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A Qualitative Analysis of Coping Strategies and the Coming Out Process of Gay Males in College Fraternities

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A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COPING STRATEGIES AND THE
COMING OUT PROCESS OF GAY MALES IN COLLEGE FRATERNITIES

(TITLE)

BY

Jack R. Trump

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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YEAR

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A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COPING STRATEGIES AND THE COMING OUT PROCESS OF GAY MALES IN COLLEGE FRATERNITIES

Jack R. Trump

COMMITTEE:
Dr. Richard Roberts, Chair
Dr. Charles Eberly
Dr. James Wallace
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother, Theresa Carrico, for giving me life, to the first person I came- 
out to, Deborah Groh, for encouraging me to live my own life, and to my life partner,  
Arthur Kambe, who is my life.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the five individuals who were so gracious as to share a portion of their lives with me. May your efforts help pave the way for others to come (out).

To my dearest trio: Dr. Roberts, Dr. Eberly, and Dr. Wallace – You have all believed in me… much more than I have ever believed in myself. Saying thank you is not enough.

To my inspiration, mentor, and “angel” – Uncle Ed, I would not be where I am in my life had it not been for you. You have taught me that I can rise above any of life’s obstacles.

Much love to Gary Ballinger and Jamie Workman, two friends that have poured out their love for me time and time again. This project would not have happened without you.

Special thanks to Mary Bankhead, Dixie Sullenger, and Jamill Taylor – It was reassuring to know that I wasn’t alone. We shall also see each other through to that next step.

To Moe, Big A, Sandro, Ahmed, Corey, Steve, Mark, and all the other Phi Taus who have shown me the meaning of true brotherhood. May the bond never be broken.

To the many colleagues and fellow staff members who have cheered me on and put up with my semi-participation in your lives while I completed this project… THANK YOU!
ABSTRACT

Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to identify existing themes in the lived experiences of five gay males who disclosed their sexuality to some or all of their fraternity brothers while still an undergraduate member. Interviews with the participants were conducted to identify (1) their perceptions of the environment within the fraternity in regard to sexuality, (2) coping strategies used to conceal their sexuality, (3) variables that facilitated coming-out to their fraternities, and (4) their approach to coming-out to their fraternities.

Methodology

Participants were obtained by means of a Call for Participants Email sent over a number of sizable listservs that focused on issues pertaining either to fraternity men, gay men, or gay men in fraternities. Five individuals were selected who fit the selection criteria for this study. The researcher collected data through one-on-one informal interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for the participants to fully share their stories. The researcher used the constant comparative qualitative analysis technique to identify emerging themes.

Findings

Three themes emerged in response to participants' perceptions of the fraternity environment in regard to sexuality: homophobia, heterosexism, and heterocentrism. Participants' perceptions of the fraternity environment significantly affected the usage of both the type and frequency of coping strategies employed. Numerous variables influenced a person's decision to come-out, but most of these variables were in some way
linked to the individual's level of homosexual identity development. Three approaches to coming-out were identified: member specific approach, step-by-step approach, and passive/reactive approach. The member specific approach emphasized coming-out to specific members who were leaders or had a strong bond with the participant. The step-by-step approach focused on a carefully planned strategy to reveal one's sexuality. The passive/reactive approach involved creating scenarios that indirectly provided the opportunity for the respondent to affirm his sexuality. The approach used in coming-out to one's fraternity members appeared to have a strong connection with the variables that facilitated one to come-out to his fraternity. However, the different approaches to coming-out within a fraternity seemed in many ways to contain numerous overlapping elements.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................ iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................... iv
ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................... v
TABLE OF CONTENTS ..................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 1

Statement of the Problem .................................................................................. 4
Research Questions ............................................................................................. 5
Significance of the Study .................................................................................... 5
Limitations of the Study ...................................................................................... 6
Definition of Terms ............................................................................................ 6
Overview ............................................................................................................. 7

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ........................................................................... 8

Fraternity Culture ............................................................................................... 8
Homosexual Identity Development ..................................................................... 12
Coping Strategies of Gay Males .......................................................................... 18
Summary ............................................................................................................ 23

III. METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................... 24

Overview ........................................................................................................... 24
Setting ................................................................................................................ 24
Subjects .............................................................................................................. 25
Instrument ......................................................................................................... 27
Data Collection .................................................................................................. 28
Treatment of Data .............................................................................................. 28

IV. RESULTS ...................................................................................................... 30

Research Question # 1 ...................................................................................... 30
Research Question # 2 ....................................................................................... 33
Research Question # 3 ....................................................................................... 44
Research Question # 4 ....................................................................................... 52
Summary ............................................................................................................. 56
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A number of undergraduate students begin college with the mindset that if they work hard enough and remain focused, their efforts will translate into a successful career. While this may be the situation for some, the reality is that college is often a great deal more than vocational preparation. During these traditional undergraduate years, students face challenges of having to reconsider “their self-perceptions, develop new skills, and master developmental tasks” (Levine & Evans, 1991, p. 1). This process often becomes especially complicated for those students who are gay, for they “have challenges not met by their heterosexual counterparts. Gay adolescents face discrimination, isolation, and often their own internalized homophobia (Johnson, 1996). As such, students who submerge themselves in an environment that might not offer any support or validation for being gay can make the process of developing a homosexual identity even more confounding. Quite possibly the American college fraternity is one example of a collegiate environment that exudes such heterosexism.

Kuh and Arnold (1993) posited, “Fraternities are products of a larger cultural context…they do not exist apart from the societies and institutions that create and support them” (p. 331). Therefore, gay males who join college social fraternities may face adversity for the values, attitudes, beliefs and prejudices held by society and reflected in fraternities. And, although college social fraternities are generally unsupportive of homosexuality, there seems to be an abundance of gay males who are active fraternity members (Case, 1996). Windmeyer and Freeman (1998) gave voice to the lived experience of selected fraternity men and their involvement as a gay male in a college
Gay Males in Fraternities

social fraternity, affirming that gay men do achieve membership in fraternities.

Likewise, Case (1996) distributed a national survey to lesbian, bisexual, gay (lesbigay) Greek members, with over 90 percent of the more than 500 participants being non-heterosexual males who were members of college social fraternities, further substantiating the idea that there is an occurrence of gay males who are active fraternity members.

To understand the phenomenon of why a person would willingly submerge himself into what may be considered a stereotypically heterosexist institution, one must first recognize the impact of homophobia and heterosexism and the effect of internalized homophobia on gay men. Adams, Bell and Griffin (1997) defined heterosexism as the “societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable orientation” (p. 162).

Homophobia:

The fear, hatred, or intolerance of lesbians, gay men, or any behavior that is outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Homophobia can be manifested as fear of association with lesbian or gay people or being perceived as lesbian or gay. Homophobic behavior can range from telling jokes about lesbian and gay people to physical violence against people thought to be lesbian or gay. (Adams, et al., p. 162)

With the recognition that homosexuality might be distinctively relevant to one’s identity, learning how to cope becomes an essential task for the young adolescent trying to survive in a society perpetuating homophobia and heterosexism. As such, many gay males are able to manage the pressures that result from being rejected and marginalized
by elements of society (Boies, 1997; Lasser, 1999; Mahan, 1998). They adopt specific strategies that help them to cope in certain situations. Mahan (1998) asserted that coping should be viewed as contextual, "referring to the individual's thoughts and behaviors within a specific context" (p. 51). Simply put, coping is a function of both the person and the environment. Thus, two people immersed in the same environment may employ different coping strategies. On the other hand, a person might use the same coping strategy in differing environments.

Some researchers have identified and labeled distinctive coping strategies that are used by gay males. Woods (1992) found in his study that gay males in the corporate world used three coping strategies to manage their sexuality – counterfeiting an identity, integrating an identity, and avoiding a sexual identity. Although Wood's study did not focus on fraternities, there may be a correlation between the results of Wood's study and the coping strategies of gay men in fraternities, for Byran (1987) claimed that fraternities are "a microcosm of broader society" (p. 38). Therefore, one might reasonably assume that the culture of a fraternity directly affects both the types of coping strategies that are employed by a gay fraternity member as well as his willingness to disclose his homosexuality (come-out) to other members of the fraternity.

It is estimated that the majority of gay males who join fraternities choose not to come-out, especially as an undergraduate member (Case, 1996). Case offered one explanation of why gay fraternity males may choose not to come-out to their fraternity:

Over 70% of the respondents indicated that they had encountered homophobic or heterosexist attitudes within their chapter, usually in the form of derogatory jokes or comments. Homophobia was also frequently evidenced in membership
selection. If a rushee was rumored or perceived to be gay... the chapter was likely to summarily vote against offering the rushee a bid to join. Likewise, if a pledge was discovered or believed to be gay... the chapter was inclined to dismiss the pledge. More often than not, the initiated (gay) member(s) would voice no opposition to the discrimination, fearing that to do so might cause other members to question their motivation. One (non-disclosed gay man) wrote, “A rushee was blackballed because of suspected homosexuality. I was one of the three who blackballed him.” (1998, p. 2)

While the majority of gay males in college social fraternities choose not to come-out to their fraternity as an undergraduate member, there are some gay males who do choose to come-out to the fraternity (Case, 1996). It is suggested that the number of individuals who come-out within their Greek letter organizations is increasing. Case (1996) stated, “In today’s world, though, more lesbigay students on campus, including those in fraternities and sororities, feel compelled to no longer hide their true identities” (p. 4).

**Statement of the Problem**

The premise upon which this study is based is that a number of gay males in college social fraternities are able to successfully conceal their sexuality but make a conscious decision to disclose their sexuality (come-out) as undergraduate members in spite of possible adverse conditions.

The purpose of this study was to identify existing themes in the lived experiences of gay males in fraternities who have come-out to other fraternity members while still an
undergraduate student. This study also added to the existing literature regarding the collegiate experiences of gay males and their involvement in Greek letter organizations.

Research Questions

Through this study of gay males who come-out to their fraternity as an undergraduate member, the following research questions apply.

1. What is the perceived atmosphere within the fraternity in regard to sexuality?
2. What are the coping strategies of gay males in social college fraternities prior to coming-out?
3. What variables facilitate gay men to come-out to their fraternity?
4. Is there a specific approach that gay males employ as a means of coming-out to their fraternity?

Significance of the Study

Although college social fraternities may reflect the same anti-homosexual values as American society, these organizations nevertheless attract gay male members. As mentioned previously, Case (1996) surveyed gay men in fraternities and found compelling results that suggest a substantial number of gay men not only gain membership but also achieve leadership status in fraternities. These data are supported in Freeman and Windmeyer’s (1998) anthology of gay men who wrote about their experiences of being gay in the midst of fraternity life. While the works of these aforementioned individuals have contributed to an increasing awareness of issues that many gay men experience as an active fraternity member, there is little known about the experiences of gay males in fraternities who have not remained obscure about their sexuality at the time of their involvement within the fraternity. Furthermore, much of the
research available on coping strategies of gay males focuses almost entirely on coping with HIV and AIDS. And, while there has been research conducted on coping strategies of gay males not related to coping with HIV and AIDS, there is no study of coping strategies of gay males in fraternities who have come-out to their fraternity as an undergraduate member.

Limitations

1. A considerable degree of difficulty exists in obtaining participants from a hidden population that will match selected criteria.

2. The findings of this study are specific to the participants' experiences and cannot be generalized to the experiences of other gay males in fraternities.

3. The data gathered involves reflecting up on past personal experiences. A major concern with this approach to data collection is that of "subjective reconstruction" (Hareven, 1982). In this sense, participants may reconstruct past events to fit with their present life experiences.

