

6-2020

Is the identity development process intersectional?: the story of 15 gay white male Chicagoans

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Is the Identity Development Process Intersectional?

The Story of 15 Gay White Male Chicagoans

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

June 2020

BY

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	5
Introduction	6
Literature Review	6
Introduction to Lit Review.....	6
What is Identity?.....	8
White Identity Development.....	12
Gay Identity Development.....	22
Geography and Identity.....	27
Occupation and Identity.....	30
Mentors and Role Models.....	32
Intersectionality.....	36
Methods and Data	38
Results	43
Diminishing Barriers to Self-Acceptance of Gay Identity.....	45
Overcoming Barriers to Connecting with White Identity.....	56
Salience Through “Othering”.....	67
Social Network Trends.....	75
The Primacy of Place.....	81
Identity Role Models.....	89
Discussion	97
Conclusion	101
References	104

Methodological Appendix.....110

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Finishing this research project involved a lot of struggle and readjustment that I did not initially anticipate. I would not have been able to make it through this without support from my family, friends, professors, and my cohort.

First, I want to thank my sisters and my mom for always cheering me on. Every time I would complete an interview or finish a draft of a section, you would all respond with praise and encouragement for taking one more step toward finishing.

Next, I have to thank my closest friends for allowing me to talk out my thoughts and complain about my struggles, as well as helping me maintain my sanity through console and fun times. Thank you Sav Henderson, Ali Harwood, Keith McHenry, Lindsey Halvorson, Adam Nolan, Marisa Lazar, Abel Amezcua and Jack Wickham.

I cannot thank my thesis committee, Dr. Roberta Garner, Dr. Blackhawk Hancock, and Dr. Hector Carrillo, enough for all of your patience, feedback, and guidance. I have learned a lot through this process and a good portion of that is from our conversations and emails.

I also need to thank a few additional professors who have helped shape my mind and encouraged me to pursue my passions. Thank you to Eulalie Laschever, John Schlichtman, Tracey Lewis-Elligan, Fernando DeMaio, Karyn Stewart, Jose Soltero, Michael Bennett, and Mark Wodziak.

Thank you as well to my cohort. We pushed each other, supported one another, and maintained each other's sanity throughout this process. I'm so grateful I was placed in a group of such brilliant, ambitious, dedicated, and kind students.

Finally, I have to thank the subjects in this study. Your openness, vulnerability, and engagement made this project possible. Sharing your stories helped me to process some of my own development and supported me in healing during a relatively rough period in my life.

Jake Stone

INTRODUCTION

This study looked to uncover the process by which gay white men develop their racial identity and compare that to the developmental process for their gender and sexual orientation. Literature surrounding identity development processes often focus on stage or typology models. While these models describe common patterns accurately, they are too stagnant and do not adequately depict the experiences, events, and people that encourage movement from one stage to the next. This project seeks to unveil that movement between stages and lay it out in full, as well as add increasing depth to the static stage models by showing how people understand their identities. In other words, this study describes *what* gay, white, and male identities mean to gay white men, as well as *how* they came to that conclusion. I recruited participants through a time-space sampling method. By conducting life history interviews with 14 gay white men between the ages of 21 and 42 in Chicago, I found that gay white men viewed their identity development processes as segregated from one another, making a single cohesive identity difficult to articulate. Othering events, role models, and moving physical locations throughout life helped to push the subjects along in their understanding of their identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past few decades, a growing number of academics built a field of study known as critical whiteness studies. This subfield stemming from academic thought in the field of critical race studies looks at 1) the manifestations of the historically

developed structure of racism in institutions, social movements, physical space, language, and more; 2) the role of white people in maintaining and enacting interpersonal, cultural, and structural forms of racism; 3) the internalization of racism by people of color through socialization; 4) the history behind why and how certain groups of people “became white;” and 5) the historically contextual nature of dominant racial discourse and structure.

As academics produce more literature around whiteness, in an era marked by late-stage capitalism, focus often shifts from the structural to the individual. Personal identity becomes the unit of analysis with this micro focus. Concentrating on the individual may obscure the structural. For example, describing racism perpetuated in media, popular discourse, and textbooks as individual acts of conscious discrimination, instead of a historically based and structural form of oppression, serves to limit an awareness and understanding of this greater web of institutions and culture that reinforce the racial hierarchy. However, this current project also focuses on individual identity. Individuals constantly reify structures through daily interactions with one another, making the analysis of identity necessary to make sense of how people build and upkeep racism on the structural level. The Aspen Institute defines a historically developed structural racism as “as system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity” (2016).

Discussions of intersectionality, the recognition of individual bodies being the sites of multiple forms of intersecting oppressions through mutually constitutive

aspects of identity (King 1988, Crenshaw 1989), continue to problematize the assumed monolithic nature of any one group by ascribed characteristic. Critical whiteness studies, in an effort to demonstrate the intra-racial distinctions made by white people and connecting that with varying degrees of access to power, already analyze the intersection of class position and race. Other fields, such as women and gender studies and LGBTQ+ studies, also increasingly problematize intersections of identities and the advantages associated with unique social locations related to that intersection.

Drawing on literature from sociology, psychology, philosophy, ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, and LGBTQ+ studies, I will discuss conceptions of identity; white identity development models; gay identity development models; the connection between geography and identity; a short note of the impact of occupation on identity; the role of role models and mentors in identity development; an explication of intersectionality; and finally the theoretical underpinnings of my methodology for the present study of gay white men.

What is Identity?

Identity is simultaneously a process and an outcome (Waterman 1985) - every new development leading to a new platform within the self from which further reflection and change can occur. Psychologists and sociologists alike create identity stage models that indicate a sort of linearity to identity development and hint at one uniform final stage where people "should" end up as they age, introspect, and have new experiences. However, the fluidity, reflexivity, and complexity of

identity call into question the value of linear models for any one ascribed characteristic like race, gender, or sexuality. This is not to say that gay people or white people, for example, do not have patterns in the way their sexual or racial identities develop, but rather that people are too varied in their experiences and self-concept such that linear models reduce and constrain the wholeness of an individual.

“Meaning comes about only as a relation is understood between two people who may be occupying simultaneous but different spaces (Miehl 2001 :241). The symbolic interactionist approach to understanding identity has been reiterated for over a century now, starting with the looking glass self (Cooley 1902) and later George Mead and Erving Goffman expanded upon this idea as a product of social interaction. This approach to identity still predominates in sociology and provides agency to individual actors in the constant decision to take on roles daily and enact them in context with others (Hall 2001). By interacting with and receiving feedback both directly and indirectly from peers, family, and others, people develop self-concept, or definitions of self. Self-concept is comprised of both self-evaluation and identity. The self-evaluation aspect is made up of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and authenticity. The identity element looks inwards to describe one’s perceptions of his or her social roles, personality traits, and sense of uniqueness based on their experiences. An individual’s social network and environment create the potential roles and socialization process to take on those roles (Brookins 1996).

Roles often situate an individual as a part of a group. Conceiving of oneself as part of a group drastically alters the ways individuals think, act, and feel about

everyday life. Collective identity describes seeing oneself as a part of a group, along with others, who agree upon certain shared beliefs and values, and imagine themselves as part of a united community. It provides a way of viewing and making sense of the world in which people live (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Actors engage in identity work to define the boundaries of what constitutes membership to the collective identity. Social movement scholars highlight identity talk as a key mechanism for instilling meaning into collective identities in relational terms (Lichterman 1999; Hunt and Benford 1994; Futrell and Simi 2004). Explaining to another person how one's own identity aligns with that of a group's speaks into existence the melding of self into a collective by allowing for both reflection and affirmation self-definition.

Gamson (1997) discusses the process of boundary negotiation that takes place to define the "*us...not just against an external them but also against thems* inside, as particular subgroups battle to gain or retain legitimate *us* standing," (180). The first half of this equation includes the building of oppositional capital to turn stigma among marginalized groups into status through incorporation into a collective (Wieloch 2002). The other half draws boundaries within the group. The LGBTQ+ moniker itself, for example, emphasizes the likelihood that subgroups will battle to maintain legitimacy within the community. Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and trans people used essentialist politics to create clear categories for their collective identities as individual groups and again as a whole for the LGBTQ+ community. Fixed identity categories, similar to those describe with essentialist LGBTQ+ politics, are "both the basis of oppression and the basis for political power"

(Gamson 1995: 390). Essentialist identity categories delineate strict boundaries that prohibit the fluidity necessary to incorporate others. Similarly, collective identities only partially reflect the individual identity of its constituents, leaving room for disputes and negotiation between the self, others within the group, and the collective entity (Stoecker 1995).

The creation of in-group and out-group leads to bias directed from the inside outwards, as well as positive association and assumptions of similarity within the in-group. Many identity theories portray this bias as a byproduct of creating explicit groups. Social identity theory, however, takes intergroup bias as a central process by which people establish the positive distinctiveness of their group and derive self-esteem (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy 2009). Incorporating bias as inherent in categorization of peoples normalizes bias as a psychological process, natural to the human experience (Tajfel and Turner 1979). When an in-group with a particular identity gains access to power and create systems rooted in their advantage and simultaneously institutionalizes the disadvantage of the out-group, a form of oppression is born. Once the members of the in-group build the system that grants them power, this group then has a vested interest in maintaining and reinforcing the system. The upkeep around the system involves justifications for the superiority of the values and characteristics of the group in power, and the degradation of the powerless (Blumer 1958).

Inside of any group, members actively support and affirm one another in adopting the group identity by providing language to describe the identity and define its characteristics. Group members also create strategies to protect the group

identity from challenges, doubling down on their commitment to the maintenance of the group itself and its correlated justification (Singh 2012). But identity solidification doesn't solely occur within groups, it also happens between groups. The identity of both in-group and out-group is defined in relation to the other. Black does not exist without white and vice-a-versa; gay does not exist without straight and vice-a-versa. That is why strategies for boundary maintenance and delineation often involve social pressure and incentives through access to power.

Power here being the maintenance of control over the political process; institutional access to healthcare, education, and other necessities; accumulation of intergenerational wealth; and protection from social and cultural harm. This form of power only exists through daily interactions that reinforce the current system in place and reify symbolic power by normalizing the dominant group's cultural values and assumed superiority.

White Identity Development

White racial identity is no different in terms of boundary creation and preservation, and retaining a possessive investment in upholding the status quo in terms of institutional power and historical accumulation of wealth (Lipsitz 1998). In order to justify the current distribution of economic and social power, white people have agreed to collectively misunderstand reality and create an alternate conception of the world that perpetuates their right to power. By viewing today as a neutral, ahistorical baseline in terms of the distribution of wealth and power, white people can simultaneously validate their position as rightly deserved because of

either an innate superiority or work ethic, while also validate the position of people of color as less successful due to laziness or cultural deficiency. Charles Mills refers to this collective agreement as the racial contract – a social contract by white people over people of color. White people can be signatories, actively enforcing the racial order, or beneficiaries, unconsciously reaping benefits from the collective agreement (Mills 1997). White values and characteristics became norms that all people live by and enabling white people to view themselves as non-raced beings (Lewis 2004). In other words, race is something that “others” have. This view of the white self as non-racialized negatively impacts white people’s ability to discuss and understand issues of race, which creates unique challenges in developing research methodology to gather white people’s perceptions of race-related issues (Stoddart 2002).

This narrative allows whiteness to go unexamined, which forever underwrites what Charles Mills calls the racial contract – the collective agreement between white people and, with the internalization of whiteness, people of color as well to uphold the racial hierarchy in place. It inculcates in white people specifically the “habitus of racism,” which portrays to white people through socialization the understanding of the stakes involved in the racial hierarchy and the need to uphold it. This habitus of racism, borrowing from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, describes “a craft, a collection of techniques, references, and a set of beliefs (Hargrove 2009: 95).” The habitus of racism uses both the racial contract and white logic to sustain itself, which together creates in the white mind a belief in one’s own thoughts and experiences as an indisputable truth. Other mechanisms within white culture

actively shut down challenges to the system or to individual acts of racism. For example, white fragility shifts the priority to the feelings of distress in white people when they are challenged by people of color or other white folks for doing or saying something perceived to be racist (structural or personal). The habitus of racism also includes social pressure to stay silent and not create discomfort around racial issues between white people (DiAngelo 2018).

Although all white people have a vested interest in upholding the system, different communities of white people have varying amounts of power dependent on class position, local environment, and a number of other factors. This is likewise true for communities of color, as class and race are inextricably linked in American society (Roediger 2007). Even within a single city, a number of white communities can coexist with differing degrees of power and completely different perceptions of the meaning of race. The process of race meaning making happens locally based on the demographic context, historical memory of racial incidents, and the language that people use to describe race. John Hartigan demonstrates this in his portrayal of how three neighborhoods in Detroit talk about both intra-racial and interracial differences and conflict (1999).

Part of this “race talk” reflects whatever dominant racial discourse exists at the time. In the U.S. context, the language around race has changed from primarily focused on race rooted in biology (essentialist racism) to cultural and social terminology that focused on cultural differences between the races to justify racial hierarchy (Frankenberg 1993). Today, “color blindness” reigns as the dominant racial discourse, which enables power evasion. This version of racial discourse

utilizes four key frames to drive power evasion – abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018). While color-blind racism may predominate now, other forms of racial discourse based in biology, culture, class, and nation coexist and constantly reinforce whiteness.

The above discussion on race and whiteness is the context within which white identity development occurs. To reiterate, “whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination (Frankenberg 1993: 6).” And although the identity development stage models have their limitations, to understand patterns in white identity development, it is important to run through a few of the prominent models.

Janet Helms created one of the first white racial identity development (WRID) models in the early 1990s. Her model had two phases, one positive and one negative, that was each broken down into three stages. The first stage, contact, essentially equates to color blindness. White people can, of course, see racial differences, but have an attitude of “talking about race is what perpetuates racism.” In the second stage, disintegration, white people become aware of their racial identity and understand some of the associated power and privileges that accompany that piece of their identity. This stage is characterized by a deep moral internal conflict with some of the collapse of the concept of meritocracy. Third is the reintegration stage, the final stage of the negative phase of WRID. The process of disintegration leads to frustration, guilt, and anger directed toward black people, which encourage the belief of white superiority and black inferiority.

