Beyond increased feelings of acceptance in urban environments, men felt there was a difference in ideas of masculinity between urban and rural regions. There needs to be further research on the influence of the rural-urban divide on self-perceived ideas of masculinity and differences between men who are out and men who are not out. Additionally, are gay men’s perceptions of masculinity different than straight men’s perceptions of masculinity in rural environments?

This dissertation has focused on the lives of forty-five men in Montana. Now that general themes have emerged, this information can be taken and applied to surveys that can be cautiously administered to a larger number of men to look for commonalities across rural regions. These larger-scale findings present the opportunity to create change in the environment, which ultimately can lead to more men feeling safe enough to come out. The coming out process is individualized and carries a personalized meaning for each person that goes through it, but the larger social and environmental factors and stigmas that influence one’s decision to come share commonalities across geographic regions.

Final Thoughts

Previous studies focusing on the rural environment have largely excluded closeted men and their voices. This dissertation sought to give voice to those men and to re-emphasize their presence in this environment. The men in this study were resilient, they have remained, for various reasons, in an environment they perceive to be largely
heteronormative and hostile. Despite feelings of isolation and depression, many of the men have discovered ways to successfully interact with and contribute back to their communities. They have developed other aspects of their identities, which they feel are safe to publicly project.

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to provide insight into how the “rural culture” influences identity narratives. This research supports prior research about the impact of stigma, discrimination, and homophobia on feelings of acceptance within the larger community, acceptance of one’s own sexual identity, and an overall sense of decreased well-being. Conservative values were seen as exacerbating homophobia and stigma within the rural environment. Although many men talked about the rural environment in general, as evidenced by figure four in this dissertation, men overwhelmingly feared their family’s reaction and the potential of changing relationships with their families. Despite increasing globalization that is slowly changing the face of rural culture, there is still a distinctive subculture that remains in rural areas. Handed down from generation to generation, cultural ideals are slow to change. Within rural culture there remains a high degree of importance on families, a strong work ethic, honesty, and morality. Less so in some of the more urban areas of Montana, but still present, family continues to be defined as a man, a woman, and their children. This traditional, heteronormative-framed definition of family excludes same-sex couples who have children and acts to further rural heteronormativity.

Despite previous calls to lessen the urban-rural divide distinction in research, the current study demonstrated a felt difference in acceptance towards same-sex sexuality between urban and rural areas. Men acknowledged incidents of homophobia in urban
areas, but many felt these to be more isolated incidents rather than the general “background” feelings ever present in rural geographies. In sum, men associated the rural environment with a general sense of unwelcoming or unsafe feelings. The larger heteronormative environment has influence over abstract perceptions of masculinity that in turn influence men’s perceptions of their own masculinity as well as their actions they feel help to better fit in with their social environment. The perceptions of the rural cultural environment that came out of this research support many of the same perceptions that have been found in prior research that had focused on gay men who are out in Montana and Wyoming. The difference between these works, is that the men in the current study have modified their sexual narratives by choosing to remain closeted as a strategy for remaining in the rural environment, while men in the previous studies have chosen to be out within the rural environment.

To further increase feelings of acceptance and interaction, social support services and opportunities need to be expanded. Several men reported feelings of fear and distrust associated with coming out to their medical providers, preferring instead to turn to the internet to find answers to their questions on websites or through chat rooms. A lack of opportunity for social contact was discussed often. While men felt they were able to interact with the community on a superficial level, many stressed their desire for a deeper sense of connection or social support networks that did not exist solely on the internet, on an anonymous level, or several towns away. However, a prerequisite to utilizing the above would be a change in the larger culture where men feel safe being out.

While there are testing facilities and support networks across the state directed towards gay men, some of the men discussed their discomfort talking with gay men.
Instead they stated their preference for talking to females. It was the minority of interviews that took place as a part of this research where before the interview began or after the interview concluded that I did not sit and listen as the men continued to talk and confide in me. There was a desire to talk to someone, as one man stated, “to get this off of my chest.” With the lack of social support and social outlets it is easy for a secret this large to begin to weigh on a person. Depression, isolation, substance abuse, and in some cases suicide ideation were the result of the fear of being outed and the constant stress that accompanies trying to modify personal narratives within the rural cultural environment. Sondag et al. (2011) also reported findings of high alcohol use among gay men who were out in Montana. This use was attributed to Montana’s culture as a whole as well a normal part of socialization. There remains a large, unfilled need in Montana to ensure that men have an anonymous outlet that may foster feelings of social support.

There are many points I hope the reader takes home from this study including the influence of culture, but perhaps one of the most important is the complexity of identity. Over the past thirty years, we have witnessed LG grow into LGB, which has grown into today’s still expanding LGBTIQQ. For as inclusive as the acronym strives to be, it remains exclusive to many people, including those who do not outwardly identify. While people may share common behaviors that should not reduce our ability to identity as individuals. The majority of men in this study dream of a day when they can express their whole identity without fear.