4. The restrictive nature of the researcher-participant relationship may affect the degree to which participants are comfortable sharing highly personal information.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used according to the following definitions:

1. Brotherhood: a close familial relationship between fraternity members

2. Coming-out: refers to disclosing one's sexuality to others

3. Coping: cognitive thoughts or behaviors of an individual in regard to keeping one's sexuality concealed

4. Homophobia: an irrational fear or hatred of those who are homosexual
5. Homosexual: refers to persons who are capable of feeling attracted to and engaging in relationships of the same sex

6. Heterocentrism: refers to the assumption that no homosexual persons are members of the group

7. Heterosexism: the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal or correct sexuality

8. Social capital: the perceived value or worth of specific behaviors in regard to sexuality

Overview

This study is comprised of five chapters. Chapter II provides an overview of the literature relevant to this study. Chapter III outlines the methodology of the study. Chapter IV contains the results of data collection, and Chapter V includes a discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following literature review focuses on three broad areas thought to be of importance in understanding the specific phenomenon of gay males coping and coming-out within fraternities. They are (1) fraternity culture, (2) homosexual identity development, and (3) coping strategies of gay males. Fraternity culture is important to study because it provides an awareness of the social milieu that may exist within the organization. Identity development has been an established area of study concerning minorities and will help create a conceptual framework for the research. Additionally, the literature concerning coping strategies, albeit limited, will assist the researcher in comparing existing data on coping strategies of gay males with those found by the researcher.

Fraternity Culture

The American college fraternity began at the College of William and Mary with the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776. As a predecessor to college fraternities, Phi Beta Kappa "established precedents that today’s groups still follow, including names composed of Greek letters; secret rituals and symbols that affirm shared values and beliefs; and a badge" (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998, p. 7). Fraternity life was intended to aid college students in their personal development through educational debates, the presentation of original works, and academic papers, all in the context of camaraderie and fun (Owen, 1991). As fraternities, college campuses, and students evolved, the function of a Greek-letter organization deviated from its intended focus. The emphasis began to stress the social aspects of these organizations, and as Randall and Grady (1998) stated,
“most people believe that social refers to events such as parties, date functions, and even intramurals sponsored by the organizations. They see these as Greek organizations’ primary activities, not the personal development of members” (p. 29).

Consequently, over recent decades, fraternities and sororities across the United States have received sharp criticisms by researchers for their deviation from their founding values toward more anti-intellectual attitudes, beliefs, and activities as they relate to the ultimate goals of higher education and scholarship (Winston & Saunders, 1987; Wilder et al, 1986). Research on college Greek-letter organizations tends to focus on fraternity culture as it relates to binge drinking (Kuh & Arnold, 1993), low academic performance (Maisel, 1990), delayed development and morality (Kilgannan & Erwin, 1992), and intolerance of differences (Bryan, 1987).

Fraternities have received a great deal of criticism in regard to alcohol use and abuse. Kuh and Arnold (1993) suggested that fraternities have included alcohol as a way of maintaining the social norms of the organization. Alcohol is often used in excessive amounts in Greek organizations as a bonding device to make new members conform to organizational norms of the organization to the point at which it is dangerously abused. In recent years, injury or even death has resulted from the misuse and abuse of alcohol (Bryan, 1987). Although unfortunate, the abuse of alcohol to the extent that one or more fraternity members die is not necessarily an uncommon occurrence (Nuwer, 2001). For example, Nuwer reported that in 1997, “Scott Krueger, 18, of Orchard Park, New York, went into a coma and died after a pledge event at which he ingested enough alcohol to raise his blood alcohol level to 0.410” (p. 270). Scott’s death was only one of numerous deaths mentioned resulting from the abuse of alcohol.
Academic integrity is often an issue of concern in regard to fraternities as well. Winston and Saunders (1987) noted that membership in a fraternity has no positive effect on academic performance, and that members are more likely to cheat during their undergraduate studies. In this regard, it may be perceived that fraternities are not doing much to challenge the cognitive abilities of their members. A lack of emphasis in academic and scholarly programming by the chapter may also lead to a negative impact in cognitive development and critical thinking skills of men in their first year of college (Randall & Grady, 1998; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998).

Many studies (Baier & Whipple, 1990; Miller, 1973; Wilder, et al., 1978) have found that fraternity members tend to be more politically conservative, more dependent on peers, indifferent to moral and social injustices, and less passionate about cultural activities. Maisel (1990) noted that, “fraternities…are exclusionary by practice, sexist in nature, and gender specific by design” (p. 8). These attitudes ultimately lead to exclusionary practices, conformist ideologies, and protection of people in the closed society of fraternity from people with different values and beliefs outside the fraternity.

Proponents of fraternities have touted that fraternities have the ability to shape and develop individuals’ leadership skills, strong same-sex friendships, ability to work in teams, promotion of community service and philanthropy, and development of a strong sense of belonging and self-esteem (Hughes & Winston, 1987; Winston & Saunders, 1987). Strange (1986) noted that fraternities might be “one of the best educational and developmental environments available to college students on campus…[sic] provides members with a chance for meaningful achievement, and leadership in various roles” (p. 522).
Additionally, the fraternity may provide a quasi-familial environment that is maintained and emphasized from the beginning as new members (associates) are taught that fraternity is like a "family" (Baier & Whipple, 1990, p. 52). This idea is perpetuated in the fraternity with the use of family-related language such as "brother," "pledge dad," and "little brother" (Jakobsen, 1986, p. 524). Jakobsen further hypothesized that there also exists a set of behavioral expectations within both the family unit and Greek organization drawing parallels between the ideal of preservation from outside factors on the family and fraternity.

Today's college social fraternities have kept many of the rituals and symbols of yesteryear but have also changed quite considerably as well. As mentioned previously, college social fraternities were established to help foster and enhance the development of intellectual skills, increase understanding of the social arena of the day and provide outlets for camaraderie and fun. However, as fraternities evolved, much emphasis was placed on having fun and being social to the degree that social activities tended to overshadow everything else. Although social college fraternities of today vary greatly from their time of conception, they still remain as a strong influence on college campuses, helping "shape the institution's character and culture" (Boschini & Thompson, 1998, p. 21). Yet, if college social fraternities are to remain as strong and as influential in the development of their members of tomorrow as they were yesterday, they must begin to discard barriers that inhibit the inclusion of diverse members (Baier & Whipple, 1990; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998). Moreover, today's college social fraternities must stop being "pursuers of the status quo, reacting to issues rather
than acting on issues. They must become bastions of tolerance when it comes to minority differences, religious choice, or sexual preference” (Bryan, 1987, p. 38).

**Homosexual Identity Formation**

Homosexuality is often a highly controversial topic that has invoked heated debates. While there are those who support the idea that homosexuality is a legitimate sexuality, there are many people who view homosexuality as pathological and immoral. Early studies of homosexuality did not focus on the achievement of a homosexual identity, but rather the causes of homosexuality. (Levine & Evans, 1991)

Instead of concentrating on etiology, a number of writers began focusing their attention toward the process by which an individual adopts a homosexual identity. Some researchers have made claims that sexuality is determined during early childhood, suggesting that it is possible that young children may know that their sexuality differs from the norm (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). There is a great deal of literature suggesting that individuals become aware of their differing sexuality during early adolescence (Johnson, 1996; Troiden, 1989). The recognition of one’s affectional or sexual interests as being dissimilar to that of the norm (heterosexuality) in society initiates the process of homosexual identity formation (Coleman, 1982; D’Augelli, 1991; Eliason, 1996). The literature pertaining to homosexual identity formation suggests that, although young males do not typically identify as homosexual during the time of early adolescence, they do possess an awareness of their affectional orientation (D’Augelli, 1991; Troiden, 1989). This confusing and complex process elicited many researchers’ interest; and as a result, a number of models have been developed in an attempt to describe how one forms a homosexual identity.
Several researchers developed stage models that fall into three basic categories: social (Coleman, 1982; Dank, 1971; Lee, 1977), psychological (Minton & McDonald, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1979) and psychosocial (Cass, 1979). The social models emphasize social factors, such as the time lapse between first awareness and age of first homosexual experience. Social models also emphasize coming-out as the landmark of being gay. Coleman’s (1982) “Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process” is one such model. Age is emphasized in this model, suggesting that males usually acknowledge their homosexual feelings when they are around 13 or 14 years old. Unlike social models, psychological models focus attention on internal processes, emphasizing the differing levels of self-acceptance as a person moves from stage to stage. For example, Troiden (1989) suggested that a major contributing factor to self-identifying as homosexual depends on the meanings attributed to previous life experiences. Unlike social or psychological models, a psychosocial model focuses on both social and psychological factors and the interaction between the two as one moves through the stages of homosexual identity formation as developed by Cass in Levine and Evans (1991). Cass’s (1979) article, “Homosexual Identity Development,” has been frequently referenced in much of the body of literature that pertains to homosexual identity formation.

Cass’s Model

The underpinnings of Cass’s model were based on two assumptions: (1) “identity is acquired through a developmental process,” and (2) “locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (Cass, 1979, p. 219). Additionally, Cass emphasized that at any point in
the process, a person can foreclose, and "is seen to have an active role in the acquisition of a homosexual identity" (p. 219). This model, although having some similarities to earlier work, was generated independently and is observed through much of the literature to provide an adequate explanation of the homosexual identity formation process.

The model explains "the process by which a person comes first to consider and later to acquire the identity of 'homosexual' as a relevant aspect of self" (Cass, 1979, p. 219). The model consists of six stages, each representing a distinct point along the continuum between identity confusion – first labeling the behaviors of oneself as homosexual, to identity synthesis – the point at which congruency is reached between one's personal and public identities as homosexual.

Identity Assumption is the first stage. At his stage a person becomes consciously aware that homosexuality may in some way be relevant to him or her. Importance is placed on the individual labeling his or her own behavior as possibly being homosexual. Not the possible labeling by others, but the awareness of and labeling of one's own behavior as possibly being homosexual is the catalyst in the process of developing a homosexual identity.

Identity Comparison is the second stage. In this stage, the person moves from a point of perceiving his or her behaviors as possibly being homosexual to giving consideration to one's self as actually being homosexual. With this awareness, there is a considerable decrease in the confusion and turmoil from the previous stage. However, someone at this stage is likely to experience perceived alienation, with an increase in feelings of being different, all alone, and in a world incapable of truly understanding him or her. The individual begins to question who they are and if this world has included a
place for them. The main task during the identity comparison stage is to deal with this surfacing social alienation (perceived or real).

Identity Tolerance is the third stage. In order to counter the felt isolation and alienation from others, the person at this stage expends a great deal of energy attempting to locate and interact with other homosexuals. Although a person can choose identity foreclosure at any time during the identity development process regardless of stage location, it is at this stage when the quality of the contacts with other homosexuals is a crucial element, for it determines to a great extent whether the person will continue his or her process or decides that homosexuality is not indicative of who they are. Essentially, if the quality of the contact is bad, the person may decide that they are not at all homosexual and therefore decide to foreclose. On the other hand, if the quality of the contact with other homosexuals is good, they may then decide that, even though they are not exactly thrilled about the whole idea, they are homosexual. By the end of this stage, there is an increase in the person’s commitment to a level where the person can say to themselves “I am homosexual.”

Identity Acceptance is the fourth stage. At this stage, the internal questions relevant to the earlier stages of development pertaining to who they are and where they fit within the world have been answered. Affiliation with the gay subculture increases in importance. Likewise, the person becomes fixed on lessening the incongruence between personal identity and perceived identity. Depending on what strategy one uses to lessen the imbalance between his or her own view of self and how others see him or her determines whether or not the individual is projected into stage five or bypasses stage five and reaches stage six.
Identity Pride is the fifth stage. If a person enters this stage, he or she may have a lot of pent up anger and pride that are released in the form of activism against established institutions (e.g., heterocentrism, heterosexism, homophobia). Put another way, individuals become very militant about accepting themselves as homosexual, their senses appear to be heightened and on the lookout for any perceived attacks (real or imagined) against their homosexuality. He (or she) is ready and willing to come-out to almost anyone. The person may use such slogans as “‘Gay is good,’ ‘Gay and proud,’ or ‘How dare you presume I’m heterosexual’” (Cass, 1979, p. 233). At times, the individual may “out” him- or herself and receive a positive reaction from someone who is heterosexual. The more this occurs, the greater the likelihood that the individual begins to experience stronger feelings of self acceptance of their sexuality as a reaction to the acceptance expressed by others. This new experience may result in conflicting consistencies of self versus other’s perceptions and propel the individual into stage six, Identity synthesis.