The positive phase of WRID starts with the pseudo-independence stage. Here, the white individual has an awareness of their own race and some issues regarding race in society at large. However, in this stage, the white person looks to people of color to understand interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism. Moving into the fifth stage, immersion/emersion, a white person challenges himself to unpack stereotypes and myths in their identity and learn what it means to be white. This stage is also characterized by a high level of emotional intensity while addressing racism and other forms of interconnected oppressions. The final stage of Helms' WRID model is autonomy, acting on an anti-racist identity, seeking constant reflection and new information for growth. Dr. Helms promotes racial self-actualization as the goal in her models of both white and black racial identity development. For her, the central issue of white identity development is the abandonment of entitlement and for people of color it involves surmounting internalized racism (Helms 1993; Dunne-Cascio 2010; Boisnier 2003; Miehl 2001).

In any identity development process, people will teeter the lines between stages, but primarily exhibit the characteristics of one box over any other. At every stage, identity development has the potential to stall, a process known as identity foreclosure. With identity foreclosure, no further growth occurs and people remain stuck, unable to or unwilling to progress through normal development (Hauser 1972). Foreclosure then places a front of a sense of integrated identity, where in reality, the individual feels confused and internalizes an impoverished sense of self-concept (Cass 1979).

Critiquing Helms' model, Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) challenged how the structure and characteristics of each stage reflected less about white people and more about their reflections on people of color. Given the invisibility of whiteness, it went understudied and unanalyzed for decades, making racial minority identity development models the precursors to WRID models. The later WRID models merely adapted to, but closely mirrored earlier models of racial identity development despite the drastically different context of living as a racial minority in an oppressive society. Both Helms' black identity development model and William Cross's nigrescence model (1971) served as templates for later editions relating to white identity. The Cross model lays out a 5-step process for becoming black and creating an integrated racial identity. As mentioned earlier, the goal demonstrated through the WRID model is to release a sense of superiority and entitlement, whereas for people of color it is to unlearn racism rooted in their bodies in order to develop a positive identity. The complexity of each of these processes makes it difficult to imagine that a simple mirroring of the two models with a few changes in characteristics would result in reaching each of the goals that Helms kept at the forefront of her mind when creating these models.

Additionally, Helms' WRID model focuses less on how White people develop around a conception of their own race, and instead, center the affect of white people toward people of color in each stage. This leaves little room for understanding the actual process by which Whites become aware of their racial identity and make emotional, mental, and behavioral changes in an effort to become racially self-actualized. Their other challenge to Helms' model relates to its linearity, as I

mentioned earlier. Helms acknowledges that people may slip back stages, skip stages, or remain stable at some points during their lives, which calls into question the stage-focused progression entirely. If the boxes set up in a linear fashion have constant exceptions, it begs the question: “how accurate is the model in the first place?” (O’Donoghue 2004) adds to these criticisms of WRID models mentioning that they usually take for granted an assumption that white people grew up having little to no contact with people of color, which, although true in many cases, leaves out a significant portion of white people’s lived experience.

Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson then offered an alternative way of defining white sense of racialized self by describing types of unachieved and achieved racial consciousness. While having an unachieved racial consciousness, three types of white people exist. First, the avoidant type ignores racial issues entirely and their related significance. Until a life experience strong enough to break through the denial occurs, this person will remain this type. Second, the dependent type looks to others to define their sense of white identity by encouraging particular forms of thought or behavior. Finally, the dissonant type is marked by uncertainty around race due to either a lack of information and experience, or from a conflict between what they believed to be true and new experiences that contradict those beliefs.

The achieved racial consciousness has four types. The dominative type believes in white racial superiority, racial minority inferiority, and has a markedly ethnocentric worldview. This type has both an active and passive form, with behaviors ranging from discriminatory and violent acts toward people of color to a reluctance to interact with racial minorities. The conflictive type responds

negatively to obvious acts of discrimination, but does not support programs or policy that address the historical legacy of structural racism. In fact, the suggestion of affirmative action or other attempts to lessen the impact of institutional racism are met with offence and discomfort, likely due to a belief in meritocratic ideals. Acknowledgment of the impact of racism on a structural level and the relative advantages given to white people in this system characterizes the reactive type. The white people of this type are quick to point out inequalities they see, but unlikely to accept personal responsibility in contributing to structural inequality.

The final type, integrative, describes white racial attitudes that hold moral responsibility, but in a way that encourages a pragmatic form of action to make change. People of this type value multiculturalism and have informed and complex understandings of the variety of issues that affect people of color. This type also ranges from passive to active in that they may intentionally create personal relationships with people of color or engage in activism to create structural change around the issues of racism. The goal of these types, and this final type in particular, is to demonstrate racial awareness in the white mind and a commitment to engaging in the process of continuing to develop around White identity. The movement between these types is non-linear and results from an incredible variety of life experiences, environments, and relationships, which all hinge on the ability of the individual to react to dissonance between old and new views.

Given my particular focus on gay white men, the Key model, which addresses white male identity development, also calls for review. The model starts with the assumptions of white male socialization to ingrain ideas of self-reliance and

individualism (commonly associated with white identity at large). Scott and Robinson (2001) highlight how white men learn to value their self-worth on their ability to provide financially for themselves and others. Again, this model, similar to the racial consciousness model, is nonlinear and involves types instead of stages. The process from moving from one type to another involves increasing self-reflection, contention within the self, and eventually more understanding within the self.

Type 1, the noncontact type, embraces ethnocentrism and traditional gender roles, knowing little to nothing about the discrimination that people of color and women face, nor about race generally. The claustrophobic type, Type 2, feels closed in by people of color and women, seeing them as having unfair advantages that harm White men's ability to succeed. This narrative comes about as a result of the American dream collapsing in their minds. In this type, they often view others in very stereotypical ways. Type 3, the conscious identity type, requires an experience that calls into question previously held beliefs and starts to understand how structural oppression toward women and people of color shapes their own worldview. At this moment, the individual can move into the claustrophobic type or on to the empirical type. The empirical type affirms the realities of racism and sexism, which allows the white man to shift blame off of the victims and recognize his advantageous position in society. The conflict here often causes discomfort, especially with one's role in perpetuating the system and with the continued dissolution of the American dream. The final type, optimal type, highlights the importance of multiculturalism and community in exploring the self and living a

fulfilling life. This type decenters the American dream from sense of self worth and allows success to come from within, which lowers feelings of competition with women and people of color, opening opportunities for connection.

In type 5 of the Key model, similarly to the integrated type and Helms' autonomous stage, the individual clearly articulates and understands their white identity. This has a number of important benefits. White people, while not seeing themselves as racialized beings, have difficulty conceptualizing how much they do not know about race and racism (Dunne-Cascio 2010). Due to this dearth of knowledge in comparison to people of color, when curricula focus on multiculturalism in diverse environments, white students tend to benefit *more* than students of color. White people are less likely to have cross-racial interactions, exacerbating the potential gains from developing awareness of race. Valuing diversity often leads to the rejection of oppression and building of a white identity aligned with the optimal type in the Key model (Martin 2014; Onyekwuluje 2000; Camino 1995).

Having a complex perception of the world through understanding the experiences of others allows for increasingly adaptive behavior. "Only an individual with a highly developed meaning system, or examined racial identity development, will be able to appreciate and understand the range and nature of behavioral choices available in any given situation (Miehls 2001)." The racial contract enables white people to collectively misinterpret the world, but adequate social functioning in the US requires a complete comprehension of the lived realities of a multicultural nation (Saari 1993). Racial identity is constantly negotiated and renegotiated

through both inter- and intra-racial contact. In order to make sense of those interactions, white people need to understand the process and its importance of categorizing themselves and others through language and symbols of communication (Patel 2007). This is one of many vital reasons why white people must to come to terms with their racial identity and the field of critical whiteness studies needs more research on how WRID occurs.

Gay Identity Development

The socially interdependent nature of the development of self through the symbolic interactionist approach reinvigorates the stage models because it allows the whole person to exist in social situations, as opposed to isolating one element of an individual's identity and assuming how that piece could or should interact in a particular context. By this I mean, when I, a gay White man, talk with my Black lesbian roommate, our racial identities aren't the only pieces of ourselves that interact in that conversation. We come to the table with a multitude of identities that dictate our unique social location, which engenders a variegated power dynamic. Understanding the development process of gay identity will add intersectional depth to this project.

The LGBTQ+ moniker describes a number of different subsets of communities that are not simultaneously heterosexual and cisgender. The "L" stands for lesbian, "G" for gay, "B" for bisexual, "T" for transgender, and "Q" for queer. The "+" refers to a number of other identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella term, such as pansexual, intersex, bigender, and agender. Colloquially, and in this

document, the terms “LGBTQ+”, “LGBTQ”, “LGBT”, “queer”, and “queer and trans” all represent the entirety of the community who is not simultaneously heterosexual and cisgender. Each of these terms has a unique history on how they came to be seen as a stand in for such a diverse community, but for now it is sufficient to say they are essentially synonyms within LGBTQ+ spaces.

Vivienne Cass developed the main gay identity development model (1979) that still directs LGBTQ+ research on identity today. Her six-stage model revolves around 3 elements – perception of attributes in self, perception of behavior as a result of identity, and perception of others’ perception of identity. Stage one, identity confusion, comes with the recognition that some of one’s thoughts or behaviors could be categorized as homosexual. There is a significant amount of stress that accompanies the increasing association of self with homosexuality. In this stage, the individual can believe and accept the association, believe but dislike the association, or deny and dislike the association of self with being gay. If the person both denies and dislikes the possibility of having gay thoughts and feelings, then they may enter a stage of identity foreclosure and stay in stage 1, associating oneself with heterosexuality forever.

Stage two, also known as identity comparison, creates the feeling of difference between self and others. The individual starts to accept that homosexuality might accurately describe their sexuality. Herein, the individual no longer sees heterosexual norms as applicable to their future, but they do not yet have new homosexual expectations for behavior or thought yet. Depending on the individual, this feeling of difference can be either negative or positive. The negative

case may encourage one to attempt to “pass” as straight. The positive one will lead into future stages of self-acceptance.

Identity tolerance is the next stage where the individual admits that they are most likely homosexual. This both exacerbates feelings of difference, which may cause discomfort, and diminishes internal confusion around the essential “who am I” question. In this stage, the gay individual tolerates their form of difference and begins to reach out to other LGBTQ+ identified people to remove a feeling of isolation. When reaching out, the quality of connection between self and other LGBTQ+ folks has serious consequences for how the newly gay individual perceives the LGBTQ+ community. Nearing the end of this stage, the individual can finally say that they are homosexual.

Next is the identity acceptance stage, where the individual integrates himself with a gay community. Acceptance of a gay self increases and their perception of both LGBTQ+ identified people and culture becomes markedly positive. The individual in this stage understands who they are and seeks to limit friction with this newly identified self and heterosexual criticism of this new identity. To do so, they either limit time spent around heterosexual people or remain closeted. Stage 5, identity pride, recognizes the simultaneity of their acceptance of self and society’s rejection of their identity. An entirely positive valuation of LGBTQ+ people and devaluation of heterosexual, cisgender people reduces distress over societal rejection. Cass says that this stage involves activism, rejection of being perceived as heterosexual, and being fully “out,” or at least less concerned with the perception of others. However, if being out is a concern for safety or could threaten access to

necessities like healthcare or employment, the individual will feel great conflict while remaining closeted.

Finally, identity synthesis breaks down the dichotomous thinking of all gay people as good and all straight people as bad. The individual no longer separates oneself from the heterosexual world and merges the public and private self. The homosexual identity becomes integrated with the other elements of the individual's identity. This model takes the assumptions that identity is a developmental process and that it occurs through interaction between people and their social context. A significant portion of the research to develop this model and other early literature in the LGBTQ+ studies field used gay white men who were middle-class and college educated as their test subjects. So while Cass's gay identity development model does not explicitly discuss race, it is important to acknowledge the intersection of this model with white identity (Han 2017). The focus on gay white men as subjects could be due to both a hesitancy of people of color to be studied by white academics and a higher proportion of queer people of color in the closet (Martinez and Sullivan 2012).

The gay identity development model for people of color involves significantly different processes due to cultural differences. Research on the relationship between black lesbians and their mothers discussed the unique closeness that draws them to consider preserving family ties over the potential for coming out (Miller and Parker 2009). Of course, individual characteristics of religiosity, family dynamics, employment, involvement with community, and a number of other factors affect the decision whether or not to come out. However, the centralization

of the coming out process in gay identity development models makes it clear that they were built around a white sample. Yet the models themselves do not acknowledge the white racial component, leaving whiteness, again, the unmarked, normalized center. Naming race in this context then adds dimension to the model, allowing for further differentiation between subgroups. Ignoring race limits the ability of the model to accurately depict the process in achieving a healthy gay identity. For Black lesbian identity development, for example, attempts to separate sexuality from race are damaging to a healthy identity formation, according to Shannon Miller (2011).

The conflation of gay white men with the moniker “gay” occurs beyond simply identity development models. Homonormativity, or the portrayal of gay, upper-middle-class, white men as the norming force in the LGBTQ+ community, exists in academia, as well as in the minds of everyday folk. In a study of Black heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, Herek and Capitanio found that respondents held more positive views of gay men if they included Blacks in their conception of gay men (1995), meaning that many of those surveyed viewed being gay as an exclusively white identity. LGBTQ+ people of color often have similar perceptions, causing delayed understanding of their own sexual identity or an inability to connect with the more mainstream white gay community (Pascoe and Bridges 2016).

All LGBTQ+ people have to make some calculation about the decision on how to express their gender and sexuality in public spaces given the potential for physical, emotional, economic, and political repercussions. LGBTQ+ people

understand the reality that they live in, and the stigma and violence that continue to be directed at members of their community. Currently, queer and trans people are situated between unconditional acceptance and outright rejection, making these calculations more important based on the context. Jason Orne discusses how LGBTQ+ people navigate varying situations by recognizing this context and devising strategies to manage stigma (2011, 2017). He mentions three of these strategies: 1) educating the person enforcing stigma, 2) strategically expressing their gender and sexuality differently based on the expected environment to minimize potential stigma (what Orne calls “strategic outness”), or 3) disengaging from the situation.