As Esther Newton stated, “anthropologists study identities, and their exclusions, that is a huge part of what we do” (email November 29, 2011). This dissertation sought to broaden our understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of identity through a
critical anthropological lens. As these men demonstrate, identities are not always outwardly apparent and our words are powerful. Not only do they present the opportunity to create change in the world when used for good, but when used wrong they are capable of influencing someone’s identity, their very core sense of being.

By providing a better understanding of some of the reasons that men are choosing to remain closeted, the next step remains to be taken. It is now time to focus on changing the larger, more abstract heteronormative cultural environment that continues to perpetuate feelings of exclusion. The findings of this research highlight the importance and necessity of multidimensional HIV prevention campaigns.

This dissertation has sought to further reduce the disjuncture between academic research and the everyday reality. By contributing to the literature within anthropology in general and specifically queer anthropology, this dissertation reaffirms that gay men and women are present in rural America, it reaffirms the need for continued research and funding. The lack of rural-based sexual minority research supports Creed and Chings (1997) argument that academia prioritizes urban-based research. As shown in the 2010 Census data, gay men and women are no longer confining themselves to the city. Urban-rural divides are changing as populations move. Researchers can no longer continue to practice a sense of exclusivity by confining sexual minority research to urban areas. This exclusivity continues the “strangely lopsided view of American gay life (White 1980:336) that originates from largely excluding rural stories. The 2011 release of the federally sponsored NIH LGBT health report demonstrated that voices are finally beginning to be heard, that change is slowly occurring at the institutional level, yet few days have gone by since beginning to write this dissertation that I have not heard about an
incidence of discrimination or violence directed at someone in this country because of their sexual identity. As Anthony Romero stated in 1998, “Treating gay and lesbian people like second class citizens -- people who may be worthy of ‘tolerance’, but not of equality -- was and still is the last socially-acceptable prejudice.” It is my hope that this dissertation can become a part of the effort to make the statement above, a statement of the past.

As I write this on National Coming Out Day 2011, I leave you, the reader, with one final question that has been so central within each of the lives of the forty-five men in this study. What would your life be like without homophobia, racism, and sexism? Imagine that world. A different world, where homophobia, racism, and sexism do not exist.
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Appendices

IRB Approval

Information and Consent Form

Outness Inventory
IRB Approval
THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA-MISSOULA
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
CONTINUATION REPORT

This report must be completed if data collection or analysis is still in progress one year past last IRB approval. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is required by Title 21, Code of Federal Regulations (Part 56.109) and Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (Part 46.109) to conduct continuing review of ongoing projects not less than once per year.

Email the completed form as a Word document to IRB@umontana.edu or provide hardcopy to the Office of the Vice President for Research & Development, University Hall 116. NOTE: Submission of this form from a University email account constitutes an individual's signature; students submitting electronically must copy their faculty supervisors.

Project Title: The effects of stigmatization of same-sex sexual orientation on closeted rural men who have sex with men (MSM) sexual risk behaviors and HIV prevention needs.

Principal Investigator: Anne Schwitters
Signature: [Signature]
Email address: amee1.schwitters@umontana.edu
Work Phone: 406-552-2115
Department: Anthropology
Faculty Supervisor (if student project): Annie Sondag
Department: HHP
Signature: [Signature]
Title: MPH and Anthropology
Graduate Student
Cell Phone: 406-552-2115
Office Location: SS235
Work Phone: 243-5215
Email: annie.sondag@mso.umt.edu

1. Approximately how many subjects have you tested? 28

2. Is data collection complete (analysis only)?  Yes  No

3. Have any subjects complained about the research?  Yes  No

If yes, describe any complaints:

4. Have any subjects withdrawn from this research?  Yes  No

If yes, describe the circumstances:

5. Have any adverse effects or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects been reported?  Yes  No

If yes, please describe any adverse effects:

6. Are there any recent findings or publications regarding risks/adverse effects associated with similar research?  Yes  No

If yes, please summarize:

7. Are you making any changes to the originally-approved protocol?  Yes  No

Attach memo describing proposed amendment and, if applicable, new consent/assent/permission form(s).

8. As Principal Investigator, I understand that my signature above certifies that all researchers involved in this project have taken a self-study course on protection of human research subjects (http://www.umt.edu/research/complianceinfo/IRB/) within the last three years and can provide "Certificate(s) of Completion" upon request.  Yes  No

IRB Determination:

X Approved by Expedited/Administrative Review (see *Note to PI)

Full IRB Determination

Approved (see *Note to PI)

Conditional Approval (see attached memo) - IRB Chair Signature/Date:

Conditions Met (see *Note to PI)

Resubmit Proposal (see attached memo)

Disapproved (see attached memo)

Final Approval by IRB Chair: [Signature] Date: 2/28/2011 Expires: 3/28/2012

* Note to PI: Study is approved for one year. Use any attached IRB-approved forms (signed/dated) as "masters" when preparing copies. If continuing beyond the expiration date, a continuation report must be submitted. Notify the IRB if any significant changes or unanticipated events occur. Notify the IRB in writing when the study is terminated.
Information and Consent Form
Information and Consent Form

Project Title: The effects of stigmatization of same-sex sexual orientation on closeted rural men who have sex with men (MSM) sexual risk behaviors and HIV prevention needs.