During the identity synthesis stage, the previously espoused ‘them and us’ philosophy no longer holds true. The person no longer sees all homosexuals as inherently good (supportive) and all heterosexuals as inherently bad (non-supportive). The realization that some heterosexuals are supportive of homosexuals challenges the individual to alter their ‘intrapersonal matrix’ to allow for this inconsistency (Cass, 1979). As the person’s contact with supportive heterosexuals increases, the individual begins to adopt a way of thinking that incorporates the idea that they do share a lot in common with heterosexuals, and, at the same time, may have considerable differences with other homosexuals. Also at this stage the person’s personal and public sexual identities mesh (synthesize) into one sexual identity. Therefore, the salience that the
person previously gave to his or her homosexual identity decreases as he or she recognizes that homosexuality is not their only identity; rather, it is only one component of who they are (male, college student, fraternity member, etc.).

Although Cass’s model was cited in much of the literature and has gained a great deal of acceptance as an accurate model, other models have also been developed to describe the process of forming a homosexual identity. One example is Troiden’s (1979) model of Gay Identity Acquisition. Unlike Cass’s model which focuses on obtaining congruencies with the perception of self, the perception of others and self-identity, Troiden argued that sexuality is dependent upon specific social settings; hence, a social model. Another difference to that of Cass’s model is that Troiden’s model is comprised of four stages (Sensitization, Identity confusion, Identity assumption, and Commitment) instead of six, and includes approximations of individual’s ages as they progress through each stage. For instance, stage one (Confusion) suggests that the average age of males in this stage is 17, and the average age of males in the Identity Assumption stage is 19-21. However, Troiden also maintained that, “As some persons progress through these stages, some steps may be merged or glossed over, bypassed, or realized simultaneously” (p. 372).

As the literature suggested, several theoretical models shed light on how an individual acquires a homosexual identity. Most models have been presented as ‘the model’ with acceptance of its definitiveness as a given. However, suggesting that one’s model is the definitive model in explaining a particular phenomenon can be problematic. Rhoads (1995) explicitly acknowledged this problematic possibility in his own work:
The problem with proposing a pattern or model of development is that one runs the risk of constructing a normative view of gay identity. And, arguably, it is the normalization of sexual identity – in which heterosexuality is established as the norm – that contributes to the widespread oppression of gay and bisexual men in the first place. (p. 72)

**Coping Strategies of Gay Males**

Being a minority in society means having to overcome several obstacles. The young gay adolescent male feels as if he is not any different than his heterosexual counterparts (Johnson, 1996). What is worse is that by the time he does begin to realize that his sexuality is different, he already possesses a great deal of internalized homophobia (Johnson, 1996; Wilson, 1999). Homophobia “...generates an enormous catalogue of feelings for sexual minority youth, including loneliness, embarrassment, discomfort, guilt, anger, fear of victimization, fear of rejection, isolation, and ‘unsettledness’” (Lasser, 1999, p. 47). Society, whether covertly or overtly, has viewed homosexuality as deviant and immoral, with the concomitant cultural messages portraying homosexuals as rejected or diseased individuals (Lasser, 1999). Moreover, Herek, as cited in Lasser (1999), claimed, “…homophobia is an integral component of socially constructed, idealized masculinity – that is, to be hostile toward homosexual persons in general and gay men in particular” (p. 27). All of this occurs before the adolescent male even realizes that he may himself be homosexual. This is because “sex is one of the few physical experiences … we know how we feel about …(attitudes of good/bad, right/wrong) before we experience it” (Johnson, 1996, p. 38). With the recognition that homosexuality might be distinctively relevant to oneself, learning how to
cope becomes an essential task for the young adolescent trying to survive in a society infected with homophobia and heterosexism.

Unfortunately, many gay males are unable to cope with pervasive homophobia and heterosexism. Subsequently, a large percentage of gay males (and females) attempt suicide. D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) reported that 42 percent of their 194 participants had attempted suicide. Other studies have supported these data suggesting that the average percentage of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth who attempt suicide is anywhere from 20 percent to 39 percent (Brock & Sandoval, 1996; Gillis, et al., 1995). These percentages are alarming when compared to the percentage of heterosexual youth who attempt suicide. Garland and Zigler (1993) claimed that the percentage of youth in the general population who attempt suicide is 6 percent to 10 percent.

Many gay males are able to manage the pressures that result from being rejected and marginalized (Boies, 1997; Lasser, 1999; Mahan, 1998). Hence, they adopt specific strategies that help them cope in certain situations. As explained previously, coping is “contextual, referring to the individual’s thoughts and behaviors within a specific context” (Mahan, 1998, p. 51). Mahan (1998) also asserted, “Individuals adjust coping efforts from context to context depending on whether they appraise the stressful event as a harmless threat or a challenge” (p. 52).

Coping can be divided into two basic types – subconscious coping and conscious coping (Mahan, 1998). The literature reviewed in the present study focused on conscious coping, “as participants can report only those thoughts and behaviors of which they are aware” (Mahan, 1998, p. 43). Conscious coping is separated into two categories – problem-focused and emotion-focused (Mahan, 1998; Todoroff, 1995). Gay males have
used a variation of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Cox & Gallois, 1996; Kaiser, 1998; Mahan, 1998).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed a model that focused specifically on conscious, purposive cognitions or behaviors, suggesting that participants cannot report that of which they are not aware. This model is known as the Transactional Model of Coping. The essence of this model is that the individual and the environment are not mutually exclusive. The individual evaluates the level of harm or threat to determine which, if any, coping responses will be used. The model emphasizes context specificity, in that as the context (environment) changes, the individual adjusts his or her coping efforts accordingly.

A handful of researchers have identified and labeled distinctive coping strategies that are used by gay males. Johnson (1996) used the term “reaction patterns,” and suggested that gay adolescents follow the pattern of being the “best little boy on the face of the earth,” or the “drop-out” (p. 38). Case’s (1996) study of gay and lesbian Greek members may provide some validity to this claim. In Case’s survey, 80% of the men held at least one executive committee position, and over 20% were either president or vice president of their fraternity. An explanation Case gave in response to these findings was that a “tendency toward ‘overachievement’ may reflect a desire for validation and acceptance by the group” (p. 2).

As mentioned previously, Woods (1992) conducted a study of gay males in the corporate world and found three basic coping strategies used to manage their sexuality – avoiding a sexual identity, counterfeiting an identity, and integrating an identity. An example of avoiding a sexual identity is that of a person who is very illusive about his
sexuality and dodges any conversations surrounding the issue. One example of counterfeiting an identity is that of a non-disclosed gay male who makes references about the attractiveness of women or pretends to be in a dating relationship with a woman. Integrating an identity is very similar to what Cass described as identity synthesis but different in that it may only be situational. For instance, a gay male may be very integrated in certain environments and very discrete in others. The men in Wood’s study reported that by disclosing their identity, they exposed themselves to prejudice and increased performance pressures. Woods held that participants often used more than one strategy, forcing them to segregate their audiences. Furthermore, the attitudes toward homosexuality by their coworkers had a strong influence on which coping strategy the men used to manage their sexual identity.

Cox and Gallois (1996) focused attention on social ingroups and outgroups and the “process of interpersonal congruency maintenance,” in an attempt to level the social status of the minority group with the dominant group (p. 9). Humphreys, as cited in Cox and Gallois, claimed that gay males used four strategies involving “social mobility: capitulating, passing, covering, and blending” (p. 18). Capitulating refered to avoiding homosexual activity. Passing was essentially being able to camouflage oneself as heterosexual. According to Cox and Gallois, “Individuals who cover are prepared to disclose their sexuality if asked, but do not actively demonstrate it” (p. 18). Blending refers to behaving appropriately according to one’s gender. These strategies have been described as “social mobility strategies” (1996, p. 18) because they are used by individuals rather than groups.
Cox and Gallois (1996) also discussed “social change strategies,” and asserted that “at times it is not possible to induce real change in the relative status between groups, but it is possible to alter the cognitive aspects of this relationship” (p. 20). Four strategies were discussed, with the fourth strategy being the only strategy inducing any actual social change. The first strategy was “to find new dimensions on which to compare groups” (p. 20). For example, someone using this strategy looks for ways to put homosexuals in a more positive light when compared to heterosexuals. He or she may claim that homosexuals are better dancers or are more artistically inclined. “[Redefining] the value attached to existing comparison dimensions” (p. 20) was the second strategy. Using this strategy, someone might call heterosexual people ‘breeders’, attaching a negative value judgment based upon procreation as a possibility for those who engage in heterosexual sexual activity. The third strategy was to “select new comparison groups against which favorable comparisons can be made” (p. 20). The essence of this strategy is unlike the previous strategies mentioned in that the focus is on intragroup comparisons rather than intergroup comparisons. For instance, someone who is gay that is more “straight acting” may look down upon other gay people who are more effeminate in nature. These three previously mentioned strategies exercised emotion-focused coping. Conversely, the fourth strategy, “social competition,” (p. 20) was more problem-focused. This strategy was used as a means of affecting real change between the groups. Cox and Gallois stated, “direct competition with the dominant group is required” (p. 20). Coming-out to a group of peers who are perceived to be possibly homophobic may be an example of this strategy, for the person who comes-out might be using his achieved status within the
group as a means of possible social collateral to challenge any negative repercussions that may arise as a result of his disclosure.

Summary

Three primary areas of interest were examined for this review of literature: fraternity culture, homosexual identity development, and coping strategies of gay males. The literature on fraternity culture was mixed. Some critics suggested that fraternities have become less concerned with the growth and development of their members and more concerned with the consumption of alcohol, academic dishonesty, immorality, and intolerance of differences. Other critics claimed that fraternities are “one of the best educational and developmental environments available to college students on campus” (Strange, 1986, p. 522).

The literature pertaining to homosexual identity development suggested that a majority of gay males matriculated through a series of stages from first awareness to the attainment of an integrated homosexual identity. While there were several models associated with the development of a homosexual identity, some models were more accepted than others. Cass’ (1979) model of homosexual identity development appeared to be the most widely recognized model within the literature reviewed.

Whether it is problem-focused or emotion-focused, gay men utilize a multitude of conscious strategies to cope with the inescapable homophobia and heterosexism that exists in American society. Some individuals have resorted to suicide as a means of dealing with societal pressures (Johnson, 1996), while others have learned to successfully employ effective coping strategies to aid in managing their sexual identity.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

This was a qualitative study of the coping strategies of self-disclosing gay males in college social fraternities. The purpose behind using qualitative methodology was to examine the participants' experiences from their own perspective. As Taylor and Bogdan (1984) have indicated, qualitative methods, in the broadest sense, refers to research that "produces descriptive data: people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (p. 5). Specifically, this was a basic or generic qualitative study. According to Merriam (1998), this type of study seeks to "discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11). Participants consisted of individuals who self-identified as gay, are/were active members of a social college fraternity, and who disclosed their sexuality to other members within their social college fraternity as an undergraduate chapter member. Data were collected via one-on-one informal interviews conducted by the researcher. Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and qualitative techniques were used to analyze narratives, search for patterns or themes, and formulate interpretations.

Setting

The interview setting was determined in cooperation with the participants. The participants were encouraged to choose a location that would be comfortable, convenient, and ensure a low level of background noise or distractions, as the interviews were to be audio-recorded. It was also suggested that the participant choose a location that would allow for some privacy, so as to safeguard against possible issues of confidentiality.
With the exception of one local interview that took place in the interviewer's place of residence, all other interviews were conducted at the interviewee's place of residence.