Geography and Identity

The physical location where people live often dictates the extent to which they will have to manage the stigma and potential for violence. In early LGBTQ+ studies literature, concurrent with popular culture and media narratives, academics portrayed urban areas as gay meccas wherein people could experiment with their sexuality and gender expression without fear of harassment, while also finding a supportive queer community. It is true that LGBTQ+ people congregate in urban space, but this narrative minimizes the lived experience of millions of rural homosexuals (Rosenberger 2014). In an attempt to provide more agency in creating their own narrative to rural gays, academics recently shifted to discussing how queer and trans people make sense of their rural identity and how it influences their understanding of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

These stereotypes do stem, to some extent, from difficulties living as a queer or trans person in rural space. In these areas, there is noticeably less access to queer facilities for socialization, healthcare, and other primary needs. With this lacuna of targeted services, LGBTQ+ people have limited opportunities for social, political, and sexual connection, harming the ability of rural queer people to develop community. This makes rural LGBTQ+ people more vulnerable to anti-gay violence and police harassment (Bell and Valentine 1995). Still, queer people develop informal support networks across rural areas by traveling or using the Internet, which allows for the building of community and some activism in rural spaces (Willis, Raithby, and Maegusuku-Hewett 2018). Moreover, a study done in 2013 demonstrated that in terms of wellbeing (happiness, health, and work satisfaction), urban gays fared no better than rural gays, proving that much of the association of rurality with homophobia may be incorrect (Wienke and Hill).

Much of recent research both confirms and rejects some of this dominant narrative about rurality and queer identity. Annes and Redlin in 2017 found that while rural gays migrate to the city for experimentation of homosexual behaviors, the city represents an unpleasant and undesired effeminizing space, which encourages them to return to their perceived masculine rural space. Identity formation requires movement between spaces to experience new contexts and reflect to develop an understanding of self. Rural gay masculinity is configured in direct relation to urban gay femininity. With a lack of available diversity of queer identities in rural spaces, gay men often abide by heteronormative standards of masculinity to define their queer identities (Bell 2000).

Rural queer people often describe their identities in relation to other elements of rural life beyond heteronormative masculinity, such as being involved in a close community of good people. When describing how or why their rural community accepts their gay identity, people often reference the fact that they are locals and have ties to the surrounding community. This allows queer people to shift the normative symbolic codes, or shared meanings about the importance of geography for queer identity, of rural space as innately hostile and backwards or urban space as inherently welcoming. Additionally, making class distinctions between hicks and rednecks within rural space prevent the image of a unified, homophobic rurality. Queer people in rural spaces associated themselves with the label “hick,” while “rednecks” were seen as close-minded (Kazyak 2011).

The term “redneck” connects to a history of white identity as well as homophobia. A survey with rural, Southern whites in 2010 describes the boundary work engaged in making intra-racial distinctions with the use of the term redneck. While making intra-racial distinctions across white identities challenges the monolithic narrative of whiteness generally, the distancing of self from rednecks enforces the overall hegemonic position of whiteness. By creating this distinction of rednecks as lower versions of white people, Southern rural whites hint at an ideal form of whiteness that is superior and normative (Shirley 2010).

Acceptance of racial difference also varies between rural and urban spaces. Interestingly, literature of racial attitudes in rural spaces focuses on white intra-racial distinctions, whereas literature of racial attitudes in urban spaces focuses on interracial (often black-white) distinctions. Most likely this contrast stems from the

increased diversity in urban spaces, which allows urban race literature to analyze contact theory. Contact theory describes the reduction in prejudice that stems from interracial interactions and relationships. According to Ihanfeldt and Scafidi, interracial neighborhood contact affects Whites' attitudes towards Black people if the Black people they interact with are of the same or higher social status. Black people's attitudes towards White people are affected regardless of the status of Whites in the interaction, but the effect is doubled if Whites are of equal or higher status (2002). Interracial contact has greatly increased in the past 50 years, but the White contact with racial minorities remains consistently superficial. Proximity determines both the frequency and depth of relationships for white people, but for Black people, place of residence matters less and early childhood contact matters more (Siegelman et. al 1996). With the continued narrative of urban spaces as gay meccas, rural and suburban white gay people migrate into this context of increased contact and open themselves up to changing racial views.

Occupation and Identity

It is important to note that this study dissects identity at a particular point in time wherein a stabilized gay identity was born through changes to the family as a result of capitalism. As the family unit maintained its interdependence, but lost its ability to provide the necessary goods for itself, happiness and emotional connection became central to the role of the family. Thus birthing a conception of a personal life. As time moved on and birthing rates declined drastically, sexuality became detached from procreation. The combination of a personal life and

separating sexuality from procreation enabled gay men and lesbians to organize their personal life around their sexuality and build communities around that shared desire. This reorganization made homosexuality part of an identity – a trait separate from heterosexual normalcy. It is in this contemporary capitalist society that gay identity became possible and gay communities a stable reality (D’Emilio 1992).

As mentioned earlier, gay identity development models based on primarily white samples prioritize the process of coming out in accepting oneself and moving toward a healthy gay self. However, in the U.S. only 21 states, D.C., Puerto Rico, and Guam have enacted explicit workplace protections from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This makes being “out” in over half of the country a major risk to the ability to provide for oneself. In addition to the risk of losing employment, LGBTQ+ people face harassment in the workplace (Wicks 2016). Still, people choose to come out in the workplace. Occupational identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression influence one another. Showing up at work with an integrated and whole self allows for development of all aspects of identity. For example, a study of gay and lesbian teachers in 2008 found that while there were certainly risks to coming out, teaching *as a* gay person allowed for a more authentic and enriched form of teaching that provided growth in both teaching and sexual orientation identity (Jackson).

Reinforcing the co-construction of occupational identity and queer identity, Miller, Forest, and Jurik (2003) studied gay and lesbian officers. The work culture in police institutions is decidedly masculine, white, middle-class, and heterosexual. Incorporating women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people triggers a flurry of

hostility from the straight, white, male officers. This was the reality for a majority of the gay men due to associations of gay men with femininity. Heterosexual officers regularly maintained boundaries between themselves and LGBTQ+ officers by excluding them, subordinating them, or verbally harassing them. Gay officers felt like they had to either hide their sexuality, prove their masculinity, or work doubly hard to ensure that their gay identity did not portray an inability to perform on the job. The workplace culture affected how the subjects expressed their sexual orientation and in turn, how they viewed themselves. Despite these impactful studies, little to no research looks at the career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ folks, and fewer studies analyze how occupational identity impacts sexual orientation or gender identity (Lonborg and Phillips 1996).

Mentors and Role Models

William Cross and Jessica Reinhardt looked at how white people come to have an understanding of their racial identity. They determined that awareness of a racialized self came about through serendipitous events or through the direction and mentorship of role models (2017). Given the interactional nature of identity development processes, it is unsurprising that role models and mentors play some role in understanding of self. A plethora of research uncovered positive results from mentorship, ranging from higher self-esteem and valuing education (Linnehan 2001) to higher self-control and lowered risk-taking (Sykes, Gioyiano and Piquero 2014).

Academics differentiate between formal mentors and informal or natural mentors. Formal mentors engage with adolescents and young people through programs such as Big Brother Big Sister, which seeks to empower youth, encourage educational attainment, and minimize involvement in crime. Natural mentors appear throughout the lives of youths as non-parental adults – teachers, grandparents, employers, coaches, or religious leaders – and provide guidance, resources, and a confidant. Differences between mentor and mentee in terms of race and gender alter the relationship and its effects. The enjoyment, positive gains, and frequency of contact all increase as similarity increases (Wohlford, Lochman, and Barry 2004). In fact, seeing adults who are perceived to be similar to the self encourages healthy identity development (Gosse 2011). Conversely, differences around race can have negative effects. For example, white men as mentors perceive risks to mentoring youths of color that outweigh the potential benefits, and thus are less likely to engage in those relationships or do so with lower quality and frequency of contact (Ensher and Murphy 1997). Both the duration of relationships and the frequency of contact positively correlate with benefits from the mentorship relationship by improving trust and closeness (Gaddis 2012; Zand et. al 2009).

Natural mentors similarly provide benefits to youths by reducing drug use, improving attitudes toward school, bettering psychological wellbeing, and yielding better educational and physical health outcomes (DuBois and Silverthorn 2005). Research suggests that these positive impacts of mentorship are compensatory, meaning they neutralize or counteract risk factors, as opposed to changing the dynamic between risk factors and potential outcomes (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer,

Notaro 2002). However, the impacts of natural or informal mentorship also change with racial difference. Black youth find informal mentorship in the maternal grandmother and non-parental adult males more often than white youth (Hirsch, Mickus, and Boerger 2012).

Apart from the mentors themselves, the effects of mentorship change with relative advantage in terms of race and class position. While youth of color benefit more from developing relationships with informal mentors, white youth are more likely to develop those relationships. Mentors to youth can act as compensatory resources or complementary resources, reducing inequality by serving as a resource for disadvantaged youth or promoting inequality by providing further access to resources for already advantaged youths (Erickson, McDonald, and Elder 2009). For LGBTQ+ youth, natural mentoring relationships offer needed additional support beyond peers and family. The impact of which can be seen in the statistic that LGB youth with natural mentors are three times more likely to graduate from high school (Drevon et. al 2016).

In addition to mentors, role models provide a guidepost for how to act and think or how not to act and think. In contrast to mentors, role models do not need to be directly involved in the lives of those benefitting from the connection. In his study of racial differences between role models of rural youth, Oberle (1974) includes movie or TV stars, famous athletes, and government officials in his study. In Lilia Berkovich's dissertation on the relationship between gender identity and role models among trans people, she operationalizes a definition of role models as "person(s) an individual perceives to be similar to some extent, and because of the

similarity, the individual desires to emulate (or specifically avoid) aspects of that person's behaviors," (2016: 31). Berkovich identifies 8 dimensions by which individuals relate to their role models: positive, negative, global, specific, close, distant, up, and across or down; these relate to the attributes, status, and skills the role models have, as well as how frequent and intimately they connect with the role model.

Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano looked at how media role models influenced gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) identities specifically. GLB media figures helped people to realize they were a member of the queer community, to come out, to feel more comfortable with their identities, and to inspire a sense of pride in themselves for their sexual orientation. Internet and book characters provided the most influential role models, followed by TV and movie characters, and trailing at the end were music and magazine figures. Gomillion and Giuliano distinguished between absolute invisibility (not having GLB characters in media at all) and relative invisibility (absence of rich, positive representations of GLB people). They even found that having limited or stereotypical representation of GLB individuals had a severely negative impact on respondents, increasing feelings of exclusion or of an inability to deviate from the stereotypes. Sometimes the role models weren't even GLB individuals, but people or characters with parallel experiences. For example, respondents listed X-Men as queer role models, comparing the way they have to hide their powers as similar to the gay experience of being in the closet (2011).

Another study analyzed how fictional novel characters model gender for emerging adult lesbians. The authors found six ways lesbian protagonists in young adult novels present as gender role models - three that defied traditional gender stereotypes and three that reinforced traditional gender stereotypes. Of the three lessons that defied stereotypes, lesbian protagonists asserted themselves, pursued intimacy with other women, and broke free of constraints to authentic self-expression. Of the three lessons that reinforced gender stereotypes, lesbian protagonists had negative emotional experiences associated with lesbian identity, expressed their gender in a traditionally masculine way, and had traditional gender role-based sexual scripts with other women. Without role models, lesbian-identified women struggled to construct a positive identity (Cook et al. 2013).

Intersectionality

Role models and mentors demonstrate the possibility to integrate all aspects of one's identity into a complete unit. Only through recognizing the multitudes of intersecting pieces of identity and their relation to each other can one begin to make sense of his unique social position and the social forces shaping the self. Although previous activists and academics articulated the concept, modern understanding of intersectionality stems from Deborah King's "multiple jeopardy" concept of "several, simultaneous oppressions [and] to the multiplicative relationships among them as well" (1988: 47). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989; 1991) extrapolated upon King's work and eventually coined the term intersectionality. Borrowing from the Combahee River Collective as well, Crenshaw describes, from a Black feminist perspective, the

interwoven nature of both racism and sexism that shape her daily experience and life chances. In the mainstream feminist movement, racism ignored her reality; in civil rights spaces, sexism limited her voice. Later, Shields expanded upon the concept defining intersectionality as the recognition that “social identities which serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another (2008: 302).”

In a subsequent article, she identifies intersectionality as both a framework and a theory in research. As a framework, intersectionality encourages researchers to not take a single element of identity out of context of the rest of the person, separating it for analysis. Without acknowledging the ways that elements of identity interact with one another, the isolated element no longer makes sense. As a theory, intersectionality provides a process analysis for identity development, understanding that one’s racial experiences inform their gender identity development, which informs a person’s understanding of their class position. In other words, identities play an active role in shaping one another within a single individual (Warner and Shields 2013). Focusing partially on identity, but more so on interwoven systems of oppression as originally intended by Crenshaw, Collins explains that “The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (2015: 2).” Each of these definitions reflects the idea that identity is a constant process, shaped by interaction, which is inherently relational in nature (Singh 2012).

Most literature discussing intersectionality as of late has been critical of both the theory itself (Eisenstein 2018) and its uses in practice. In practice, researchers discuss the concept of intersectionality, while only loosely applying it, leading to lacking analysis of how certain forms of oppression inform their research. Carbado (2013) coined the terms colorblind intersectionality and gender-blind intersectionality to explain the phenomenon of ignoring how race or gender play a role in research, while still the word intersectional to describe their approach. Additionally, research about intersectionality does not have a defined methodology or even a united definition of the term (Nash 2008). The mere invocation of the term intersectionality also carries additional symbolic power to position the storyteller or academic as good but oppressed (Ilmonen 2020). Still, the ability of the term to break down binaries, provide complexity within seemingly monolithic identity groups, and center marginalized subjects adds to research efforts (Nash 2008).

METHODS AND DATA

The target population for recruitment was gay white men between the ages of 21 and 42. This means that a majority of the respondents fell in the Millennial generation. Identity works uniquely for this generation as it is characterized by declining importance of class and a rise in the self-identification with one's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and generation. As a result of late-stage capitalism and neoliberalism, this generation views itself as "rugged individuals" who are primarily consumers, dramatizing the centrality of identity markers of the individual (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Those within the Millennial generation

also tend to support more leftist politics and embrace the values of multiculturalism (Fisher 2018; Mehta 2015).

The actual age of the subjects interviewed ranged from 24 to 40 with an average age of just above 32 and a median age of 30. The respondents represented experiences of those born all over the country – the West coast, East coast, South, and Midwest. There was an over-representation of subjects from rural areas. Seven interviewees were born in rural areas, two in urban areas, and five in suburban areas. While all respondents identified as white, one respondent also identified as Mexican and one other as Latino.

I received IRB approval on Thursday, October 10th and wanted to begin data collection immediately so I planned between 1 and 3 venue-date-time (VDT) units on every Thursday for the upcoming week from the middle of October of 2019 to February of 2020 with a 2-month hiatus in November and December. Over this 5-month period, I completed 18 recruitment events at 16 different sites, handing out a total of 20 cards to potential recruits, and ending with 14 total interviewees – an involvement rate of 70%. There were 2 recruitment events where no cards were handed out because all of the people in the venue were either over the target age range, entirely people of color, or both. And there was one other recruitment event where no cards were handed out because my friend and I were the only people in the establishment for over an hour.