Sponsor: This project is being sponsored by Montana’s Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) and is being conducted by Amees Schwitters

Local Project Facilitator: Amees Schwitters, MPH. Address: University of Montana Department of Anthropology Social Sciences 235 Missoula, MT 59812 Phone: (406) 552-2115 Fax: (406) 243-4918 Email: amee1.schwitters@umconnect.umt.edu

Project Coordinator: Annie Sondag, PhD. Address: University of Montana Department of Health and Human Performance, McGill Hall 205 Missoula, MT 59812 Phone (406) 243-5215 Fax: (406) 243-6252 Email: annie.sondag@umontana.edu

Special Instructions: This consent form may contain words that are new to you. If you read any words that are not clear to you, please ask the person who gave you this form to explain them to you.

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to gather rural men’s perceptions of stigma oriented at same-sex sexual behavior and their effect on sexual behaviors and ability to access HIV-related information.

What happens during the interviews: Men who are a part of the interviews will meet for approximately 60-120 minutes in private areas of book stores, coffee shops, and other areas mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the interviewee. The interview will be audio taped so we can accurately understand all of the discussion and comments later on. We request your permission to audio tape your comments. The project facilitator, Amees Schwitters, will host the interviews. Amees will first talk about the purpose of this project and answer any questions you may have. Before beginning the interview, you will be asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire and the “outness” inventory. The majority of your time will be spent talking about your perceived stigmas oriented at persons who practice same-sex sexual behavior and how those stigmas influence your ability to practice safe sex and access HIV-related information. There will be time for you to discuss any other topics you see pertinent as well. Your name will not be included on any study records after the interview is over. If you wish to keep your first name private, please make up a first name to use for the duration of the interview.

Payment for participation: You will receive $25.00 cash for your time and I will provide a non-alcoholic drink during the interview.

Risks, inconveniences, and discomforts: Some participants might have some initial discomfort when opening up about sexual practices and behaviors. You may feel uncomfortable disclosing your sexual behaviors and attractions. Disclosing this information could cause you social, emotional, and/or physical harm if your name is connected to the study. To minimize this effect, your identity will be kept anonymous and all research records and files will be kept private and will not be released to anyone outside of the study. If you are uncomfortable during the interview you may choose to end the interview and leave at any time.

Benefits: You might not benefit from taking part in this study, but being a part of the interview will allow you a chance to improve sociocultural and environmental barriers to coming out and practicing safe sex.
Confidentiality: Your records will be kept private and will not be released to anyone outside of the research team. Only the researchers will have access to the files. Your identity will be kept anonymous. If the results of this study are written in a scientific journal or presented at a scientific meeting, your name and exact location will not be used. The data will be stored in a secure office. Consent forms will be stored in a cabinet separate from the data. The audio recording will be transcribed by a member of the research team without any information that could identify you. The recording will then be erased after one year.

We are conducting this interview in a private setting so that any information you share, can be shared confidentially.

Compensation for Injury: Although there are minimal risks in taking part in this study, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms:

"In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims Representative of University Legal Counsel. (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, July 6, 1993)"

Voluntary participation/withdrawal: Your decision to take part in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in or you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are normally entitled. Your participation may be ended by the interviewer if continuing is not in your best interest.

Questions: If you have any questions about the research now or during the study contact: Amee Schwitters, MPH (406) 552-2115. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Chair of the IRB through the University of Montana Research Office at (406) 243-6670.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form.
What is the Outness Inventory?
The Outness Inventory (OI) is an 11-item scale designed to assess the degree to which lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are open about their sexual orientation. Responses on OI items indicate the degree to which the respondent’s sexual orientation is known by and openly discussed with various types of individuals (e.g., mother, work peers).

OUTNESS INVENTORY

Use the following rating scale to indicate how open you are about your sexual orientation to the people listed below. Try to respond to all of the items, but leave items blank if they do not apply to you.

1 = person definitely does NOT know about your sexual orientation status
2 = person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is NEVER talked about
3 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is NEVER talked about
4 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is RARELY talked about
5 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is RARELY talked about
6 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is SOMETIMES talked about
7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is OPENLY talked about
0 = not applicable to your situation; there is no such person or group of people in your life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. mother</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. father</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. siblings (sisters, brothers)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. extended family/relatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. my new straight friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. my work peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. my work supervisor(s)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. members of my religious community (e.g., church, temple)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. leaders of my religious community (e.g., church, temple)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>10. strangers, new acquaintances</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. my old heterosexual friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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