**Subjects**

Studying "hidden populations" can often create unique research issues that complicate matters of recruitment strategies and research design. According to Case (1996), the number of gay men who disclose their sexuality to their fraternity as an undergraduate member is difficult to estimate. Case referred to this group as "hidden members," suggesting that the recruitment of a useful sample may be difficult to obtain. Thus, additional obstacles were faced when trying to locate participants who specifically a) fit the criteria, b) were willing to participate in a research study, and c) were within a reasonable distance of being able to conduct a face-to-face interview.

In an attempt to locate a sample of the population that would fit the scope of the present research, a Call-for-Participants Email (Appendix A) was developed that, through the help of a few colleagues, was sent out over a number of sizeable listservs that focus on issues pertaining either to fraternity men, gay men, or gay fraternity men. Those who received the email were asked to respond should either they or someone they might know fit the initial criteria for the study. In a period of three weeks, nineteen individuals responded to the call-for-participants email. Each respondent received a follow-up email including a simple survey (Appendix B) to gather additional information that would be helpful in deciding which respondents to select as participants for the present study. After gathering the results of the survey, it was decided that six individuals fit within the scope of this study while also being within the maximum desired driving distance from the researcher. An email was then sent back to the chosen individuals stating that they
had been selected as participants for the study (Appendix C). The selected participants were asked to reply to this email and include both their contact information and selection of available interview dates provided. Five of the six participants responded. An additional email was sent back to the person who did not respond, but there was still no response. It was determined that this person self-selected to withdraw from the study.

The researcher then called each of the five remaining participants to gather all the necessary information in order to conduct the interview, including time, place, and any needed driving directions. Each of the five interviews took place in early March, 2003.

All five participants of this study were white males who attended five different Midwestern colleges or universities and were all members of five different North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) campus chapters. All participants had completed their group’s pledging process and were initiated members prior to their decision to come-out to their undergraduate fraternity brothers. Four of the five participants were out to their entire chapter membership. One participant was out to some but not all of his fraternity brothers at the time of the interview. Two participants were still undergraduate students at the time of the interview.

The first participant attended a midsize public university and joined his fraternity during his first year in college. At the time of the interview he was a junior in college and had only come-out to three fraternity members. He planed to be out to the entire brotherhood before the end of his next semester. The second participant obtained his undergraduate degree from a small private university and has since completed a master’s program at large public university. He joined his fraternity the sixth week of his freshman year but did not come-out to his fraternity brothers until the fall semester of his
junior year. The third participant attended a midsize public university and he was a sophomore at the time of the interview. This participant joined his fraternity the summer before he began college but waited until the second semester of his freshman year before coming-out to half of his chapter. The following summer he came-out to the remaining members of his chapter. The fourth participant attended a large public university, and he joined his fraternity the first week of his freshman year. This participant came-out to his fraternity brothers near the end of his junior year. He had since graduated at the time of the interview. The fifth participant attended a small private liberal arts college. At the time of the interview, this participant was a doctoral candidate at a large prestigious private university. This participant joined his fraternity his freshman year but waited until the beginning of his junior year to come-out to his fraternity brothers.

Instrument

The instrument used for the present study was the semi-structured interview. Before each interview began, the researcher reviewed in detail an informed-consent form (Appendix D) with the participant. The form explained that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The form also explained that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed. Before starting the tape, the researcher made casual conversation with the participant to build rapport and to assist with helping the participant to be relaxed and prepared to begin sharing their story. The researcher also explained that the interview would be semi-structured with an emphasis on letting the participant fully share his story. The researcher explained that an interview protocol was only to be used as a guide to ensure that the participant had an opportunity to respond to all research questions. The researcher began each interview by
asking the participant to describe himself. The purpose was to allow the participant to begin at a comfortable starting point and proceed from there. The interviews lasted from one hour to two and a half hours. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher indicated that a follow-up email would be sent should there be a need for any further explanation or clarification of responses.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual interviews that were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Individual interviews were conducted face-to-face. The individual interview method was chosen because it enabled the participant to share the full extent of their experience of being a self-disclosed gay male in a social college fraternity without the dynamics of a group. Additionally, this interview method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to observe the participant's behavior, setting, and how they interpreted their perceptions during the interview (Weiss, 1994).

Treatment of Data

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Although the researcher adopted the constant comparative method to analyze the data, the researcher was not seeking to build substantive theory (Merriam, 1998). This particular research project was not meant to generalize to the entire population, but rather to "specify the conditions under which [the] phenomena exist, the action/interaction that pertains to them, and the associated outcomes or consequences" (Strass & Corbin, 1990, p.191). Constant comparative methodology refers to the technique of constantly comparing data. The researcher took field notes of each interview for comparison with all other data. These comparisons led
to meaningful categories or themes that were helpful in identifying coping strategies and coming-out processes of self-disclosing gay males in college fraternities.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents a discussion of the emergent themes relevant to the four research questions. The qualitative analysis provided a rich description of how five participants managed their sexuality within their fraternities prior to coming-out within their respective chapters. In examining the data collected from this research, several themes emerged. Some themes were apropos to more than one research question. For simplicity, each theme was assigned to only one research question. A discussion of the resultant complexities will ensue in the subsequent chapter.

Research Question # 1: What is the perceived atmosphere within the fraternity with regard to sexuality?

Three themes emerged as a result of the participants’ perceptions of the atmosphere within the fraternity in regard to sexuality: homophobia, heterosexism, and heterocentrism. Below is an expanded discussion of each theme.

Homophobia

Four of the five respondents indicated perceiving the environment within their fraternity as being homophobic in nature. One respondent recalled his initial impression with his fraternity to be “a fairly open and accepting place... but when I got there and was ready to move in, the first day I heard so many gay jokes and anti-gay slurs and I was just instantly back in the closet and didn’t even think about coming-out for the next month or two.” This was echoed by the other participants who claimed that it was essentially impossible to avoid hearing their fraternity members make negative comments about gay people in some fashion, whether it was in the form of a joke or through the
excessive usage of slurs. One participant, who was still in the process of coming-out to his entire chapter, shared his reservations about coming-out based on his perception of the existing homophobia:

I would hope it would be all good but I know it wouldn’t. I know that there would probably be some guys in the house that wouldn’t be able to accept it. And... so I know our relationship would change in a way... in talking with them, or vice versa, them talking to me. I know it would change. I would hope that it would all be positive, but I know it wouldn’t be.

As participants’ involvement in their fraternity increased, their perceptions of what was previously thought to be sheer homophobia began to change. Although the participants did not deny the existence of homophobia within their fraternities, they began to attribute the homophobic comments or gestures as being “out of habit” more than anything else. One participant asserted, “…they’re just a bunch of normal teenage guys and they, they have the same kind of macho, slaggering attitude most teenage guys do.” Another participant stated, “…they could have just as easily said, you’re an idiot, as, you’re gay, and it didn’t matter.”

Heterosexism

All the participants had a clear understanding that heterosexuality was the only accepted form of sexuality within the fraternity. One participant stated:

I was in a Greek system that had very clear, defined gender roles. On that campus, there was the, the kind of reinforcement, subtly, that heterosexuality was what was right and what was necessary to be successful.
This was reinforced early on as it was expected that the guys bring a female date to fraternity socials. Although one participant claimed that his fraternity was not homophobic, he still thought that it was only proper to tell his fraternity in advance should he ever bring a male date to a fraternity function, claiming, “You need to prepare them for something like that.” Another participant claimed that his fraternity not only expected but subtly imposed heterosexuality. He felt that you had to actually be dating a female or others would begin to have suspicions as to whether or not you might be gay.

**Heterocentrism**

In addition to the pervasive heterosexism, there was an air of heterocentrism that was also present. One participant explained that it was very common for certain members of the fraternity to be teased about their sexuality, but it was never suspected that anyone in the fraternity was actually gay. Another participant stated:

> I think that these were a bunch of men, who, just because of their lack of exposure to homosexuality, didn’t have a conception that there really were gay people, that there would be gay people who would join the fraternity.

Another participant adopted a similar viewpoint after coming-out to one of his brothers that he suspected to be least accepting of homosexuality. This participant realized that the person was not necessarily homophobic but more unaware that he would actually be offending someone. He stated:

> One guy in particular, I was scared of him. He was this huge football player guy and um, lifted weights all the time and he talked about gay people all the time... faggot, queer, always called everybody else that. Always told sexual jokes, stuff like that. I was really afraid of what he was going to think because he was, he
was kind of perceived as a little mean and not very approachable, but now he is one of my good friends. It’s really weird. Right after [coming-out] he sat down with me, he just walked into my room and sat down and said, “You know you do realize I don’t care. You are probably a better friend now because I know more about you.”

Research Question # 2: What are the coping strategies of gay males in college social fraternities prior to coming-out?

Gay males in fraternities employ a variety of coping strategies to conceal their sexuality prior to coming-out. In answering this research question, it was evident that the coping strategies used by the participants depended heavily on their perceptions of the atmosphere within their fraternities in regard to sexuality, as mentioned previously. Participants’ level of homosexual identity development, to be discussed later, also appeared to be a contributing factor in determining the type of coping strategy used. Three primary themes emerged from the data: Avoidance, Passing, and Assimilation.

Avoidance

In this context, avoidance refers to either running away from or not dealing with an issue. A perceived lack of control in a given situation often warranted using avoidance as a way of coping with undesirable thoughts, comments, or behaviors. Avoidance, as discussed by the participants, manifested itself in three distinct forms: repression, deflection, and separation. Below is an expanded discussion of each avoidance sub-theme.

Avoidance – Repression
When asked why participants repressed their sexuality, the typical response was that it is easier to keep it hidden or push it down rather than to deal with the pain of rejection. All but one participant had an early awareness of their sexuality. Three participants mentioned wanting to explore their sexuality when going away to college but soon learned that, after joining their fraternities, the possibility of advancing in their homosexual identity development would need to be put on hold. One participant stated that he specifically went out of state to college to explore his sexuality, but his sexuality “...very quickly was repressed, or pushed aside, after joining the fraternity.” Another participant shared a similar statement:

I knew that I was gay but I thought, I still was not going to act on it when I, when I went to college. That was my thing. I was like, yeah, you’re this way but I mean, I’m not going to do anything about it, you just need to, you just need to get over it.

Avoiding – Deflection

Deflection was another type of avoidance strategy that emerged from the data. In this context, deflection means ignoring comments or behaviors that are perceived as homophobic or pertaining to homosexuality in some fashion. Growing up, participants learned not to acknowledge the homophobic statements that were ever prevalent within the larger society. One reason for not acknowledging such statements within the fraternity was due to the rationalization that homophobic comments or behaviors resulted from mere ignorance or unawareness. With an increasing expectation that such comments would be included in the everyday banter of their male peers, it became easy
for the participants to eventually train themselves to focus their attention elsewhere. One participant noted:

I think a lot of the time I just sort of, I just trained myself to block it out and just completely ignored it, and I never ever went along with anything or laughed at any gay jokes. But, I wouldn’t necessarily acknowledge them either. I would just ignore people. So I couldn’t tell you what processes were going on in my head because as far as I know there wasn’t one. It was just an automatic block.

Another participant echoed this response, claiming that he had become so accustomed to hearing negative comments about homosexuality that it no longer affected him. He stated:

I just tend to pass it off. I don’t really think about it. I’ve just been used to it my whole life. And when I hear things like that, those kind of terms and little phrases, lately, it kind of rolls off my back.

Avoidance – Separation

Separating oneself from the fraternity was another strategy that participants used to keep their sexual identity concealed. As one participant stated, “Sometimes there is a wall on what you let other people see and what you don’t.” Constructing ‘walls’ with the fraternity allowed participants to create an artificial sense of closeness with others. For instance, one participant said that he would always listen to any of his brothers if they needed to talk about their relationships with women, but he would never reciprocate any of his own personal information. Another participant stated, “I never talked to anybody about my relationships or lack thereof or never talked to anybody about who I thought was cute...”
Participants also created separation with their fraternities by limiting their interactions with specific members, especially members they feared would be able to detect their sexuality. One participant mentioned keeping a safe distance from someone who would always find ways to tease people about being gay. Often times, this participant would go so far as to find an excuse to leave the room for fear of having to interact with this member.