For the recruitment process for this project, I used a time-space sampling (TSS) methodology. This method is designed to gather subjects from hard to reach populations and has been used almost exclusively for researching two groups: drug

users and members of the LGBTQ+ community. First, the researcher determines venues that members of the target population frequently visit. Then, based on the open times of the venues and the researcher's capacity, VDT units are randomly selected, which dictate when and where the researcher recruits potential subjects. Finally, at the venues, the researcher indiscriminately approaches potential participants, assesses for eligibility, and then hands the participant information to later contact the researcher for the data collection process if that process cannot occur immediately. This methodology presents limitations in that members of the target population exist outside of the venues specifically designated for that group and they may not visit public socialization venues designed for their marginalized identities at all. These limitations lead to a less diverse sample except geographic area diversity. The randomization element to TSS provides a non-zero relatively equal probability that any member of the target population could be selected for the study if they socialize in the chosen venues (Clark et al 2014; Semaan 2010; Stueve et al 2001).

To create the list of venues to randomly select the VDT units for this project, I combined several lists of gay bars in Chicago from local LGBTQ websites, magazines, and newspapers. I augmented these lists with a Google Maps search for "gay bars in Chicago," where I found 3 additional venues not mentioned on other lists. Upon verifying each of the venues, I removed 2 establishments that were no longer open or had changed ownership and therefore names. This yielded a total of 54 bars, clubs, and venues self-marketed as LGBTQ+ spaces that are currently operating. I then created a second list of the days and times of the week that I was neither in

class or working one of my three jobs, and which the bars were open for service. I had 64 available times throughout the week. I ensured that I had potential times listed on every day of the week, which started as early as 6pm and ran as late as 4am on the weekends. To select the VDT units, I used Google's random number generator twice to randomly select a number 2 through 55 for the venue and 2 through 65 for the day and time correlating to the Google Sheets cells in each column.

At the end of the interviewing process, I had over 17.5 hours of recorded interviews. The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes and 50 seconds and the longest 2 hours 3 minutes and 23 seconds. The average interview length was about an hour and fifteen minutes with the median length being just a few minutes longer. During the interviews, I used feminist interviewing techniques, which are based in principles of rapport and empathy, and democracy. With these principles, the goal of the researcher becomes reducing distance, building trust, and minimizing stress, while ensuring a space that enables the subject to partially control the interaction by asking questions, moving in directions they feel are important, and giving feedback (Campbell 2001). By incorporating these actions into the interview process, the researcher can reduce the power dynamic between himself and the subject that is typically infused into this process. Instead of the interviewer having an interview guide with prepared questions and an idea of the data they want to extract from the participant, feminist techniques give agency to the subject to dictate the process.

Feminist interviewing recognizes that the researcher comes into the interaction not just as a researcher, but instead as a full person with a multitude of

identities that will interrelate with the subjects'. This recognition turns to reflexivity into *how* the researcher's identity creates assumptions and connections with the subject (Best 2003). Often, when researching subjects with similar ascribed characteristics to one's own, the participant will invoke shared identity as a way of creating assumed understanding between the pair. The role of the interviewer, then, is to dissect these assumptions and uncover how that invocation functions in the interview process (Devault 1990). The dialectic between researcher and subject builds knowledge for both involved through critical reflection and dialogue (Linabary and Hamel 2017).

Sharing one's own experiences or story throughout the interview process to the subject encourages trust building and personal growth, which positively benefits both the researcher and subject. Simply allowing subject to tell their own stories and relaying them in their own words, instead of interpreting all of their language, gives agency to the subjects as well. It also allows the researcher to view the responses as developing a full narrative, instead of chopping up responses into incomplete bits and pieces of data (White and Dotson 2010).

Steps such as allowing the interviewee to choose the location of the interview, ask the researcher questions in return, or take the interview in new directions to discuss what they see as important helped even the power differential between myself and the subjects in this study. As respondents continued to ask me questions, the transcripts began to uncover my own identity development processes as a gay white man as well, which will be discussed later in this paper. Having the interview feel more like a conversation for the respondent allowed me to build a

strong connection that engaged the subject and opened them up to be vulnerable and honest about emotional and, at times, traumatic experiences. The interview schedule focused primarily on basic demographics; salient pieces of identity in a variety of settings (upbringing, Chicago life, college, work, etc.); development of gay, white, and male identities; issues that are important to the subject both politically and personally; their social networks throughout their lives; and the settings in their lives where changes in their identities took place. The life history format, the sample size, and even the degree of detail to understand the mindset of the interviewees closely resembles Robert E. Lane's *Political Ideology* (1962).

To record the interviews, I used the Voice Memos app on my cell phone. After concluding each interview, I sent the recording to the Temi app for preliminary transcription. Subsequently, I listened through the interview and edited the errors from the electronic transcriptions. I then copied the completed transcripts into a Word document, added line numbers, and coded each transcript for anything relating to one of nine topics on the coding scheme - salience, role models, reference groups, specific institutional settings, events and experiences, timing, sequence of stages, conflict/congruence in the role/status set, meta-analysis of narrative structure. I created an Excel file to synthesize all of the information in one place.

RESULTS

After coding hundreds of pages of interview data line by line, I uncovered 6 common patterns across the identity development processes of gay white men.

1. The gay white men in this study moved forward toward self-acceptance of their gay identity as they reduced the stigma, threat, and fear in their lives relating to their queerness.
2. Conscious white identity development of the subjects beyond initial socialization took place after a precipitating event that was dramatic enough to awaken them to the possibility of structurally different treatment and outcomes based on race. Sometimes subsequent events yielded new levels of understanding of their racial identity if the event was more dramatic than the last.
3. The salience of any particular element of subjects' identities increased when others made it apparent that element of their identity deviated from norms in some way.
4. Respondents mostly grew up in predominantly white communities, experienced a little more diversity in college, and then moved back into majority white communities. Often they did not sustain friendships with the people of color they met in higher education.
5. It became clear that place serves a prime function in developing all parts of one's identity.
6. Both positive and negative role models demonstrated or explicitly told subjects how to act or how not to act. Gay role models exemplified that LGBTQ+ people can achieve their goals and be happy in life.

Diminishing Barriers to Self-Acceptance of Gay Identity

The gay white men in this study demonstrated a development and acceptance of their gay identity only as the fear, stigma, and shame associated with their gayness lessened. This comes as a surprising twist to commonly told narratives in queer spaces about self-love, community, and other positive elements being the primary drivers for coming out and self-acceptance.

For many, family served as a primary barrier to self-acceptance, filling the subjects' minds with guilt and shame. Peter, for instance, explained that while exploring each other's bodies with a crush in middle school, he would become overcome with feelings of guilt that relate back to one experience he had with his father.

But there was always something where like after we went too far, what I thought was too far, it was like immediate regret and like this can't happen again. Um, and I think, now this is me like telling a lot. I think it's because my parents found in middle school gay porn on the family computer cause I was so smart and like knew how to hide everything. Not! Um, and they like confronted me about it and they sat me down and they actually said this is the devil. Yeah, yeah. I'll never forget that... Like my dad just comes from a very... my dad, my mom's also pretty religious....Um, so he was just like homosexuality [is a] sin. Like the devil is on the family computer.

Connecting the Devil with homosexuality, Peter felt fear and shame around any gay thoughts, acts, or feelings. An experience later in middle school highlights just how severe his feelings of shame were:

...the day before I had like been watching gay porn or something. And then I went to school and I remember I was in like music class or something and my tea- I remember like, I really, really idolize [her]. She was a female, um, a music teacher. And I remember sitting in the room and being like, you're such a good person and like you are so great with students and like, you're such a role model. I should not even be allowed in this room because I'm such a bad person 'cause I

watched gay porn last night. I remember like thinking like that...Like, yeah, like I'm not, I like don't deserve to be around good people cause I did such a bad thing yesterday...So it's a lot and I'm sure a lot of gay men go through it...That like goes through like a, "Oh I shouldn't be like this or this is wrong or like, you know, why am I like this?" But for me it was always just like it...there was like a good and evil component to it. Very much so...And that like my bad deed the night before would somehow like infect... Not that I thought I was going to turn music teacher gay. Like she was like happy, like happily married to a man and like all that. But it's just like that, like my sin or my like, yeah, like the part of me that was bad would somehow like...hmm...like would somehow infect you in some way.

Viewing queerness as pathological, and even as evil, Peter engaged with his sexuality as solely same-sex feelings in action. Later, as these feelings of shame dissipated Peter engaged with his sexuality as a form of identity.

Greg, a 38-year-old manager of a retail facility in the Loop, who has a round face, kind blue eyes, and an all-around clean-cut lumberjack vibe, similarly felt the stress of family shame. We met at a small café in Southport for our interview and sat along a wall of white granite top, two-person round tables. When discussing his gay identity around his teenage years he stated,

...and then pretty much just understanding that like, you know, I'm gay, you know, but it was a very secretive thing because like literally like I lived in a subdivision, there was a street and across the street was a mall, so like that's where I worked. And then like down the street was my college. So proximity wise, the family was so close that like I couldn't, I had to be very careful through those few years of like who I told, where I engaged in like social activities because I couldn't have been like out.

Beyond some initial sexual exploration, living near his family, a constant source of fear and anxiety around his gay identity, prevented him from moving forward toward self-acceptance. Not 20 minutes later in the interview, Greg returned to

describe just how prominent the threat of family retaliation was in his mind and how it stopped him from further developing.

I had like an exit strategy because I knew if they ever found out they'd kick me out. So like that was kind of my whole thing was like, if I get kicked out right now, like where would I go? Who would I live [with]? How much money do I have in the bank? Um, and then when I finally did move out, I moved out to, um, move in with my husband. And so we had been together for like a year and a half at that point. And so I made us, which we were poor as can be, but I made us get a two bedroom so that we were "roommates". Um, even though like we moved into the same bedroom together, like when my family moved us in, they moved my stuff into the other bedroom.

Greg's family created a stress that was constantly reactivated while he lived with them. Only upon moving away from his family (and in with the man who would become his husband) could he begin to adopt a gay identity.

While not worried entirely about family stress, others nonetheless felt a reprieve from the repercussions of exploring their gay identity upon moving away. Jeff, for example, a blond wine seller, met me at a restaurant that he also needed to conduct some business at. We sat down for a glass of wine that he had sold to the retailer and got down to our own business of discussing his life story. When talking about his coming out process he mentioned that within his family he first told his sister.

Jeff: And then I just took a boy to dinner one day with my dad, like pretty abrupt, but I knew they wouldn't be surprised either, so...

Me: And so they're all like on board from the start, like you think both of them?

Jeff: Yeah. There's also freedom when you're already living on your own...Um I mean I'm...My parents are pretty fine about things, but I really had nothing to lose, so, you know, that's a benefit.

Independence and the ability to have his own place and stable income allowed him to move past a potential barrier to disclosure and further acceptance of his gay identity. These securities would have likewise provided Greg with the same opportunities to develop when he was younger.

Sometimes it wasn't about the shame imposed directly by family members, but instead the fear of potentially causing a rift between the subject and the ones they loved, so much so that subjects kept themselves from even acknowledging their gay identity. This was exactly the case for Max, a Nebraskan who moved to Chicago for his undergraduate degree, stayed for his Master's in education, and now works happily as a pre-kindergarten teacher on the South side.

Um, and then also I felt like doing it would mean losing my family and friends to some extent. And that just wasn't a risk that I wanted to take. So in Nebraska I was just like, that's not, you know... I knew that about myself, but I was like, I don't need to ever like act on it. I don't need to tell anyone about it. Like I can still do everything the way that I want to do it and just like know this about myself and just like keep it compartmentalized.

Max's desire to maintain his relationship with his family and friends encouraged him to bury his sexual identity for as long as necessary until this fear abated. Within only 5 months of moving away from this context that kept him closeted and his identity unexplored, he fully embraced his identity as a gay man.

In the eyes of many of the subjects, a general culture of homophobia, aside from any one particular relationship, kept them from exploring potential forms of expressing their gender and their sexuality. Dave referred to his good fortune at "passing" because it shielded him from the violence and stigma of homophobia. To pass is to come across to the outside world as heterosexual in terms of voice, dress,

and mannerisms – typically this means having traits or interests associated colloquially with masculinity. As a pretty outwardly masculine guy with a military haircut, deep voice, and standing at 6 foot 3 inches tall, passing came pretty easily for him.

So I think like, yeah, I've tried on a couple of different hats, but at the end of the day like I pass because I think... I don't want to say it's completely authentic because like it is often something I'm performing, but it's not hard for me to perform because it's still, it's almost authentic, if that makes sense. But it also depends on who I'm around. Uh, I remember I came back from Provincetown once when I was in Boston. I got lunch or dinner with my best friend the next night and he was like, were you just in Provincetown? I was like, yeah, why? He's like, you're really gay right now. And I, and I do feel myself doing it. Like my voice changes a little bit. My mannerisms changed a little bit when I'm around nothing but gay men for like 72 hours straight. It's really interesting. I think I, uh, code switch a lot more than the average person does. And I kind of wonder if that comes from insecurity and a feelings of safety and things like that. Um, safety versus danger.

Only after being immersed in a community of gay men for multiple consecutive days could Dave allow himself to drop the mild performance of passing in order to more authentically express his gay identity. In this new context around gay men, the fear of homophobic violence dissolved, which encouraged Dave to express his queerness in new ways, moving toward a more authentic gay identity.

The insecurity mentioned by Dave expanded into other areas of self-confidence for other respondents, as was the case with Scott. It acted as deterrent for him as well. While also tall like Dave, Scott is quite skinny with long limbs, red hair, and a distinctly hipster style. Growing up, Scott poured himself into school as a distraction from much of his insecurities about his body and his sexuality. His

sexuality served as only one of many things that provided discomfort, preventing him from developing around his gay identity.

I think for me high school wasn't very... regardless of my sexual orientation was kind of a rough time for me. Um, and I was very like unsure of myself, just kind of like general teenage angst, but also unsure of myself. I was a huge nerd. I like was like this height but like maybe like 50 pounds lighter so just like really like this tall, lanky like, just bad. It wasn't cute... I felt so exposed already as this kind of nerdy guy. I didn't want to show one more aspect of myself that could be like a vulnerability or could be anything that could be picked apart or be set apart from the crowd.

In college, upon gaining confidence, removing the primary barrier for self-acceptance, Scott began to explore his sexuality and move toward incorporating his gay identity into the whole of his person. Unfortunately for some, the relatively small struggle over self-confidence was the least of their worries.

Martin, a 39-year-old pudgy and scruffy urban planner who crassly described himself as a Connecti-cunt, saw first-hand the violence that homophobia can bring upon young gay men.

Martin: And so like at my high school there was one openly gay kid and it was like a small high school like 900 people and he was just like physically abused constantly and like had to withdraw for a year.

Me: Oh my gosh.

Martin: Cause he was like one point and he was like thrown down the flight of stairs. And it was like serious... but like the lesson is when you grew up in like...if you are a gay then like they'll try to kill you.

The pure fear of being a victim to such extreme violence threw Martin into a very dark place mentally and emotionally, and it kept him in the closet for decades.

Essentially, the only thing that allowed him to start coming to terms with his sexual identity and to begin to live openly as a gay man was a mental shift in the costs and

benefits to doing so. This shift came at a moment of complete desperation for him, which became clear when I asked him, “What did eventually push you to come out, if you don’t mind me asking? His response was both direct and haunting. “Um, just an intense amount of depression I guess. And realizing I just can’t like... I don’t know, like either I’ll kill my self or I’ll come out.” In that time for Martin, the cost-benefit analysis changed entirely, such that the fear of violence living in a homophobic world became less threatening than his own risk of violence toward himself through his depression. The only option at that point in his life was to come out and live authentically, accepting himself for who and what he is.

Another interviewee Noah disclosed suicidal thoughts and even a suicide attempt, which led to recalibrating his matrix of emotions that went into staying closeted. At that point in his life, Noah was married to a woman, a decision he had made with the intention of forcing himself into a heterosexual lifestyle. He even disclosed that he went to college specifically with the goal of finding a wife, not necessarily to get an education. He described that low point in his life as follows:

I would just have like some like unfortunate thoughts as well. And, um, that, you know, led to unfortunate actions and didn't know if I wanted to be alive like, just like, all that stuff. And at some point it clicked that like this, like why am I thinking all of this craziness, you know? And um, and it clicked that it was because I was like suppressing feelings and like my authentic self. And, um, and all of that. So, um, I made the decision to tell my wife that I was gay and that was, um, June 14th, 2010, so almost 10 years ago.

In his lowest moment, Noah realized that as long as he does not make progress on understanding and incorporating his gay identity, he would remain in a dark place. Other subjects similarly felt pushed to a breaking point wherein the balance shifted between costs and benefits for self-acceptance and disclosure to close friends and

family of their gay identity. For example, Kevin, a 26-year-old IT nerd with a square face, pointed ears, and a fantastically queer sense of humor, described his low point that led to his coming out. After being involved in a secret relationship for 5 years from late high school through most of college, Kevin and his boyfriend split up. During this time, they had grown so dependent on one another and closed off from others that Kevin had almost no friends to fall back on when his relationship ended. In a period of extreme sadness and loneliness he came out to his parents. Sadness driving his action made him feel as though he “didn’t come out on like [his] own accord.” Understanding the relationship with his mother and her feelings about gay people makes it clear that this downswing in his life altered his cost-benefit analysis for coming out so drastically that he almost felt forced out of the closet. Kevin provided this illustrative example of his mother’s apparent homophobia:

I don't think my parents ever sat down for a moment. Well, my mom did. She said, if any of my... I remember her saying this when I was younger and she says if any of my kids were ever like, like that, like gay or anything, she's like, I would never talk to them. I would disown them, you know, stuff like that. And that's when I was really young, really, really young and maybe like she had an idea maybe if I was or maybe my other sister was or something like that. It was like kind of like a fear tactic or a scare tactic, you know what I mean?

He recounted about a dozen other times his mom affected his confidence, his romantic relationships, and other areas of his life by spewing hatred toward gay people generally and his gay identity specifically. Still, in his low point, the potential for her vitriol weighed less than his own sadness and loneliness, a barrier to his openness fading with new challenges.

A few of the subjects had internalized heteronormativity so much so that just a simple feeling of “gay is wrong” came into consideration enough to limit or

entirely prevent exploration and acceptance of gay identity. A 30-year-old hairstylist from rural Indiana, Andy described some of his early sexual exploration.

Andy: I mean it was elementary school, I don't even know how it started, but this neighbor kid and I used to like go off, like when we were out playing, and like go into the woods. And like, I mean I don't really, I don't even remember exactly what we would do. It was never like sex, but yeah. Yeah.

Me: Touching, exploring?

Andy: Yeah.

Me: Got it.

Andy: So that was, I mean it was, it was probably third grade, fourth grade around there I think. Umm. But yeah. And then after that, then after that it was kinda like, okay, like we're hiding this so this obviously is not right. This is not the right thing to do.

That sentiment of “this is not the right thing to do” stayed with Andy and stopped him from moving toward identifying as a gay man. At this time, these were solely isolated same-sex sexual acts.

Tim echoed this sentiment and it's impact on delaying his coming out process. Tim was born in Israel and moved around throughout the US as a kid from New York to Mississippi and finally settled in the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. He's tall with dark curly hair and an endearing smile with dimples in both cheeks. Out of all the interviewees, he had me laughing the most, constantly cracking jokes and doing bits as if he was the star of an improv show. He mentioned early in the interview about his discomfort as a youth with his sexuality. When asking what sorts of things kept him in the closet, he replied:

I mean like obviously like fear. Um, looking back I feel like it's just like the classic, like fear of like people not accepting you or treating you differently. But like I also was never like, I never really thought that

was gonna happen. Like I didn't think my parents would like freak out or anything, but it's just like so weird. Just you, you like feel like you're doing something wrong and you feel like it's, yeah, you just feel like it's wrong. So you don't, you don't say anything. Even I, I think it took me honestly just to the point of just believing that it wasn't wrong to be like comfortable. And even when I was comfortable with that I was still like scared.

Whether expressed clearly, hinted at, or only conveyed through intonation in the voice or a light grimace on the face, every subject, including myself as a gay white man, felt this sense of wrongness early on. The power of heteronormativity maintained control over everyone's process over self-acceptance of his gay identity.

This power warps experiences that at face value may not be inherently negative and turns them into stressful, and potentially traumatic events. It acts as a lens through which all of the subjects interpret the meaning behind the occurrences in their lives. Although Liam at age 40 was the oldest respondent in the sample, he talked excitedly with a youthful energy that enticed me to listen closely to every word. Liam had one such innocuous conversation that he initially interpreted as an attack on his gay identity, which later, upon reflection, wasn't so negative after all.

I remember I was in high school and uh, an aunt who had substance abuse issues, was drunk one day and just started asking like, "Oh, so like you like men, right?" And I didn't know how to take it. And so for me it was like really traumatic because I didn't know how to respond. I, I felt like she was like attacking me. Um, subsequently have learned that, that it's not at all the case. That uh, I have an uncle, my father's brother who identifies as gay and the family knew was gay, but they never spoke of ever. And I didn't learn that until I was probably 22, 23 and so like, when I think about the memories of like when I felt particularly like aggressively asked about these things.

In the moment, this was one of many experiences that signaled he needed to hide his authentic self to shield himself from the stress of this conversation.

Liam would remain closeted to his family for several years beyond this moment, despite the chatter within the family about his sexuality.

Noah, the subject mentioned earlier who was married until 2010, is a clean-cut, blond man with blue eyes, standing at 6 foot 2 inches tall. His job as a chief development officer at a nonprofit, as well as his soothing voice, perfectly suits the kindness and compassion that exudes from him as soon as he walks into a room. While everyone takes his previous experience and extrapolates meaning from events that occur in their lives, only some have the homophobic and religiously conservative background that Noah does. An event when he was a freshman in college would confirm for him through a divine power that being gay is wrong.

After Jason, Noah's childhood romantic interest, and Noah were caught experimenting sexually as young teenagers, Josh's family moved away to another town. They reconnected at 17 through AOL Instant Messenger and that is where this story picks up. For the sake of demonstrating the intensity of the event and allowing Noah the power to tell his own story, this soliloquy is laid out in full here:

Noah: ...my roommate was going to be out of town for a full weekend and so Jason was going to come up uh and stay with me. I'm so excited. This is like my second weekend in college and um from the night he called, he was with his friend. I think it was Brittany or Jessica or something...Um, and they were, it was like midnight and they were in this, um, they were in the Taco Bell drive through in [the town] where they lived. And he called and he was like, "Hey Eric I'm getting fast food, but I'll call you in the morning when I hit the road." And I was like, "okay." He was like, "it'll be around 10 or so." I was like, "alright, great." And then the next morning my dad called and it was like at 7:30 in the morning and he said, "Hey, do you remember Jason?" [inaudible] And I was like, "yeah." He's like, "he died in a car wreck last night."

Me: Oh my god.

Noah: So he was with one of his friends and he pulled out of the drive through and a truck driver smashed into the car and killed them both. And, um, and that was the moment where I was like God does not want me to be gay. That's like the ultimate like sign that I am wrong. And so, um, not only did I never... obviously, never get to see him again. Um, but I think about him often, but then it also reinforced like exactly what I thought. Like I can't be this.

This defining moment drove Noah down a path of repression and depression to the point that he would eventually attempt suicide. For too long his religious upbringing and relationship with God drove him into the closet to cope with this horrific death of a loved one. His current connection with his spirituality enables him to further explore and accept his sexuality, even while his love for Jason remains in his heart.

The subjects in this study gained new understanding of their gay identity as barriers to self-acceptance decreased, explaining one key part of *how* the gay identity development process functions. This contrasts sharply with their white identity development process, as will be described next.

Overcoming Barriers to Connecting with White Identity

While gay identity seems constantly salient on the minds of every respondent, only a few described it as a primary element of salience in their identity. A basic understanding of the respondents' white identity seemed to follow events that challenged the normalization of self as a non-racialized being. These experiences often created a high level of stress, countered the belief that the subjects lived in a world run on meritocratic ideals, or made the subjects feel as if their thoughts or actions were racist in some way.

Dave explained how the normalization of white values and ideas affected his perception of his race. He brought up race pretty early in our discussion and when asked about how race plays into his upbringing and where he is now in life, he responded like this:

Dave: Ummm, you know, that's probably the thing that I think about the most, but I have the least answers for.

Me: What do you mean by that?

Dave: Um, because I think there are a lot of ways, but I think it's, I think acute examples are hardest for me to see of how it's shaped who I am, if that makes any sense. Maybe because whiteness to me is so ubiquitous, which is obviously a problem in and of itself. Um, but my world has always been kind of framed, I think because I've always lived in such a white ass world. It's been very easy for me to frame my life in other ways rather than whiteness because it's the norm, which is the exact problem with whiteness. Um, I mean Brentwood... there was one mixed race black family that I can remember in the town of Brentwood growing up. Um, my two best friends were people of color, but one was, um, in, uh, she was...her parents were Indian and um, one was biracial, her mother was Chinese. Um, and um, other than that, those were the only two mixed race people I could think of.

For Dave, although he had some connections with people of color in his predominantly white community growing up, he only later began to understand what *his* race meant to him. In college he took a number of classes that focused on race, so much so that he switched from a minor in history to a minor in American studies following a particularly enjoyable course on the history of race relations in America.

And it, that class blew my fucking mind. Um, because it was the first time that structural racism was really explained to me. As funny as that sounds, I was a sophomore in college and cause like the level of racial education, discourse, whatever you want to call it, my high school was so obtuse. It was like racism is bad and we're all different, but that's okay. And that's kind of where it ended.

After taking a number of courses on race, he still only seemed to comprehend it academically. But it wasn't until he made a connection with a person of color as an adult that he really began to understand what his race meant for him personally.

...in Boston, my very first good friend, um, Claude, he was black, his parents were Haitian and we used to talk about race a lot. And talking with him, um, really made me realize like, you know, I was an American studies minor. Like I can go into my, uh, ivory tower and talk all about race. But like talking to him really made me realize like, "Oh shit, life is different for you in so many weird, subtle ways." Um, and I think like, you know, whiteness ties together with all those other privileges I've talked about to make my life a lot easier. I mean, um, my name is Dave Renolds. No one's going to turn away that resume.

Dave needed a combination of explicit racial education, and close personal connections with people of color for him to begin to understand his racial identity, hinting at key ways that white identity development occurs.

Scott similarly had an experience seeing a Black friend deal with racism that put his own racial identity into perspective.

You know, being in Chicago and having more experiences with friends...who were not white men, hearing their stories kind of made me like "oh!" Opened my eyes and helped me see more of that a little bit...I'll give you the story of what I'm thinking of. So one time when I was with my friend Will...We went to Sidetrack and we were walking in and it was pretty late so there were like drunk people around and somebody just kind of like started catcalling him, for lack of a better term, like "hey baby" and that kind of thing. And once he didn't respond, um, then they like started using racial slurs. And it was one that like, he, at least to my knowledge, wasn't affected by it. But it was one of those things where it was like, wow, I'll never have to deal with that. You know what I mean? So it's just like stuff that I would never think about, you know

The events that Dave and Scott described are powerful and impactful to the subjects because they are both personal, clearly marked as race-based, and also present race

as a tangible difference between their own and others' experiences, encouraging self-reflection on their own racial identity

Tim also had an experience where viewing acquaintances of color deal with racism made him understand that he will not have to deal with the same distress. Tim mentioned that one of his friends from his improv troupe discussed race with him on occasion.

...like the people in my improv troupe in college and we weren't like very diverse. Um, but everybody was very like liberal and open minded. And um, the probably the closest person was, uh, one of the people on my improv team, they were dating, uh, their black roommate at the time....Um, and she like was a huge like activist on campus. Um, so yeah, so like I think that was like my first introduction to like kind of like at least like the mentality of like the black students on campus and like what they were going through and like how they felt about certain things happening on campus. Um, because there would be like random shit that would happen, like racist things being said, like flyers being put around campus for like... I can't even remember now, but it was... see that's the privilege is I get to forget. Yeah. But um, but yeah, like I think like watching, watching like her like fight for those like things and going to the protests like I think that like opened my eyes that like I don't really like have much I need to protest for like for my own identities. You know what I mean? Like, like she is actively protesting like things that are happening to like people that have like... share her identity. Whereas like I have all these identities right now that like... maybe gay is like the one that like I might need to go march for something for, but other than that like I have the privilege of not needing to march. I think that's like... that could be like a good summation of like, realizing you have privileges. Like I don't need to march for anything and I'd be fine.