Rather than just avoiding specific members, another way participants would create separation was to avoid their chapter as a whole. One participant stated, “I was sort of a recluse for the first two months because I didn’t want people to know that I was gay. I sort of spent most of my time in my room and didn’t really connect with anybody.” Another participant explained that he had minimal contact with his fraternity his first year as a way of limiting any suspicions that others might have of his sexuality. One participant explained that he had only spent a total of four hours with his fraternity before his pledge induction. He stated, “…in those four hours… I didn’t say a lot. If someone talked to me I talked to them.”

Passing

When a gay male is able to camouflage himself in such a way that others become unsuspicious of his homosexuality, he is said to have the ability to pass. In this context, passing is defined as being observably heterosexual either by consciously altering one’s behavior or deliberately creating an image through deceit or the manipulation of convenient circumstances. Two sub-themes of passing emerged from the data: censoring behavior and fabricating an image.

Passing – Censoring Behavior
One participant was proud of how he could walk past “a total stranger on the street” and not get pegged as someone who would be gay. He stated, “I really try to get rid of peoples’ preconceived notions of how gays should look and act.” This participant also added, “I guess when I came out to people it surprised them because I don’t really come off as gay most of the time. I don’t really fit most of the stereotypes...” Other participants received similar reactions from their fraternities upon coming-out.

It was not by accident that the participants of this study did not “fit most of the stereotypes”. One participant did not admit to consciously censoring his behavior, claiming that there was not a reason for him to try to pass because he did not even realize until his junior year that he himself was gay. In contrast, the other participants were quite aware of themselves as being ‘different’ early on and went to great lengths to modify their behavior. When visiting his fraternity house, one participant stated, “I tried sometimes to be more macho, or to maybe watch the things that I would say or the way that I would act, or try to not necessarily have them suspect that I would be gay.” For two of the participants, it was not necessarily as important to “be more macho” as it was to just be mindful of not discussing issues that could be seen as being “stereotypically gay.” “Not discussing issues,” in this context, should not be confused as being an avoidance strategy, as discussed above. The difference is that participants were not necessarily avoiding certain topics of conversation but rather just being careful to edit the content of their speech. For example, rather than not talking about a significant other, one might instead use gender non-specific pronouns or alter the “he” to a “this person.” Participants were also more careful about bringing up certain topics that they felt their brothers would not be interested in discussing. One participant stated:
I often would not talk about some of the activities that I was involved with, like the theatre for example, with my fraternity brothers because I either didn’t think they would be interested or thought that they would think it to be ‘gay’ for me to talk about being interested in the theatre.

Passing – Fabricating an Image

“You can’t stop people from guessing. If they want to assume they can, but you can’t stop them from guessing about your sexuality.” While this may have been the viewpoint of one participant, the other participants seemed to think otherwise. As mentioned previously, the participants prided themselves on being “non-stereotypical” in that others would generally not be able to detect their homosexuality. However, one way for the participants to ensure against the possibility of being “found out” was to actually fabricate an image of themselves as being heterosexual by purposely engaging in heterosexual behaviors with the awareness that others would become knowledgeable of such behavior. One example is deliberately engaging in intimate activities with a female for the sole purpose of “proving” an interest in women to others. This was the case for one participant:

Mmm yeah, New Year’s Eve I made out with this girl just to make out with her. (LAUGH) My sophomore year just so... She was another fraternity guy’s ex girlfriend. So I thought, well, this will be good because she will go tell him and nobody will suspect anything. And it was just like that, and saying something like... I had this crush on this girl and stuff... I would tell my fraternity brothers about how I thought that she was cute and wanted to date her and blah blah blah. And it was all bullshit, I mean (LAUGH) it was just, it was an act. I really didn’t
have any (pause) deep down I thought maybe I could have some type of feeling if
(pause) I wasn’t gay. (LAUGH) I mean, it was (pause) it’s really pathetic to say
that, but I mean, I did it and that’s how I proceeded at the time.

Going so far as to make up an elaborate story was not uncommon. However,
participants often felt that just bringing a female date to a fraternity function would
suffice. This was the case for one participant who stated, “The fact that I had a friend
who was a woman and that I brought her to events was a good enough cover…” In
reference to bringing a female date to fraternity functions, some participants took a
slightly different approach. Rather than bringing a female date and having to play the
role of showing interest in her and then later having to do damage control, one participant
explained how he learned to “play the system.” He indirectly avowed that there were
definite advantages of his executive position. This participant stated:

I was social chairman and I was planning parties and, of course the social
chairman can never date because they are too busy running the parties, so that was
fine… I mean, when you are social chair of a house and you are expected to put
on parties every weekend, how the hell do you have time to date when you are
supervising parties? Making sure that the kegs are there, and the band is on time,
and this person is happy, and this person isn’t throwing up in the bathroom, and
this person isn’t passing out (pause) so, you would never bring a date to a party
because there just wasn’t time to pay attention to them.”

While this rationalization seemed legitimate with no pretenses, it was not
completely without underlying intentions. This participant appeared to be very
knowledgeable of the convenience that his position afforded him. When asked what he
would do if he was not social chair, his response was "I probably would just have brought a friend that was a girl, until I was ready to tell them."

**Assimilation**

In simple terms, to assimilate means to become like or to be incorporated. Assimilation is an appropriate term for one way in which the participants were able to manage their sexuality prior to coming-out. Two sub-themes of assimilation emerged from the data: blending and fusing. Although these sub-themes existed apart from one another, a pattern emerged from the data suggesting that participants first attempted to blend before becoming fused with their fraternity. Moreover, the earlier that one was able to successfully blend impacted the degree to which he became fused with his fraternity.

**Assimilation - Blending**

In reference to blending, one participant believed that it was more a matter of instinct than anything else. He associated gay men with chameleons, claiming that gay people have acquired the ability to "change their skin and their colors in different situations. They have already been doing this their whole life without their knowledge. It's something that's inherent." This participant then provided an explanation about why he thought being a chameleon was inherent rather than being a matter of conscious thought. He asserted:

It's a matter of course. You're born [gay], but the way you're raised doesn't nurture you to be gay or straight. (pause) What I should say is, you're born gay in my opinion, but your parents raise you as straight. You don't question your parents, they're your parents, and you don't know what gay is because, they are
your parents and unless you’ve got two daddies or two mommies you wouldn’t
know that that is okay too. So you spend your whole life pretending, but you’re
really not pretending because that’s really your skin. And then you figure out
who you are and your skin changes to that different hue, but there are many hues
in the coming-out process that by the time you’re out you can go to any color of
the rainbow, that chameleon, and adapt, because it is something that is inherent in
you. It’s the way you’re raised. You’re raised as an individual that turns out to
be the individual that you were raised to be. So your whole life has been this
alternating universe, you know, here and there and here and there, and you don’t
realize what those colors were until you’re like, “Oh my god, I’m gay,” but
you’ve already been through all the colors.

While this explanation seems logical and believable, numerous inconsistencies
within the data suggested that the participants were distinctly aware of their efforts to
blend. For instance, when talking about his fears of being noticed as being gay, one
participant stated, “I tend to look around the room and stuff like that to make sure people
aren’t looking at me and that kind of thing.” This participant intentionally tried not to
stand out in his fraternity at first, claiming that he needed to get a feel for the atmosphere
in fraternity before he could be comfortable. Another participant who also had concerns
about being comfortable in his fraternity stated, “I wanted to pick a fraternity that maybe
I could blend into without necessarily sticking out as someone who would be potentially
gay.” For these participants, blending was something consciously and purposely done to
not draw attention to themselves.
Seeking out others who shared commonalities within the fraternity was another way participants were able to initially blend in. One participant who had an interest in playing the guitar stated:

One of the guys played guitar and he was teaching me to play guitar as well, so it was like, I had an upperclassman on my side before pledgship even got into the thick of things. So it was, it was just a smart move.

Another participant commented on not being all that good at sports and so he opted not to play on any of the fraternity sports teams. However, he did not want to seem standoffish or uninvolved in the fraternity so he found other ways to connect with his brothers. This participant stated, “I went to all the community service projects, like the fundraisers, campus sings, talent shows... and I always did stuff like that.”

Essentially, these participants sought out ways to participate within the fraternity without necessarily standing out or isolating themselves in such a way that anyone would begin to have suspicions of their sexuality. While some participants went out of their way to find ways to connect with their brothers, others just tried to mirror the kinds of behaviors that their brothers exhibited. All the participants were able to successfully find ways to effectively blend in as just another brother. At the same time, their blending efforts seemed to have a reversal effect in that the participants became highly recognized by their fellow chapter members as possessing desirable qualities of leadership. Hence, it was not long before the participants began to take on leadership positions within the fraternity.
Assimilation – Fusing

In this context, fusing means ingraining oneself into the formal structure of the fraternity. Although similar to blending, fusing is distinctively different. One aspect that makes fusing different is that the person actually holds a formalized position within the chapter. What also sets blending and fusing apart is that being fused means having an automatic, unquestioned degree of connection with the fraternity, whereas blending involves seeking out ways in which to connect as a means of drawing attention away from oneself. As such, all five participants successfully fused with their fraternity. One participant stated:

When I first joined [my involvement] was very little, but after the second semester I became pretty deeply involved with things. I still wasn’t out, but I became the secretary for the house and I took over the alumni relations committee and was pretty heavily involved with the other groups too (pause) with the social committee and the entry house rush committee and all that.

This participant also reported that had his chapter not closed when it did, he would have been the next president of the fraternity. Another participant’s response for having such a high level of involvement within his fraternity was, “You must learn to play the system, and I learned to play the system early on.” This participant was president of his pledge class and social chair his senior year. Moreover, he had accumulated the most chapter points by his senior year, which afforded him the luxury of having the largest room in the house with a private bathroom. A similar experience was shared by someone else. He stated, “I held an office every year that I was in the fraternity... I was four officers.”
Research Question #3: What variables facilitate gay men to come-out to their fraternity?

Gay men in fraternities make a conscious decision to come-out for a multitude of reasons. Six variables were influential in facilitating the participants of this study to come-out to their respective chapters. These variables included: the enmeshed nature of Greek life, prevailing diversity within the chapter, participant’s level of homosexual identity development, brotherhood, reflections of previous coming-out experiences, and pent-up frustrations. Each of the variables mentioned was common to at least four participants. Furthermore, the six variables differed significantly in relevance to each participant’s experience. Below is a discussion of each variable.

Enmeshed nature of Greek Life

Greek life appeared to be the primary social outlet for the majority of the participants. One participant explained that on his campus “the first thing that you would say when you would talk about other people on campus was what house they were in, not what their major is or where they were from or anything like that.” This participant, as well as some of the other participants, felt as if there was literally no sense of separation from being a college student and being a member of a fraternity. One participant asserted, “The Greeks were so infused in the workings of the university and in the academia part of it and in the social part of it that you never got away from it.” This was echoed by another participant who stated, “You see them every waking hour of the day.” It was not uncommon for participants to eat most meals with their brothers or to sit next to some of them in class.

As previously mentioned, all five participants of this study ascribed to a high level of involvement in their fraternities. This often meant an increased level of interaction
with the brothers to the point where the participants felt as if they literally could not keep their personal lives private. One participant explained the complexities of trying to date. He stated:

So if you come back in from… If you leave campus at midnight, you are not going to get off campus without somebody asking where you are going. And you are not... people are going to think it’s weird if you pop in at 3:00 a.m. in the morning and have class the next day. And they are going to ask you, “why were you out so late?” And so, I was always (pause) oh, it was so hard because you had to make up so many lies on where you were, what you were doing, and how, and if anybody saw you out with somebody that they didn’t know... If I was out with a gay friend or a boyfriend or something, they would always want to know. They would ask, “Oh, well how do you all know each other?” And you would have to make up this big elaborate story. So, yeah, it was hard. You had to be creative.

For some participants, the major issue was not necessarily that the fraternity was an enmeshing experience. The enmeshment of the fraternity within the campus culture simply exaggerated matters. Participants felt the need to remain secretive about their personal lives for fear of rejection from the fraternity. Had the fraternities been perceived as being more accepting, participants would have felt less stress trying to keep their personal lives concealed. Hence, the greater issue was the perceived homophobia and heterosexism, as mentioned previously.
Prevailing diversity within the chapter

One element that was common to all the participants was the observation that a high level of diversity existed among the brotherhood. Participants were quick to assert that their chapters included more diversity in comparison to the other chapters on campus. As such, participants avowed that homosexuality was “just one more form of diversity.” One participant stated:

We had a number of international students and African Americans. We also had people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds which was not quite as common at the university because it is a fairly expensive private university. So, I think that the diversity of my chapter within the strict confines of it being presumably all heterosexual men… (pause) I think it was a fairly diverse group of people, and so that made me feel comfortable being a part of them.

This response was common among the participants as they each explained how their chapter seemed to be more inclusive of diversity than other chapters on campus. One participant said that members of his chapter used to make a lot of jokes about Jewish people. After discovering that one of the brothers was Jewish, the members made a concerted effort to be more respectful toward him. Prior to coming-out, this same participant assumed that a similar level of respect would be given to him. As such, this participant felt that his fraternity was more heterocentric and less homophobic. He stated, “I learned that calling each other “fag” and “homo” was just part of the common banter between the guys. I think had they known previously that I was gay they might not have used those words.”
Participant’s level of homosexual identity development

It was apparent that all five of the participants in this study were highly developed in their homosexual identity prior to coming-out to other fraternity members. As discussed previously, it was not uncommon for the participants to repress their homosexuality as a result of not feeling able to explore being gay and being Greek at the same time. However, despite not being able to outwardly express their sexuality, these participants managed to progress in their homosexual identity development.

A major indication of having a high level of homosexual identity development is not only having an awareness of but also being able to admit being homosexual to oneself. One participant stated, “I am gay... It’s just who I am. It’s part of me.” Similar responses were expressed by the other participants who claimed to also be comfortable admitting being gay to themselves prior to coming-out within the fraternity.

All five participants had come-out to at least one person prior to coming-out to their fraternity. The simple act of coming-out to at least one person indicates a milestone in development, for it is at this point when one’s sexuality is no longer a self-kept secret. All the participants were very aware that telling someone else meant relinquishing a certain degree of control. One participant stated:

I mean, as much as I love these people, they are going to talk to each other about things, and if I didn’t want anybody to know then I wouldn’t have told anybody.

You know, I was smart enough not to say anything before.

Another participant explained that he purposely set a goal to come-out to one of his friends upon arriving back at campus after being away and having time to reflect all summer. Hence, the participants’ previous coming-out experiences were not
happenstance. These participants were very aware of the possible consequences of coming-out to others but were at a point in their lives when it was becoming personally important to be more open with their sexuality.

The time span between achieving a high level of homosexual identity development and actually coming-out to other fraternity members varied from participant to participant and appeared to be highly dependent upon the perceived level of acceptance by the fraternity. One participant who claimed to be very comfortable with his homosexuality prior to joining his fraternity stated:

I was walking into the house preparing to, you know, not necessarily say, hey, I'm gay, but not be, not be discrete or closeted about it either. And, people are already there making fag jokes and calling people queer and I was like, alright, that's not going to happen.

Another participant claimed to suddenly become aware of his sexuality while on vacation. This participant seemed to have an instantaneous acceptance of himself as being homosexual and claimed that the only reason he did not share his new awareness with his fraternity directly upon arriving back was because he thought it to be more respectful to come-out to his parents first. The participant who had yet to come-out to his entire chapter stated:

If someone was questioning my sexuality, I would hope that they would at least come and ask me... I won't defend it if someone asks me anymore. And I won't lie to them... There is no one that I don't want to know that I'm gay.
For the participants of this study, brotherhood meant more than just camaraderie and fun. These participants seemed to have a very sacred perception of brotherhood. One participant defined brotherhood as "a very deep understanding of the other person and how they work and what makes them tick." Another participant shared a similar definition. He asserted:

Brotherhood is loyalty like no other. Brotherhood is kind of like being siblings in a way. You can yell at this person for doing something stupid, but ten minutes later you can be like, hey, let's go get a slice of pizza and everything is forgiven. It's a bond that we share that, unless you go through it, you really don't know.

For these participants, subscribing to such an altruistic idea of brotherhood did not go without a certain degree of skepticism. Participants often thought that if true brotherhood actually existed, their fraternity brothers would be able to look past their prejudices to see more than just sexuality. In this sense, participants felt that coming-out to their fraternity brothers was one way of evaluating the authenticity of brotherhood.

One participant stated:

I was sick and tired of it. I had said too many lies and... I was really...
recapitulating this in my head of... Okay, these people are preaching this brotherhood thing, and I bought into it this far, and you know what (sigh) either it's true or it's not, and if it's not, then I'm getting the hell out of here, and if it is, then I'm going to stay.

Some participants relied on brotherhood to be their saving grace when coming-out to fraternity brothers. One participant who came-out during a chapter meeting stated:
I stood up and I said you know guys I was home over spring break and I told my parents something and, if you really are a fraternity, and you really are my brothers, then you’ll be fine with what I am going to tell you and if not, then I’ll leave. And I said, I’m gay. I got the snaps after about mmm, 30 seconds of silence because no one knew what the hell to do (laugh).

This participant went on to explain that being accepted by his fraternity gave him a sense of reassurance because he really wanted to believe in “this thing called brotherhood.” Another participant explained that he was not necessarily ‘testing’ the authenticity of brotherhood. Rather, he just wanted to be authentic himself. He stated:

These guys were becoming my really good friends and they were, they were some of the best guy friends that I had had. And I really liked that, and they really liked me for, what I thought, it was for who I was, and... but they really didn’t know all of who I was.

Reflections of previous coming-out experiences

One factor that seemed to have an impact on whether or not participants came-out to their fraternity was previous coming-out experiences. Coming-out was usually considered a process of trial and error. In this sense, participants often evaluated their own previous coming-out experiences to determine whether or not it would be beneficial to continue coming-out. One participant stated that he was more apt to come-out to his fraternity after having a good coming-out experience with one of his female friends. This participant stated:

When I met this friend of mine... She was the first one, the first person that I told openly that I really thought that I was gay. She treated me no different. She
treated me as a friend. And… knowing that people won’t change how they act around you, I just didn’t care anymore if people knew.

In addition to evaluating one’s own coming-out experiences, participants were often very attentive to any information regarding past coming-out experiences of other Greek students in an attempt to “make it work.” One participant sought out a past nondisclosed gay member of his fraternity to ask his advice on coming-out. It was after having this conversation that this participant deemed it necessary to come-out to the fraternity. He stated:

Another big catalyst for me [to come-out] was that our alumni board president was an openly gay guy. Well, I didn’t know that he was openly gay until somebody said some snide remark. But he is one of those guys that, he is not your typical queen I guess, at all. And so, I just always thought that he was straight or whatever. But when I found out I was like, okay, so I need to talk to this guy. (LAUGH) So we went out to dinner then. He told me what it was like when he was in the fraternity, and he didn’t come-out until way after college. And, he said, “There has always been gay people in fraternities.” He said, “When I was there, I knew of a guy that was gay in my same pledge class and nothing was ever said.” And I asked, “Do you look back on what you have done and ever wonder, and say wow, you know, I wish I would have come-out to them?” He said, “Sometimes, but the time wasn’t right and the, the society wasn’t right for it and it would have nothing but… negative results.” … So after talking with him said to myself, “You can do this. I mean, yeah, some people have kind of come-out but they have never made it work. You can make it work. You can change these
peoples' attitudes. You may be giving up something, you may be giving it up if, if it turns out wrong but you need to give it a shot because gay people need to give it a shot, because it's not going to change on its own. You have to do it yourself.”

And that was what I told myself.

Pent-up Frustrations

Some participants discussed having an overwhelming sense of frustration toward their fraternities just prior to coming-out. One participant explained that he was tired of hiding himself and that he was “just as equal as they are.” Another participant expressed his level of frustration regarding the senseless homophobic jokes. He stated, “After a while I just really got fed up.” Still, another participant felt as if he had earned his right to be accepted by the fraternity. He stated:

I thought, okay, give me a break here... I’m really unhappy right now and... I thought, I pay money for functions. Why in the hell can’t I bring my boyfriend to a function? I pay for it just as much as they do. You know, I pay my dues. I go to all this stuff. I’m a damn officer, and I was getting real hostile over it.

Research Question # 4: Is there a specific approach that gay males exercise as a means of coming-out to their fraternity?

All but one of the five participants had come-out to their entire chapter. One participant had come-out to several members within his fraternity but was not out to his entire chapter at the time of the interview. The data gathered from these five participants revealed there is not one specific approach that gay males exercise as a means of coming-out. Rather, one of three basic approaches to coming-out within a fraternity was used: member specific approach, step-by-step approach, and passive/reactive approach. The
participants used a combination of the three approaches, suggesting that perhaps these approaches co-existed as concentric circles. Below is a discussion of the three approaches.

*Member specific approach*

The member specific approach involved coming-out to specific members. Often, participants would come-out to specific members based on three criteria: formal status, perceived level of acceptance, and degree of familial attachment. The following is an example of each criteria.

*Member specific approach – Formal status*

Two participants first came-out to their fraternity president. One participant shared his reasoning for coming-out to the president:

I take a lot of pride in the letters I wear, and, not to say that I would disgrace them, being gay, I just didn’t want to disgrace them and I didn’t know what the whole fraternity standpoint on it was. So I wanted to see what he thought about it... whether I would deactivate or not. Because if it would have came to it, I pride those letters so much that I would have deactivated.

*Member specific approach – Perceived level of acceptance*

Another participant explained that he came-out to someone because he perceived him to be very accepting. More specifically, he thought the person to be gay himself, but later found out that this member was just very open-minded. This participant believed that telling others who he felt to be most accepting to be the best approach, for the only reactions received were either of acceptance or indifference.
Member specific approach – Degree of familial attachment

Two participants first came-out to others with whom they felt a strong attachment with. When explaining why he first came-out to a specific member, one participant stated, “I came-out to him because he is the one I’m closest with in the fraternity. He is just the person that I felt the strongest connection with.”

Step-by-step approach

Participants who used the step-by-step approach saw coming-out as having a specific order. Rather than just knowing to whom the participants wanted to come-out, as in the member specific approach, the participants saw importance in having an order of events. This approach involved elements of the member specific approach in that participants often came-out to one person or a small group of people at a time. Extending beyond the member specific approach was the notion of having a preset plan of not only who to come-out to but also in what sequence. One participant explained how he first told his president on a Friday, discussed it with his fellow members at the executive board meeting on Saturday, and then brought it up in new business at the chapter meeting on Sunday. This participant stated, “I’m an orderly person and I like things to go in a calm fashion. I wanted to set it up so that it was easy for me to do. I wanted to get their feedback on it. It was, it was testing the waters.” Another participant went so far as to develop a strategic plan. He stated:

I made a list. I drew up a list of people who I was sort of worried about coming-out to and then went through and actually sort of discretely talked with each of them... and over the course of several months, I worked on the people who would
be least safe. I wanted to make sure they wouldn’t have excessively negative reactions. And, then I sort of went for all the neutral people.

**Passive/reactive approach**

The passive/reactive approach involved “setting the stage” so as to indirectly come-out to the members within the fraternity. For example, one participant who had left a gay affiliated magazine sitting on his desk made no attempt to hide the magazine when one of his chapter brothers stopped by to hang out. This participant stated:

I had a subscription to the *Out Magazine* that was sitting on my desk. So he picks it up and starts to flip through it as he is talking to me. (LAUGH) And then I could see on his face that it dawned on him that what he was looking at was a gay magazine. And, he was surprised, and he put it down and he said, “What is this?” And I said, “Well, it’s a magazine, it’s a, you know, a gay magazine.” He said, “Why do you have a gay magazine?” And I said, “Well, you know, because… I’m gay.” (pause) And so our conversation kind of ended, and then at that point I knew that it was really going to get back to the rest of my fraternity brothers.