Again, the realization that the interviewee's racial identity did not cause them harm in some way made them connect with and make meaning of their white identity. In order to make movement in self-understanding of racial identity, the individual needs to both perceive racial harm and identify it as such, distinct from their own experience.

In the past few quotations, the subject under study was not the one who said or did something to cause emotional or mental harm to their friend of color. Kevin shared a bit of a different story and a different lesson. In his story, Kevin was the one who said something perceived as racist by his friend, but all he learned from it was a script of what not to say in the future.

And especially like when the whole black lives matter movement was like taking off. That's kind of like when I was in college, like it was starting to get bigger. Um, somebody like made a joke about it and he was like, black lives matter. Cause I was like joking around with him and he was joking around to me and that's what he said. I was like, no, I said like something like all lives matter. And then he informed me like that's actually something I should never say. And I don't know, I try to be really respectful. I always do. Um, cause that's what I like to perceive. Like I don't really have like bad bones like that in my body. But I've been called a racist in my life for no reason.

For Kevin, this moment around his white identity was a training exercise in learning what is socially acceptable race talk. He learned that saying “all lives matter” makes him come across as racist and since he does not see himself in that way, nor does he want others to view him that way, then he must learn the scripts of what to say and what not to say. This put him mostly into a state of identity foreclosure, no longer gaining insight into his identity or moving forward his thoughts about race. Instead, he ebbs and flows with whatever language or actions are socially acceptable and he keeps the rest to himself.

While many respondents recalled episodes where an incident occurred that caused a friend of color harm because of something racist they said or did, Andy's case was unique. Andy grew up in a home where “every other word [his] father said was the ‘n’ word”. His mother could only bring her friends of color from work over when his father was out of town, and he was scolded for watching *Save the Last*

Dance because the story involved an interracial couple. Still, he told a story that struck me as inherently filled with contradictions. One of the first and closest friends he made in college was a black woman. And the rest of the story needs to be told in his words:

Andy: Um, I took her and my other best friend brought them home with me, which was such a stupid, stupid idea. I think I did it just to, because that's when I was really, that's when I was really like...

Me: Rebellious?

Andy: Yeah. Yeah... I brought them home and I was like, this is just going to be like a knife in my dad's back...and I was so thrilled about it. Uh, but it wasn't even, my dad was actually super lovely with her. Um, it was, I took them to a party where my, like all of my high school friends were a bonfire in the woods...and other people that were there were like making comments and she got really upset about it and so that was kind of, it was just kind of that and I was like, I don't understand. Like if they're saying something to you just, you know, brush it off. And she was like, I understand what you're saying, but like I dealt, I deal with this every day. And so that was kind of the first like, "Oh shit. Like this is real." 'Cause anything you see or anything I had seen up to that point after moving out was always like on TV or just hearing in movies and stuff like that. So I just never really looked at it as like racism and stuff like that as just real, does that make sense?

Me: Yeah.

Andy: Even though I lived with it every day, if that makes sense.

Me: No, it does. It seems like the, um, that experience you had to see not just the, the initial like harm, but you actually had to see like your friend dealing with that and like understanding that that is her lived reality.

Andy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, not even, even if she wasn't my friend, just like seeing it.

When telling this story, Andy seemed a little excited about what he had learned about race in this moment, ignoring the fact that he intentionally brought his friend

into a racially hostile situation with his father in the first place. While this moment provided him the pole to vault over the bar that had kept him from recognizing the lived daily experience of racism for people of color, he failed to see the other way that this reflects on his own racial identity. Unlike Kevin, this experience for Andy did not translate from “race is something that others have and causes disadvantage” into “I am a racialized being and I will never have to deal with that same experience as well”.

Noah’s experience with his racial identity reflected a mix of almost all of the other subjects’ white identity development process. He also had two notable experiences with friends or acquaintances of color wherein he caused racial harm and another wherein he recognized the normative power of whiteness.

Um, I think that there are two moments that that helped me think differently about race. One was a guy, a black guy said to me in 2014 or ‘13, one of those years, said to me, you know you're privileged. I don't remember the context of the conversation. I don't remember what we were talking about, I don't remember his last name even. And I became extremely defensive and he tried to explain to me and I just wasn't having it and I went to, I went to what a white person would go to, “You don't know a thing about me. I've worked for this and I've had challenges.” Um, but I really thought hard about that experience. Um, and then, um, and, and it wasn't until a year after that where I was like, “God, I handled that wrong.” Like I became more reflective and what not. That was one. Two was one of my friends, she said to me one time - this is also like from 2015 in late 2014 - um, she's Indian, straight, cisgender, and she said to me that, um, she can never find Band-Aids that match her skin tone. And I was like, “What? That's outrageous.” She's like, “It's not that outrageous.” That's her everyday experience. And so that inspired me to start asking more people of color, like their experiences that they like have, when the setting is right, and I've just been blown away. I mean I'm blown away by, um, a lack of acknowledgement of people who are, not white.

Noah took these experiences and used them to try to learn more about what his white identity meant to him. Moreover, when responding to how he developed his

racial identity, he mentioned that his development around his gay identity opened him up to furthering his understanding of his white identity.

I think that my gay identity is related to this experience to this and I'll tell you. Um, and I'm not comparing being gay to being, um, black cause those are not comparative experiences there, the um but, um, coming out and living authentically and then living in the world through my gay lens is very different than living the world through my straight lens. And, um, I, I wish I'd never been straight, but like my, um, forced straight lens or whatever. And um, and so, and like I said earlier, it enabled... that experience enabled me to be empathetic and be compassionate and carve out time to listen and learn and observe. And just through that, so that experience led me to those, um, leaning into the world empathetically and compassionately, which made me recognize that born in, being born in, born and, raised in an environment where...I had like racist tendencies...I was like, "Oh my God. Like, um, I think that I need to dive into dive into this." And so I did. And, um, and I have been on a journey to undo racism ever since.

As Noah gained new insight into his gay identity, strengthening his compassion and empathy skills, he also moved forward in understanding his white identity. This provides evidence for Grollman's underdog theory (2018), which states that living as a member of a disenfranchised group may open one up to understanding the plight of other groups who hold identities that they do not.

Yet still with this cohesive and simultaneous development in both his gay and white identities, his gay identity takes primary salience in his day-to-day life. And his reflection on that fact seemed to cause some concern or conflict around his thoughts about whiteness overall.

I think that like my gayness, is um, is more in the forefront than my whiteness...But then by entering that way, does it... is that by... by saying that my gayness is at the forefront of my every day rather than my whiteness? Does that then like fuel, like what is like white privilege? Which is like white people walking around and every single day not really recognizing their, their whiteness, you know? I believe that like with my friends, you know, I think my gay friends, whether they're gay or lesbian, um, like you know we, we have jokes like we

can joke about being gay. Like, um, there's a culture there that, you know, you, I think that there's a culture that is gay that I'm in every day...Um, that is more in front of me than my whiteness.

The lack of apparent culture, ritual, humor, or connection between white people explicitly about their white identities in his life makes that element of his identity less salient than his queerness. After recognizing the invisibility of whiteness in his life, this invisibility functions dually like light. Light can exist as both a wave and a particle. While whiteness maintains its invisibility, often encouraging Noah to forget about his racial identity throughout his day, it also heightens its transparency as invisible an invisible force when it sneaks back into his purview.

Only two of the respondents, in fact, mentioned that their white identity took primary salience in their lives. And in both cases, that salience derived from explicit training, education, or research experience on identity, as well as being in a managerial position with subordinates who are people of color. Working directly with people of color and, in Liam's line of work, for students of color, race was very much so on the forefront of his mind. When asking about which piece of his identity is most salient, he responded talking specifically about his work.

It probably is actually being a white man, particularly at work, um, just because the environment is, uh, so privileged and so many levels of the university and also still predominantly white. And the area that I oversee is like our traditional student activities office. So like student organization, student involvement, um, and see the struggles and hear the stories of students from communities of color who just had a really hard time thriving on campus and thinking about how I... how my identity allows me to be, to speak up and be kind of aggressive around things in certain spaces that they do not get to.

In his work environment that explicitly deals with issues of race, Liam cannot help but recognize the predominance of whiteness in the setting, as well as reflecting on

his own white identity. Liam even discussed that he works actively with his associate director, taking into consideration their racial and gendered dynamic, to communicate their directives to others in the workplace.

My partner in crime on campus my associate director is, uh, an Asian woman. And we will, even in, when we're like, planning our strategy, like, planning our strategy sessions around meetings or like initiatives that we're gonna need to do, we'll even like, laugh and joke about who has the privilege space in these meetings and like, where do we, where is it my responsibility to say something that's like unpopular and where she gets to be able to say something that's not. Like thinking about and talking about our racial privileges in the hierarchy at the university and what, how we use that for our advantage of like pushing initiatives and strategies. So like, for better or for worse, like chuckling our way through that.

This constant discussion and thinking around race keeps Liam progressing in developing his white identity and maintaining the primary salience of race for him, making Liam a very unique case in this sample. Continuous and active reflection about racial inequalities and one's own racial identity encourages identity development.

Peter, as the only respondent who identified as both white and Latino, had a unique take on his racial identity process. He mentioned that other people directed a lot of his learning around his white identity. For example, he commented that,

filling out just any kind of college application or any kind of like, anytime they were trying to gain like, you know, demographic information, it was always like, well the boxes, right? Uh they're white, black or African American. Um, and other, other, uh, demographic information as well and choices, so you can be white and after that you're Hispanic or Latino. So it wasn't like, so I always understood like, okay, if you're Hispanic, then you still are white. Like, it's just like I kind of learned something through filling out those bubbles in a way. Cause it's, if you look at most of them, it'll ask you that information. And then there's always a second question that's like, are you Latino or not? So I was always like, Oh, so I can be white and then I'm on this, I'm Latino.

These experiences of collecting demographic information provided a unique racializing experience for Peter because of the primacy of whiteness and then the secondary nature of his Latino side as reflected in the documents. The bubbles enabled Peter to comprehend and adopt more of a biracial identity, but one that is necessarily tiered. Despite a few boxes trying to push this narrative, Peter mentioned that he wished he was entirely Costa Rican, and not white at all, which stems from his perceptions of white culture and values. And I think they are instrumental in understanding how he interacts with his white and Latino halves from his mom and dad respectively.

Peter: I think that I would, I would... I want to be, or if I had the choice, I would want to be more like 100% Costa Rican because it would mean that I was more connected to humanity... I think that if I were 100%, you know, not white, I would be more down to earth. I would be more connected...Um, like, I don't know, like sometimes and some of... some of my travels like with [my husband] and even on my own, it's like you see people that don't fucking subscribe to or maybe they just haven't had, don't have the choice and don't have access to, but like the, like this like very capitalistic world that I think that is very white and they're so happy. I mean like I just feel like, not that I'm unhappy. I mean, well some days I get home from work and I am unhappy, um but I think I would just be like someone that was more like living life the right way if I, yeah, didn't have as much white in me. I don't know.

Me: That's really interesting. What is, what is life the right way?

Peter: Happy, connected to people, connected to nature, connected to... Yeah, humanity and the rest of the world and just like placing importance on like family on like, you know, laughter, on love. Like not that white people don't do that, but I just feel like God for, for a white person to do all that, they need to have a lot of money, you know? And I feel like there's a lot of non-white communities around the world that are very happy and don't need to have money nor to, to feel that way.

The quote above reflects on how he perceives his racial identity as something almost sullied by his white half. A lot of these feelings developed from both conversations with his husband and from a lifetime of experience being situated within three cultures (one Latino, one white, and one mixed).

Directly opposite that of gay identity development wherein the dissipation of barriers yielded growth, white identity development needed explicit and often intense experiences to push one over the invisibility of whiteness toward recognition. These experiences involved seeing racism in action or learning about racism in educational environments or by building relationships with people of color. Through seeing the harm caused by racism, respondents came to understand their own racial identity as something that protects or shields them from such harm. This realization turned to actively exploring their own race and racial inequality for some, often describing this as a privilege.

Salience Through Othering

Subjects all experienced moments when other people made apparent that their gender, sexuality, or race was somehow out of the ordinary. These moments were the only universal experience for identity development across identities and for every interviewee.

The wisdom provided by my first interviewee Jeff proved prescient. When asking about what identities became salient at what point in his life, he responded,

Jeff: I think most of them, it's pretty clear. I mean, it's like I'm the majority person who fits into this majority identities, so it's pretty cut and dry...You notice the things we are not like everybody else. It takes

a while to think about which other things might be like that for someone else. And I think you have to see them first.

Me: See what first?

Jeff: How those things do affect other people. You know, you don't notice them if you've never seen them there.

I start with this quote in a section about othering because it is the *absence* of othering in this case that allows the identities where Jeff is aligned with the majority to remain unacknowledged or underdeveloped.

Jeff then proceeded to tell me a story about how he would look at pencils in first and second grade and question why the words were always upside down. Eventually he realized that as a left-handed person, the pencils weren't made with him in mind. I, as the right-handed interviewer, had never thought about pencils in this way, nor heard this analogy before to think about identities and the ways in which the world might function to prioritize certain people.

Max felt the salience of both his gender and his sexual orientation particularly as a primary school teacher due to a mixture of his demographic uniqueness in that position and as the unfortunate victim of workplace discrimination. In his first year teaching pre-kindergarten, one of his student's parents didn't want their child in the classroom with a gay person as the teacher. The administration agreed and allowed the student to change classrooms. This event, along with the novelty of being a man in the position of elementary school teacher, placed his gender in the forefront of his mind and helped him to process what his gender meant to him.

Max: I feel like I didn't interrogate my gender so much as my sexual orientation in college, but since teaching it's been especially salient,

um, just because I've never really felt like the most masculine dude in the world. Um, but now I identify with my masculinity a lot more strongly since I've started teaching.

Me: Why's that?

Max: I... it's just... I think that the qualities that were the most salient about like masculinity to me before were the ones that were the most different from me, like just sort of the like brutishness and the kind of the like aggression and the lack of sensitivity. 'Cause I've always been like, I was always like a really sensitive kid, you know? Um, but since I've started teaching and being, I mean part of it is being around my kids, especially like the little boys that I have in my class and then being around their parents who are so lovely. I think that, I mean now I feel my most masculine when I'm with my kids because... I'm very, you know, at school I have to be so responsible. Obviously. Like I have 18 lives I'm taking care of and I have to be. So I mean like I take care of them and I'm very protective and I'm very affectionate and like very nurturing. And I feel like that really brings out like I feel that's when I feel my most masculine.