Another participant set the stage by involving a female friend. Several of the participant’s fraternity brothers dated his female friend’s sorority sisters. The plan was for the female friend in the sorority to tell some of her sorority sisters, knowing that these sisters would discuss it with their boyfriends. Hence, it was not long before these brothers who became privy to such information spread the news throughout the chapter.
Summary

Overall, the five participants of this study provided a sizable amount of rich data pertinent to the four initial research questions. Three themes were identified in regard to participants' perceptions of sexuality within their fraternities: homophobia, heterosexism, and heterocentrism. Participants claimed that it was almost impossible to avoid hearing homophobic comments or slurs from other fraternity members. It was also explained that in order to be successful in the fraternity one must adhere to the established heterosexual norms, such as bringing a female date to functions. Furthermore, some participants perceived their brothers to be oblivious to the possibility that a gay male would be a member of a fraternity.

Research question two involved gaining a conceptual understanding of the research participants' conscious coping strategies. This question generated numerous responses, and three primary themes were identified: avoidance, passing, and assimilation. It was observed that participants often used a combination of coping strategies to assist in managing their sexuality. However, some coping strategies were used more often than others.

Variables that facilitate gay males to come-out to their fraternities were the focus of question number three. Participants expressed coming-out to their fraternities for a number of reasons; six variables were identified: pervasive Greek life, prevailing diversity within the chapter, participant's level of homosexual identity development, brotherhood, reflections of previous coming-out experiences, and pent-up frustrations. A combination of variables affected each participant's decision to come-out to his fraternity. However, it appeared as if a participant's level of homosexual identity
development and brotherhood were the two variables of greatest influence in facilitating this decision.

The forth question pertained to approaches that gay males exercise as a means of coming-out to their fraternities. Three approaches were identified: member-specific approach, step-by-step approach, and passive/reactive approach. Participants reported using more than one approach. Some participants appeared to use elements of all three.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify existing themes in the lived experiences of gay males who concealed their sexuality prior to coming-out as an undergraduate fraternity member. The results of this study, as discussed in chapter four, have been compared with the existing literature presented in chapter two. The following is an interactive discussion addressing the researcher's conclusions as derived from the analysis of these comparisons.

The scope of this study did not intend to include reasons why gay males join fraternities. However, it is perplexing to think that someone would purposely put himself in a potentially hostile environment. Hughes and Winston (1987) reported, "promoters of the Greek system praise fraternities for encouraging the formation of same-sex friendships..." (p. 405). Likewise, the participants of the present study expressed having a desire to increase their number of male friendships even if it meant keeping their sexuality concealed. Similarly, Hughes and Winston claimed, "members through their identification with the fraternity are willing to make sacrifices and contributions to the group at the expense of their own freedoms of action" (p. 409). This may be one explanation of why these participants were able to endure the open homophobia.

Byran (1987) stated that fraternities "cannot be defined as bastions of tolerance when it comes to... sexual preference" (p. 47). The participants' initial perceptions of their fraternities supported this claim. A majority of the participants explained that upon joining their fraternities they felt as if there was no possibility of ever coming-out to anyone in the chapter. Participants claimed that other members were very blatant about
their homophobia, often telling “fag jokes” and making fun of anyone in the fraternity who “acted gay.” In addition to perceptions of homophobia, there was also an intense pressure to conform to the heterosexual norms and practices set forth by the fraternity. It was not enough to attend fraternity functions alone. Participants often brought a female date to fraternity functions for fear that others would develop suspicions.

Although initial perceptions of sexuality within the fraternity were often disconcerting, it appeared as if the participants’ perceptions evolved over time to seeing their fraternities as being less homophobic and more heterocentric. In this sense, it might not be that fraternities are intolerant of differences, as Byran (1987) asserted, but instead just ignorant to the possibility that some members are gay. Supporting this idea are the reactions the participants’ received from their fraternities upon coming out. For instance, one participant claimed to be shocked when the one person he thought to be the most bigoted was actually very accepting. Other participants reported similar reactions, claiming to have mostly positive coming-out experiences. Nevertheless, participants employed a variety of coping strategies in an attempt to keep their sexuality concealed until they resolved coming-out to their fraternities.

Mahan (1998) asserted that coping is “contextual” (p. 51) and that, “Individuals adjust coping efforts from context to context depending on whether they appraise the stressful event as a harmless threat or a challenge” (p. 52). Mahan’s explanation of coping appeared to be consistent with the findings of the present study. For instance, participants mentioned having friends outside the fraternity who were both aware of and accepting of their sexuality. As such, they felt it unnecessary to employ any coping
strategies in this external context. At the same time, participants reported using a variety of coping strategies to conceal their sexuality from fraternity members.

Woods (1992) reported that the participants in his study of gay males in the corporate world used three basic coping strategies to manage their sexuality: avoiding a sexual identity, counterfeiting an identity, and integrating an identity. The present study produced similar results. For example, participants would intentionally avoid issues of sexuality or fabricate an image of being heterosexual so as to dispel any suspicions that others might have had. Although the participants in this study "integrated an identity" by coming-out to other fraternity members, this was not considered a coping strategy as defined in the context of the present study because coming-out is the opposite of concealing one's sexuality.

Case (1996) reported that a large number of participants surveyed had a "tendency toward 'overachievement'" (p. 2). The participants of the present study all held at least one executive position in their fraternities. One participant held four executive positions during his undergraduate experience, and another participant claimed to have had the most points earned in his fraternity by his senior year. Case also noted that over 20 percent of those he surveyed had been either the president or vice president of their fraternity. Furthermore, of the thirty coming-out stories chronicled in Windmeyer and Freeman (1998), a strong majority contained references to the subjects as officers or leaders. Likewise, one participant of the present study held the position of vice president of his chapter. Had his fraternity not closed when it did, he was very confident that he would have been elected as the next president.
This “tendency toward ‘overachievement,’” Case reasoned, “may reflect a desire for validation and acceptance by the group” (p. 2). Desiring acceptance appeared to be a distinct possibility as to why the participants of the present study attained executive status (fused) within their fraternities. As such, all five of the participants of the present study appeared to follow the “reaction pattern” of what Johnson (1996) called the “best little boy on the face of the earth” (p. 38). One participant cemented this claim when he stated, “Before I began college, who was I? I was the oldest child, practically perfect in every way.”

Some participants described themselves as being a “chameleon.” One participant stated that gay people have always had to learn to “change their skin and their colors in different situations” to survive. This participant then asserted, “You must learn the system, and I learned to play the system early on.” Other participants also made reference to “playing the system.” From a social perspective, fusing appears to be less of a “reaction pattern” and more in line with what Cox and Gallois (1996) described as a “social change strategy” (p. 20). One social change strategy is to “select new comparison groups against which favorable comparisons can be made” (p. 20). Essentially, the focus of this strategy is on intragroup comparisons, which means that a gay male using this strategy seeks ways in which to compare himself with other gay males. For example, a gay male who not only gains membership but also attains a high status within his fraternity may look down upon other gay males who are unable to attain fraternity membership. As such, this gay male might perceive himself as being closer to “normal” because he has mastered the ability to assimilate into the dominant group (heterosexual males). Often, there was an air of pretentiousness among the participants as they
repeatedly stressed being unlike “the stereotype.” Supporting the current analysis, one of Dilley’s (2002) respondents in his study of non-heterosexual college men from 1945-2000 stated, “Over the years, I’ve come to realize that I joined the greek system to prove to myself that I wasn’t gay. My being a fraternity member would alleviate anyone’s doubts, if they thought I was gay” (p. 76).

“The stereotype...,” was defined by one participant as being, “someone who lisps and is very flamboyant.” As observed in the interviews, the mannerisms exhibited by the participants of the present study appeared to be dissimilar to this definition of “the stereotype.” However, while the participants may have perceived themselves to be atypical, it appeared as if the process by which four of the participants developed their homosexual identity was very typical. In many ways, these participants’ developmental processes were similar to that outlined by Cass (1979). Cass’ model was based on two assumptions. One assumption of the two was “locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interactive process that occurs between individuals and their environments.” (p. 219). Incidentally, this assumption precedes five of the six variables that facilitated the gay males of the present study to come-out to their fraternities. As such, these five variables, when examined collectively, illustrate the participants’ yearning for congruency between their public and private life.

Having a high level of identity development was thought to be the most significant variable that facilitated participants to come-out to their fraternities. This is not surprising, for Cass (1979) explained that it is stage six when a person’s personal and public sexual identities synthesize into one sexual identity. Moreover, stage six is when
people recognize that homosexuality is only one aspect of who they are. Similarly, the participants often stated, “Being gay is only one part of who I am.”

Reflections of coming-out experiences facilitated participants to come-out to their fraternities. Cass (1979) explained that reflecting upon one’s own coming-out experiences is part of the developmental process. However, what distinguishes this variable from the previously mentioned variable is that participants would often reflect upon their own experiences but also on specific coming-out experiences of others. One participant explained that someone had come-out to his fraternity prior to his own revelation, but, “it didn’t work. I thought I could make it work.”

Boschini and Thompson (1998) asserted, “If Greek-letter organizations are to survive and flourish within the modern college and university, it is imperative that they understand the importance of diversity” (p. 19). The participants of the present study avowed that a sizable amount of diversity was prevalent in their chapters. Often, participants would assert that being gay was just one more form of diversity. As such, the participants were hopeful that their fraternities would have a similar view. Interestingly, some participants mentioned that when deciding on which fraternity to join, they purposefully sought out fraternities that included diversity. One participant stated, “I think it was a fairly diverse group of people, and so that made me feel comfortable being a part of them.”

As discussed previously, participants may have fused with their fraternities as a way of achieving “validation and acceptance by the group” (Case, 1996, p. 2). As a result, some participants expressed feeling as if they were always in the spotlight. For instance, one participant explained that it got to the point where he had to cautiously date
males from other campuses and then make up stories as to where he was and what he was doing. Interestingly enough, some participants expressed feeling as if the Greek life on their campuses was so enmeshed with the campus culture that they felt no possibility of escape from their Greek identity. One participant stated, “The Greeks were so infused in the workings of the university and in the academia part of it and in the social part of it that you never got away from it.” It is confounding to think that someone who feels no escape from an environment chooses to become even more immersed within that environment. As such, becoming even more immersed might further substantiate the notion that fusing was a coping strategy. Nevertheless, participants indicated the enmeshed Greek environment to be one of the deciding factors that led to their coming-out.

Prior to coming-out, participants reported struggling with mixed views of brotherhood. It was common for the participants to have feelings of guilt as a result of not being totally honest (authentic) with their brothers. This desire to be authentic equates to stage six of Cass’ (1979) model, suggesting that these participants were highly developed in their homosexual identity. On the other hand, participants claimed that while they wanted to believe in the concept of brotherhood, there was only one way to feel certain of whether “this whole idea of brotherhood” was real or not. The participants’ rationale was that acceptance meant proof that brotherhood was real. Moreover, brotherhood appeared to be used as the participants’ artillery in coming-out. Upon coming-out to his fraternity, one participant stated, “... if you are really a fraternity, and you really are my brothers, then you’ll be fine with what I am going to tell
Thus, brotherhood emerged as one of the variables facilitating participant coming-out to their fraternities.

The motivations behind the five aforementioned variables appear to be consistent with what Cox and Gallois (1996) described as "striving to become whole" (p. 9). Explained differently, participants were seeking acceptance to enhance their self-esteem. In this sense, continued acceptance upon coming-out to one's fraternity would mean not only gaining true acceptance but also experiencing a sense of completeness. As such, the sixth variable facilitating participants to come-out, pent-up frustrations, does not equate with the presumed motivations of the other variables. Rather, this variable appears to be more in line with what Cox and Gallois (1996) described as a social change strategy because it was an attempt to "level the social status of the minority group with the dominant group" (p. 9). The basis of this observation stems from the response of one participant who was very expressive about his level of frustration that resulted from feeling constrained in his sexuality. Specifically, this participant stated, "... Why in the hell can't I bring my boyfriend to a function? I pay for it just as much as they do. I pay my dues. I go to all this stuff. I'm a damn officer, and I was getting real hostile over it."