This redefining of masculinity and his connection with it only occurred when the salience of his gender was brought to the forefront through the gendered dynamic of teaching mixed with the homophobia he faced in the workplace. By becoming the “other” in his work environment, his male identity gained salience, enabling reflection and development

Being the minority in a group forces the individual to recognize how they are different and reflect on how that difference interacts with the majority in the room, as well as what that difference means to them. Tim mentioned the salience of his gay identity in the workplace as well. In fact, he is *the* gay coworker and his coworkers repeatedly joke about in a way that both Tim and his coworkers find funny.

Tim: I think like for me personally, like I do, umm I do like think about my sexuality a lot with them, like throughout my day. Um, and like also like... Oh, my job actually! Like it's kind of like, at least with my close coworkers, it's like part of my identity, like as their coworker.

Like they know that about me and like I have two, two guys that like, like to make fun of it in like, in like, um, in not an offensive way.

Me: Like a playful way?

Tim: Yeah. In a playful way because they know it's offensive. Like it sounds horrible. But like this, this guy I worked with, he's like a comedian and he used to be like an improviser. Um, and he, he's like 50 something now and he likes to play the role of like misinformed. Like he likes to do bits, but we know he's not because like he very, he's very vocal about like his opinions on Trump and stuff like that. So like it's very clear that he's not of that mindset. 'Cause he'll also laugh after he says things like, but like he likes to poke fun of... Like he, he likes to pretend that he thinks I spend my time at the baths, he calls them, which is one of his bits and it's really quite funny every time he says it. It's hilarious. But it's also, I mean I have like a very good sense of humor, so I don't take any of those things personally but...what I'm trying to say is like it does, it is a part, like a big part of my identity.

Clearly, the othering process can even occur consensually, as in Tim's case, with humor. Still, recognizing his gay identity as central to how he sees himself and how others see him, Tim gains insight into what his gay identity means to him in different contexts.

At other times for Tim, the mocking transpired non-consensually. Tim mentioned another time when he was younger and closeted wherein a friend mocked him about his voice, causing a bit of panic.

I remember in like high school, I had this friend. She was like one of my close friends at one point... And I was like in the closet... But like she would actually...like I would say things and she would like repeat them in like a very feminine way, like in a feminine voice to like suggest like you kind of sound feminine when you're saying that. So like that was my first like, "Oh shit. Like sometimes I guess like the way I say things comes out like sounding feminine." Like when I'm like, when I say like, Oh my gosh, like, you know what I mean? Like, like she would repeat it and be like, Oh my gosh. And like, cause she was like my friend, so I didn't like, it didn't hurt my feelings or anything, but in the back of my head I was like, "Oh wow." Like as a person that was in the closet and didn't want to be like outed for

being like, seen as feminine or outed as maybe like not straight. So I definitely was like, "Oh shit."

Othering only needs to define the recipient of the comment or action to recognize the distinction between themselves and someone else. This drawing of the line in the sand creates salience. In this moment of salience, Tim furthered his understanding of how his gay identity was interacting with the world, whether he wanted it to or not.

Friends and family surprisingly took center stage in making these distinctions, sometimes without even knowing they were doing so. For example, Noah talked about two comments that his mother made about his smile and his style that affected his confidence with the way he expressed his gender and sexuality.

I, I remember one time my mom - two experiences - my mom... one was, she said, um, "sweetie, you have the prettiest smile." And she was like, "it looks just like your cousin Casey's" and Casey's a girl. And I was... she had no idea. My mom didn't know I was like struggling. And so I practiced my smile for weeks in the mirror. I wanted it to be more like my friend Ross because he was sort of the masculine peer, like a masculine peer of mine and a friend of mine. And so I practiced my smile for weeks and weeks and weeks. And then one time. Um, what did she say? Oh she said, "you are so picky about the clothes that you wear" and, and I don't know... And it embarrassed me because my whole goal was to not be like... the word fashion was very like feminine to me and like gay. And clothes, like if you spent too much time on your clothes, then that means that maybe you like shopping, so you're fruity. And so I, um, so the fact that she said like that, I mean... very uncomfortable. I remember turning beat red and feeling like, "Oh my God. Like she knows." And really the reason I was picky was because I was just trying to mimic my peers, my straight guys and like how they're walking and the shoes they're wearing and the socks and like the style.

And while these conversations seemed innocuous to his mother, they stuck with him because of how distinctive they made his femininity and queerness. By increasing

the salience of what he perceived as feminine or gay features, he developed new insight into how he expresses his gender and sexuality.

Interestingly, the emotion with which he discussed the memories above was mostly absent during some of the more directly hostile confrontations he relayed to me throughout the interview. The memories that may have been more volatile in the moment he said more matter-of-factly. Take these situations for example:

...like for me growing up, like I heard my uncle say one time, I hope Noah didn't grow up to be a faggot. I had a teacher that would like make fun of me because I was feminine. Um, I had another teacher that would, um, like call me out in class specifically to ask me questions about sports cause I never knew the answer. Um, Mrs. Roberts was her name, um, and, uh, stuff like that. And I think I was called like, was called faggot all the time and queer.

Despite the tone with which Noah communicated these painful memories, they still stuck with him because, again, they defined him as someone different for his femininity and made him feel less than others because of that. In these moments, he learned to feel shame and to further retreat into the closet, pushing him down the path that would lead to an eventual suicide attempt.

Rick also elaborated on the salience of his gay identity, but specified how it changed based on the particular group of friends that he is in at any one time.

Um, friends in the city, I would say like, it doesn't really occur to me all that often that I'm a gay man. Um, my friends in the suburbs who are like more blue-collar, it comes up all the time. Like I just know if I'm going to go hang out with those, that group of people, it's going to come up. Like I have to be prepared like talking about things. So like, so, um, I know I'm the only gay friend that any of them have got, it's like they want to know things or like make jokes and see if it's cool. Like I'm the one, I'm the one who has to hear about it. Like my friends in the city, like they have more than just me to like think about that stuff with or they're used to it and it's not like this novelty, which is just kinda funny. It makes me feel like everyone's just like working

through their own thoughts they've never had the opportunity to work through before.

With his city friends, being gay doesn't make him feel as if he is different, making it not salient, almost to the point of irrelevance. However, his suburban friends see him as *the* gay friend and they let him know this, which makes his gay identity salient, highlighting the important of context in othering as a driver of identity development

The othering process occurred with race as well. Of course, with most of the subjects growing up and staying in predominantly white communities and spaces for a majority of their lives, the instances where they were the racial minority were fewer and farther between than with being gay. Still, both Liam and Peter recalled specific memories wherein they were the racial minority or their race made them the butt of the joke by friends or even family. For Liam, he recalled one of the first times that he truly thought about being white.

There's one experience that I remember just before I did this study on, uh, like white identity development that I was part of a national honors fraternity. We had like pretty strong relationships with chapters around the area. Um, and there was one chapter in particular at Morgan State in Baltimore. Um, and so we were doing an event with them and I can't remember, I can't remember what, uh, why we were there. But a group of us had gone up to Morgan State to like attend a meeting and, um, like talk about this, this collaborative event that we were doing. And I remember sitting in their meeting and they started their meetings with the black national anthem. And I just remember sitting there and like, they were all standing like fist raised. And I just remember thinking, "my God, like, I really don't know what like... Am I supposed to stand? Am I supposed to do that? Like is... is this acceptable as a white person? What, how am I supposed to interact in this space?" Um, and, and I think the fact that that was still stuck in my mind is probably one of the first triggers where I was starting to think about like, what does it actually mean to be a white man?

Not knowing how to act in a situation dominated by black cultural norms, a novel experience indeed, Liam's race became very salient and led to reflection that supported his racial identity development. So rarely did any of the subjects in this study find themselves in spaces dominated by people of color that it makes sense that this would be stay as a prominent memory. However, this did occur in college, indicating that conscious white identity development for Liam had begun to take place significantly later in life than the development of his sexuality and gender.

Peter also had a defining othering experience around his white identity, made particularly salient as a mixed-race person through observing both his mother's and father's interactions with his extended family in Costa Rica.

I would go to Costa Rica every, well when I was a baby, my dad would take me every couple of months, like the second he could travel with me, he took me. Um, I'd go and I'd hang out with my cousins, maybe not quite at first 'cause at first I was still like a baby. And then like I said, I was living with my dad... well I was around my dad more um, when I was really growing up, so my Spanish was probably a lot better then. Um, but when I started going back when I was like in elementary school and I like had difficulty, like communicating. Like I wasn't as fluent or like I would maybe be wearing like Abercrombie or like, you know, like there are just certain things about me. And so they started calling me gringo, which, yeah, it's not like a super derogatory term, but it's... you know, if you're from Costa Rica, you're a tico. And I was not being called a tico and my mom was always called gringa, cause my mom is very white. She's very, very, very white. Like, she can't roll her R's. Um, and that's something that you can, especially by kids, get easily made fun of like when you're speaking Spanish. And so like I just knew like, well, I love my mom, but I don't want to be called the same thing as my mom. Like, you know, um, it's like, I think that was it. Like the first, the first realization that I had that I was, I was white, again, because someone else was telling it to me about me. Same way about being gay, um, that other people were saying... it was like people knew that I was gay or people called me white before I even knew what those things were. Right? And it's like, shit, how do you know more about my identity and who I am when you're not even me.

Within a multi-racial familial setting, Peter's outward appearance as white passing became clear and his engagement with the family in a way that appeared culturally white made him reflect on his racial identity.

Other people delineating how one is similar or different from themselves, a particular group, or even societal expectations of who they are supposed to be served as powerful memories for all of the subjects. These experiences end up being the building blocks for helping all of the respondents to understand what their identities mean to them, even down to the labels that they should use to define the different pieces of who they are. Moments of salience encourage reflection and movement toward understanding one's own identity. As mentioned above, respondents mostly existed in majority white spaces throughout their entire lives, minimizing the salience of their racial identity through othering. While these othering moments are important to acknowledge, it is equally vital to discuss patterns of racial diversity among the respondents' social networks to get a grasp of the timeline and function of their racial identity development processes.

Social Network Trends

All subjects followed one of three trajectories regarding the racial diversity of their environments throughout their lives. First, and this was a significant majority of the interviewees, they grew up in predominantly white communities, had a slightly more diverse community in college, and then returned to predominantly white communities, maintaining few or no close relationships with people of color.

Despite this pattern, most subjects seemed surprised or displeased with thinking

about this trajectory in their lives. When asking Greg about how similar or dissimilar his friends are from him today, he responded:

I don't think it [is as] diverse as I would like it to be, but it's definitely more diverse than like a kid, you know? Um, it's funny for living in a pretty diverse, um, city, most of my friends are white. Um, which I find interesting. I mean we have a few black friends but not a crazy amount.

He both noted an increase in diversity from when he was younger in an almost entirely white environment, and a lack of diversity currently in comparison to the very diverse city within which he lives. While reflecting on his dissatisfaction with his majority white social network, he hinted at this homogeneity occurring through happenstance as opposed to conscious action.

Dave recognized all the white people in his life as partly due to chance as well, but acknowledged, to his dismay, the possibility that some of it may be his choice, whether conscious or unconscious.

...the vast majority of my friends throughout my life have been white in the, in just people in my life. Um, and it's something I think about, like, has that been subconsciously by choice or by the places I've lived in, the people I interact with or both. Um, and I think it is both. Um, I would like to think it's not choice. Um, and I try to examine that and go out of my way to kind of challenge that.

It goes against the comfort of the subjects to believe that they actively make their social networks almost exclusively white, despite that being the case to some extent. A big part of this pattern depends on them choosing to live in majority white communities. Still, Andy who lives in what he calls "Little Vietnam" up by the Argyle red line stop also has white homogeneity in his social circles.

Andy: I don't have that large of a group of like friends, um, like close friends that I would text everyday or, you know, call if I needed something. Um, but as far as like race in my friends, um, I don't know.

I guess now that I'm looking at it, it's not that diverse. The sexuality, everyone's gay, gender, everyone's male. Um, yeah, I guess, like I said, it's not that cul- or ethnically diverse. Hmm. Um, but yeah, again, like there's, I have my roommate and I have, um, my best girlfriend from college who's really the only one that I still talk to. Hmm. Um, and then maybe four other people that I like, like I said, could call at any minute and like ask if I needed help or anything like that. So, yeah. But yeah all of them are white.

Me: How does that sit with you?

Andy: I mean, I don't love that, but I guess, and I don't have an excuse for it either. Um, but yeah, I, I don't know. I guess, I guess if we like expanded it to more like not people that I'm like that close with, um, it would be more diverse. Um, but I uh the closeness has nothing to do with, with like sexuality or race or gender or anything like that obviously.

Even while mentally parsing through his close friends and acquaintances, recognizing that all of his closest connections are white, he still talked about that pattern as coincidental or unrelated to his own choices – “nothing to do with...race...obviously”. This type of reflection prevents Andy from seeing his active role in shaping the racial structure of his life as well as his racial identity.

College proved a unique time for interacting with people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Max, who grew up in rural Nebraska, described the multi-faceted ways that diversity presented itself in comparison to the familiar homogeneity of his hometown.

...growing up in Nebraska, it was all, not all, but I would say there was a very little to no like racial diversity or socioeconomic diversity. So even like people of color that I knew were all kind of like from my same like social class and have the exact same like lifestyle that I had. Um, and there were no, like gay people or queer people or trans people or anything like that. Um, and then here in Chicago is the complete opposite of that. So it was just like moving and moving to the South side in particular and just being surrounded by people who came from all sorts of different places, all sorts of different backgrounds than me. Um, my school was really diverse in terms of

just like domestic and international students too. So even kids from like overseas who came from completely different cultures outside of even like the diversity of like American cultures.

Both in the case of college environments, and specifically in Chicago, the racial diversity of the people around most subjects increased dramatically from what they knew growing up. Still, while making one close biracial friend throughout his undergraduate career and living on the South side of Chicago in a very racially diverse area, Max's friends are still majority white. This is especially surprising given Max's expressed desire to continue to expand the racial diversity of his network of friends and his recognition of the ways in which structural racism maintains racially segregated communities and social networks.

While most of the respondents expressed a desire for more diversity in their lives or shock at the notion that they would intentionally be creating white networks, Chase dodged questions about the racial make up of his friends and even mentioned his discomfort around people of color. He grew up in a household where his grandparents refused to visit the home whenever his parents fostered children of color. His mom also expressed racist sentiments commonly and, despite acknowledging his closeness to her, he refused to see his own discomfort around people of color as racist.

I was closer to my mom so I kind of adopted a lot of her thoughts and the way she did things. I wasn't racist myself, but I know that I would be a little like growing up like playing with kids and stuff like that. I just feel weird going to that side. I guess that's old school.