Cass (1979) observed coming-out as a milestone of development. Coming-out to someone does signify a higher order of development. However, coming-out to others might be about more than just development. It may also serve as a means of affecting change. Cox and Gallois (1996) asserted that "social competition" was the only way to affect actual change between the minority group (homosexuals) and the dominant group (heterosexuals). Cox and Gallois also stated, "direct competition with the dominant group is required" (p. 20). From this perspective, it may be that a gay male (representing
the minority group) divulges his sexuality to his fraternity (dominant group) for reasons other than what Case (1996) proposed as “validation and acceptance by the group” (p. 2).

It may be that someone comes-out to his fraternity in an effort to “level the social status of the minority group with the dominant group” (Cox & Gallois, 1996, p. 9). While it might be that the participants of the present study did not come-out to their fraternities for this reason, it certainly appears to be a distinct possibility. Regardless, four of the five participants of the present study were out to their entire chapter. The fifth participant was out to several members of his chapter at the time of the interview.

Previous studies focusing on approaches of gay males who come-out to their fraternities were not obtainable. In the present study, it was observed that participants exercised a combination of three basic approaches when coming-out to their fraternities: member specific, step-by-step, and passive/reactive. These three approaches appeared to have a significant connection to the six variables identified as facilitating their processes of coming-out to other fraternity members. As explained in the previous chapter, it is possible that these three approaches co-exist as concentric circles. However, the question arises as to what persuaded a participant to use one approach more so than another.

The answer to this question of which path to take presumably lies somewhere between the intersection of the various coping strategies employed and the variables that facilitated the participants to come-out to their fraternities. Furthermore, additional factors appeared to affect a participant’s decision to use one approach to a greater extent than other approaches. One example of an additional factor that was highly significant was timing. Four of the five participants joined in their first year of college, but came out during their junior year of college. However, one participant explained that he did not
plan a specific time in which he was going to come-out. He stated, “I just knew that when the time was right I was going to let them know.” Another significant factor appeared to be the contextual backdrop. One participant explained that he intentionally waited until the summer to begin coming-out to his fraternity members because he knew there would be fewer of them staying in the house over the summer. Hence, he felt it easier to concentrate on a select few rather than the entire group at once.

Recommendations

The present study was the first to examine the coping strategies and coming-out processes of gay males in college fraternities. Given this early study and small sample of participants, the researcher believed it was premature to make recommendations to practitioners in the field or to other undergraduate fraternity men contemplating their own decision to come-out to their fraternity brothers. Thus, the following recommendations were directed to researchers. This study should be replicated with a variety of modifications as suggested below.

1. All five participants of the present study attended college in the Midwest. Future studies should include gay males who attend college in other geographical regions to determine if similar patterns of coping and coming-out exist.

2. The present study examined the lived experiences of gay males in fraternities only from the perspective of the gay male member. A stronger research design could include the perceptions of other, non-gay fraternity members who experienced someone coming-out amongst them.

3. The participants of the present study expressed receiving mostly positive reactions upon coming-out to fraternity members. Another study of gay males who did not
receive positive reactions from their fraternity brothers upon voluntarily coming-out or who were involuntarily outed to their brothers is recommended. A comparative analysis of the three coming-out processes and outcomes will aid in determining the effectiveness of individual coping strategies and coming-out approaches.

4. All five participants of the present study came-out to their fraternities after at least one semester of being an initiated member. A future study could include the lived experiences of gay males who come-out prior to becoming an initiated member to determine if participants shared similar experiences and relations with non-gay brothers.

5. All five participants of the present study were highly involved in their fraternities and held at least one executive board position. The present study could be replicated with conditions that include both participants who did hold an executive position and who did not hold an executive position to determine if the level of fusing and coming-out affect the reactions of fraternity members.

6. Little is known about the effects on the organization as a whole of a known, out gay member within its ranks. Another study could focus upon the short-term and long-term effects that may occur within the culture of a fraternity as a result of someone coming-out within the organization.

7. Similar studies could be conducted of gay males who are members of other all-male college sub-cultures (for example, athletic teams, musical organizations, and residence hall floors) to identify possible consistencies or disparities in the coping strategies that are employed by gay members within the groups.
8. A cross generational qualitative study focusing specifically on gay fraternity men using Dilley's (2002) methodology would help to understand both the changing atmosphere within the college fraternity in regard to sexuality across time and the comfort of gay men to reveal their sexuality within the context of fraternity.

9. All five participants of this study were white males belonging to traditionally white NIC-affiliated fraternities. A similar study should be developed focusing on members of traditionally Black and Latino college fraternities.

10. The present study explored issues of sexuality only from the male perspective. Similar studies should be conducted within women's collegiate sororities and fraternities.

Limitations

While efforts were made to find a representative sample, one must be cautious in generalizing these results beyond the immediate group of five research participants. The researcher intentionally limited the scope of this study to include only gay males who (1) had membership in a college fraternity, and (2) had come-out to other fraternity members while still an undergraduate member. Consequently, identifying and obtaining a sizable pool of potential participants was difficult. Upon obtaining a pool of applicants that fit the scope of the study, it was determined that the majority of possible participants were beyond a reasonable driving distance accessible to the researcher. Kuh and Arnold (1993) posited, "Fraternities are products of a larger cultural context...they do not exist apart from the societies and institutions that create and support them" (p. 331). In this regard, only selecting participants who were in the Midwest was thought to be a major
limitation as the experiences of gay fraternity members in other cultural landscapes within the United States were not examined.

Conclusion

The foundation of this qualitative study was based upon exploring the lived experiences of those individuals who have come-out to their fraternities as an undergraduate member. It goes without question that a certain degree of complexity is involved when investigating a highly controversial phenomenon such as this one. In order for the researcher to capture the nuances of the participants’ experiences, a semi-structured, face-to-face, informal interview was employed. Moreover, it was predetermined that the data from the interviews would be organized into categories apropos to the four initial research questions. As this was an early study in the coming-out experiences of gay males in fraternities, a comparative analysis with the existing literature was in many ways restricted because so little published, credible research in the area was available. Albeit limited, the for-going conclusions were made based upon this analysis.

Several themes emerged indicating that gay males in fraternities employ a variety of coping strategies in an attempt to conceal their sexuality. The participants’ perceptions of the environment within a fraternity significantly affect their usage of both the type and frequency of coping strategies employed. Numerous variables influence a person’s decision to come-out, but most of these variables can in some way be linked to the individual’s level of homosexual identity development. The approach used in coming out to one’s fraternity members appears to have a strong connection with the variables that facilitate one to come-out to his fraternity. Moreover, it seems as if the different
approaches to coming-out within a fraternity are in many ways mutually inclusive of one another.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Call for Participants Email
A masters’ graduate student from Eastern Illinois University, Jack Trump, is working on a cutting-edge thesis dealing with the experiences of young men who have come-out as gay to their fraternity while they are/were undergraduate chapter members.

He is looking to obtain research participants who came out while an undergrad to interview in order to gain an understanding of their lived experiences. In this regard, he is hoping to acquire a conceptual understanding of (1) what propels gay men to come-out to their fraternity chapter, (2) the contextual backdrop (e.g., atmosphere within the fraternity, participant’s level of fraternity involvement) at the time of their coming-out, and (3) coping strategies gay males may employ as an aid in the process of coming-out.

Jack’s e-mail address is cgjrt@eiu.edu. Jack is an Associate Resident Director in the Office of University Housing & Dining Services at EIU. He is a founding father within his chapter. One of his reasons for conducting this study is that he disclosed his sexuality to his chapter brothers while he was an undergraduate, and believes that there are many others who have also done the same.

Thanks so much for helping Jack find some participants willing to share their personal experiences.

Fraternally,

Chuck Eberly
Professor of Counseling & Student Development
Eastern Illinois University
(217) 581-7235
APPENDIX B

Follow-up to Call for Participants Email
Dear ______: 

Thank you for your interest in being a part of my research project. As you are aware, I am trying to gather participants who are willing to share their experience of coming-out at the time of being an undergraduate member of their fraternity. I am very passionate about this area of study and would like to include all those who have responded. However, because of the nature of my research (qualitative), I would like to limit my participants to five or less. In order to help me accomplish this and meet the criteria required for my sample, I have constructed a brief survey. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and return it to me at your earliest convenience. Your cooperation will assist me in completing my thesis in a timely manner and provide needed information on this important topic. I will let you know if you have been included in my research project and set up interview schedules as soon as possible.

Survey Questions

1. In what area/region are you currently located?
2. On what campus was your undergraduate chapter located?
3. How old were you when you began college?
4. When did you join your fraternity? (Freshmen, Sophomore, etc)
5. How many semesters were you in the fraternity before coming-out to the fraternity?
6. Did you come-out to the fraternity before or after you were an initiated member?
7. Did you come-out to your entire chapter?
8. What year did you graduate?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Again, I appreciate your willingness to participate in this research project.

Fraternally,

Jack Trump
APPENDIX C

Participant Selection Email
Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire that I sent to you. After reviewing the information from all the respondents, your responses appear to fit closely with the scope of my study. I understand that confidentiality may be a concern. I assure you that I will not share any data that you do not want shared. This is an area of study that I am highly passionate about and is very personal to me, for I too am a gay male who came out to his fraternity as a undergraduate member.

If possible, I would like to conduct a face-to-face personal interview with you in the near future. I am currently trying to free up time in my schedule and have identified specific dates in March that would allow me to travel to where you are located for the interview. These dates are listed below. Could you please let me know as many dates as possible from this list that might work for you? Also, could you please provide a phone number at which I may reach you so as to set up arrangements for the interview? We can meet wherever you choose for the interview. If you have any questions, please contact me either via Email or phone.

Here is my availability:

Monday, March 10
Tuesday, March 11
Wednesday, March 12
Thursday, March 13
Friday, March 14
Saturday, March 15
Friday, March 21
Saturday, March 22
Sunday, March 23
Friday, March 28
Saturday, March 29
Sunday, March 30

Again, I want to thank you for your continued interest in being a participant of this study, and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Fraternally,

Jack Trump
217.581.7702 (office)
217.549.1165 (cell)
APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form
INFORMED CONSENT

Coping Strategies of Undergraduate Gay Males in College Social Fraternities

This study examines the experiences of gay men who have disclosed their sexuality to their respective fraternities while they are/were undergraduate chapter members. The purpose of this study is to gain a conceptual understanding of (1) what propels gay men to disclose their sexuality to their respective fraternity chapter, (2) the contextual backdrop (e.g., atmosphere within the fraternity, participant's level of fraternity involvement) at the time of disclosure, and (3) the coping strategies they may have employed during the process.

Descriptive narrative will be used to describe participants' recollections of their coming out experiences to their fraternities, the culture within the fraternities, and possible coping strategies that may have been employed. Data will be collected through extensive formal interviews and informal follow-up interviews. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Information gathered from the interviews will be held strictly confidential and data will be stored securely. Participants will be given a pseudonym and any quotes will be kept anonymous. Additionally, universities, fraternities, and locales will not be identified in any way to mask both the individual and the institutions. The researcher will not use any information in the study that may potentially place the participant at civil or criminal risk, be damaging to their financial standing or employability, nor deal with sensitive aspects of their behavior.

In signing this form, I agree to:

_____ (a) participate in this study voluntarily;

_____ (b) agree to allow quotations without attribution;

_____ (c) reserve the right to withdraw at any time;

_____ (d) give permission for the audio recording of my interview.

Thank you for your participation in this thesis research.

________________________  ____________
Respondent             Date

________________________  ____________
Researcher (J. Trump)     Date