Chase hints at race causing discomfort without saying it outright. He even chooses to use the term "side", making it seem like people of color and white people are two teams fighting across some unspoken line. And when asked about his current

demographic composition of his close friends, I specifically queried about race and sexuality. He responded with a breakdown of his 6 closest friends saying, “1, 2, 3 are gay. 3 are gay and 3 are straight.” His intonation in this moment hinted at that being the end of what he wanted to say on that topic with a bit of frustration in his voice and a closure of his posture (crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair).

The second pattern apparent among respondents’ social networks resembles the last but diverges after college. These subjects grew up in racially homogenous communities, experienced diversity in college to some extent, and then intentionally went on to make more friends of color, regardless of the racial makeup of the community they move into after college. Still, these subjects all had majority white friends. This was Noah’s circumstance as he explained in response to questions about his social network’s diversity.

So I have my professional network, I have my social network and I've got, um, family and then I've got a shit ton of acquaintances. And, um, my professional network is, um, cause I'm in fundraising in a queer space. It's predominantly like gay white dudes and some like older white lesbians, and a few prominent people of color in the queer space and then my social network is much smaller and is more diverse. My acquaintances are everybody but a lot of gay white dudes still. But like, yeah past that it's very diverse and um, family's all like white and straight.

Noah spends a lot of his time actively pursuing social justice and attempting to learn about how his white identity interacts with the world. As mentioned earlier, he even formed what he calls the “breaking bread group” to discuss issues of diversity in a non-judgmental space alongside queer and trans people of color. These actions have allowed him to develop a more racially diverse network, but still in his life there are “a lot of gay white dudes”.

Liam, the subject who spent time in college researching identity and who now works on issues of student life on a diverse college campus, also intentionally sought out relationships with people of color. He was actually the only respondent who mentioned dating a person of color at any point throughout the interview, and even that was only for two months with race being the primary reason for breaking up. And now, while his closest friends are almost entirely gay men, he described them as “pretty evenly split” in terms of race. It seems as though the only way to create diverse social networks is to do so intentionally.

The final pattern of racial diversity in social networks was one of continual interaction and connection with people of color throughout the lives of the respondent. This meant they grew up in racially diverse communities or families, and continued to engage with diverse groups of people in college and beyond. Only Rick and Peter had this experience, hinting at the imbalance of racially homogenous and heterogeneous communities across the US.

Rick grew up in a divided community. One half was a rich white suburb and the other half was a lower income, mixed-race community. Rick was born and raised in the latter, making racial diversity commonplace and banal. Most respondents had moments of realization about their white identity, but Rick felt differently.

Um, so I feel like all the other schools were like all white rich kids and we'd be the mixed race school. So I feel like I kind of grew up with lots of people...which is why I guess you don't really think about like a realization that you're white if you like are around not white people a lot.

Rick's race only became salient to him as a manager of a team that included people of color as mentioned earlier. Peter's experience in a mixed-race family made race

distinctive for most of his life and the diversity of the community, particularly the schools, around him ebbed and flowed continually.

Um, so started kindergarten, my parents did raise me in kind of a diverse neighborhood. So suburbs of Washington, D C definitely multicultural, but then like the exact neighborhood where I grew up, a lot of white people...It's like some neighborhoods go to your elementary school, even more go to the middle school, and then like everyone goes to the high school. So by the time I got to high school for sure, definitely, um, a lot more diverse, but like elementary school, very white.

And now Peter's immediate group of friends, unlike any other respondent, is mostly people of color. These three paths all end with almost every respondent, whether intentionally seeking diversity or not, to majority white social networks. Having little to no relationships with people of color limits engagement with issues of race and reflection of one's own racial identity. Regardless of the diversity of one's local environment, increasing diversity in one's social network only occurs with conscious, intentional action to do so. Going to college served as a primary driver of engaging with people of races different from the subjects' own. Changing environments by moving from one place to another encourages identity development as will be shown next.

The Primacy of Place

Without any initial questions on this point, a majority of the respondents told the story of their personality and identity development in relation to the places they lived or moved. Take Max for example. He learned something unique about living in rural Nebraska, living in the urban hub of Chicago, and in transitioning between the two. In Nebraska, he learned to be family-oriented and appreciate nature and a slow

pace in life. Moving to Chicago, Max “came into [his] own as a gay man” and encountered more diversity that wasn’t available in Nebraska. For his decision to come out, he said that moving to Chicago,

...was a really big impetus behind that. Um, I knew that I was gay in Nebraska as a teenager, but I did not want to come out, um, partly because I was afraid of the reaction that it would get, but also just because that's not a life that I wanted for myself. And it wasn't really until I moved to Chicago and met different people and that different guys and just kind of like started at college and started to feel more excited by the possibility of like living life as a gay man that I decided that coming out was even something that I wanted to do.

This excitement bourgeoned and almost his entire coming out process occurred within the first five months of moving to Chicago. Being in this new environment full of gay men living open and free allowed him to do the same, moving forward in accepting his gay identity. His understanding of his racial identity also transformed through the change in environment.

I think that I came here and first off I've met so many people and made friends from lots of diverse backgrounds. Um, and just listening to them and hearing about their experiences really made me think about issues that I hadn't really come into contact with before... Just being in a place with so many people who had very different upbringings than I, live very different lives than I had lived in Nebraska, really made me think about like the way that I was approaching other people and the way that I was just like approaching being in a community that was like a predominantly community of color, especially as somebody who just like moved from someplace else. Like a white guy who came from Nebraska and like had not been a part of this community or neighborhood before. Um, so that was really, I say that was like really important and very formative right off the bat moving to Chicago.

Just seeing and engaging with people of color makes all the difference in starting to understand his white identity for Max and for most of the other subjects. The contrast between the two spaces invites further reflection and questioning why

things are the way they are. Learning to navigate new environments allows for a lot of the identity development discussed here by Max and by other respondents in this study.

Andy, like the others, explicitly stated the move to Chicago as key to his racial identity development process. Contact theory abounds with evidence from these men's stories.

Uh, I guess, I mean obviously I was knew that I was white, but, um, I never really realized what that entails or what that holds, like what privilege we have until probably until I moved to Chicago, honestly, which was in 2012. Um, because before that I was just always in small areas where it was mainly white people. And so you don't really think about that stuff, you know?

Without contact with people of color, Andy and others won't have anything that jostles the unchecked and invisible normalcy of whiteness in their life and forces them to think about race as something more than just what "other" people have. Andy had grown up in a particularly racist household as mentioned earlier, so building relationships with people of color upon moving to college, he said, made him question some of his conscious and unconscious biases. Talking about his upbringing and the change from college, he disclosed that he

...was always like fed a certain thing about Republican is right and white is right and all of this. And then, uh, but like I said...I always knew that it was wrong, but then I never knew why or if it actually was. And then until when I like moved away for college, uh, I was still in Indiana, but it was like, it's the second largest city in Indiana, which isn't saying much, but it's a city. It's called Brentsville. And, um, like instantly, well, I had two roommates who were, I think they were Puerto Rican. Right away. Um, and then after that, like one of my best friends, she was black and uh, yeah. Then I was like, what? Like all this stuff that I've thought my whole life is not accurate.

Relationships were the primary building blocks for developing and understanding Andy's white identity. However, these relationships would not have been possible to cultivate without being the same physical space as people of color, hence the primacy of place.

Sometimes it wasn't even about moving to any place in particular but about moving away from someplace else. Chase had mentioned that his father and him had explicit conversations about how he needs to walk, talk, and dress as a man to be a man. I asked him how he navigated all of his parents' expectations in coordination with what he wanted from his own life. His response made us both laugh: "Well the kicker was getting the hell out of the house." Peter agreed, saying that he needed to move away from home to really begin to explore his identity. "It was really important for me to leave Virginia for university. I didn't know why but looking back now it's cause I needed like space to be able to figure out who I was." Staying close to family, constantly being monitored, subjects could not fully explore their gay identities until they moved away.

Noah echoed this sentiment when discussing his coming out process. For him "getting out of Memphis was really important...for that journey to happen." Growing up in a home where homophobia was commonplace and openly LGBTQ+ people were sparse or entirely nonexistent, going to college in a city in Arkansas for Noah meant that he finally could meet gay people and have some gay experiences with less fear of repercussion. To him,

entering college and meeting new people made his “understanding of the world evolve and expand”.

Liam painted a picture of how moving to grad school in Michigan provided him the first opportunity to integrate into a gay community, and with that opportunity came new challenges. Spending time with lots of gay men made Liam learn *how* he wants to express his gay identity, as well as cultural norms in gay communities.

Liam: My roommate at the time, like this random, that was also a gay man, um, who was one of the first people that right off the bat was like, “so you like Madonna, right?” And I was like “ummm” ...He was just like, “you're gay?” I was like, “yes, yes. Yes I'm gay.” Um, and so but being in that community, thinking about, “Oh, how, how do I present, how do I behave in this whole new space of like top, bottom, masc, femme? Like what does this look like?” Um, and definitely I think tried to put myself in the more like “oh, like I'm not a, I'm not a femme gay. Like that's not me.” Um, because the language, I think it still continues to be like very anti-femme in a lot of the community spaces. Um, and so trying to present as masculine as possible, whether that was, you know, physically like going to the gym, clothing styles, haircuts. Uh, but also just like behavior of wow do you... I just remember thinking like when you meet someone new, like how do you engage them? Do you hug your friends? Do you kiss your friends in public? Like all the kind of things that I would consider being part of the gay community at first I struggled with. And then I think, you just get to a place of comfortability sometimes. And you say like, “no, fuck it, like this. I love my friends so I'm going to hold their hand and like kiss them. And you know, and if I behave femme then okay. That's just what's going to happen.”

Me: Yeah. Where do you think... do you think... was is it just the, like the language around like anti-femme stuff that like really pushed you into that or was...

Liam: At first? Yeah, for sure. Um, and to worry about like the content, you know. My anxiety shifted from like being afraid of telling people that I was gay to like being afraid that I was being perceived as femme. Right? And so seeing the language and how people talked about, you know, bottom boys and whatnot. That really made me struggle with thinking about how do I present, how do I behave, what do I, what do I

say I like? What do I say I don't like? It was just time and friends, other people taking like... becoming the role models and then saying no, this is what I am and it's okay.

When moving into a new place with access to a gay community for the first time, Liam began to develop an understanding of the cultural norms and conflict within gay spaces. He then began to question the expression of his gender and sexuality beyond what he had previously understood to be a relatively stable part of his identity. Entering this formerly unfamiliar culture forced Liam to ask specific questions of himself and seek to find answers. While the struggle around masculinity and femininity at first felt prominent to him, he later became comfortable in where he situates himself with his gender expression.

Liam reflected on a similar experience coming to Chicago and feeling conflicted about the community surrounding Boystown, querying whether or not it was a racially inclusive space. When asking him precisely what it means to be a gay white man, Liam explained how Chicago created a new understanding of the intersections of these identities for him.

Moving to Chicago and living in Boystown... I think almost immediately recognizing the kind of othering that exists with the, the communities of color or the queer people of color communities in the Boystown area. Um, and frankly having people aggressively say like, these are white gay spaces. And struggling to think about like, no, like these are inclusive spaces. And then to hear people continually talk about like, I, I don't feel safe there. I'm not welcome there. Like, these are not spaces where people find me attractive. People don't welcome me. Right? Um, and coming from like some of my very dear friends, uh, is really where I started to think about the white gay aspects of my identity and what does that mean...Um, and it made me think a lot about just kind of like social network, um, my attraction aspects, right? Like who was I responding to on the apps? Who was I recognizing as being attractive, um, and really challenging myself to, to consider what are, what are those notions and why? How did I develop those? Where do those come from? Um, and like I don't have

good answers...I mean other than my racist poor upbringing kind of like built these, these archetypes in my mind. And that's what I had to try to like break out of.

Understanding some of the conflicts in a particular community and then seeing oneself as part of that community forces one to either pick a side or seek to comprehend why the conflict exists in the first place. For Liam, he initially perceived the Boystown space as inclusive and his role as a white gay man in it as an unquestionably positive experience for himself and others. After learning about some of the racial tension in the community, Liam dug deep inwards to figure out just how his white identity interacts with others', as well as how he came to have the beliefs and values he has as a white person.

Dave sums up the primacy of place perfectly when he mentioned that the different stages in his life and the forward processing of different parts of his identity are directly related to where he's lived. He moved all over the place as well, which makes it easier to identify his changes in identity spatially.

Honestly, you know, I've lived in a lot of different places, um, in different parts of my life and it really, I think of them as umm at different points of my life. Yes. And I associate different points in my life with the places that I have lived. Um, I think I really came into myself as a gay man first in Russia, but really in Boston. Um, I think I started realizing my privilege a lot, um, maybe in Minnesota in and shortly after college ummm both as a white person and as someone with financial means.

In Russia, Dave had his first serious boyfriend; in Boston, his first group of gay friends; in Minnesota, he took classes around the history of race in the United States. Every time he moved to a new place, there were new opportunities to build relationships, learn new information or skills, and have new experiences, which helped him to understand the pieces of his identity.

While Peter mentioned needing to leave home to find who he was, he likewise felt that development of his identity relied strictly on moving *to* new places.

I know that I am Hispanic and I know that it's who I, who I am and like I, want to make sure that I really like connect to that part of me. Um, but it's almost like I had to go to Spain to do it. I couldn't like... it was places I think for me... every phase of my life where I felt comfortable kind of like advancing to the next level. So like being honest about who I am and what my sexuality is I had to move to Boston to do that. To... for me to like feel more like I was connected to like my dad and, and that side of the family I had to like go to another country, a Spanish speaking one, um, to be able to do that. And then like Chicago, the similar thing too like I tried living in DC like right after school and it just like didn't work out. [My husband] wasn't happy there either. But like going to Chicago, we didn't know anybody. It was like, well I can like go there like with my partner and like have this new life. It's like just like new, big important life changes for me have to happen in new cities. That's always how it's been for me. Like oof! I'm so nervous to even think about who I would have been if I had never left Virginia. I'm like terrified to know like what that version of Peter is.

Again, each move provided the potential for exploring the self in a unique way, interacting with unfamiliar people under novel conditions. In new spaces, subjects had the opportunity to integrate themselves into communities, build relationships, and have conversations to support their identity development.

This project seeks to understand all elements of the process involved in how these gay white men come to make sense of their identities. Relationships are often the primary driver for identity development in the new environments discussed above. Role models – those who demonstrate to the subjects how to think and act or how not to – pop up constantly throughout the lives of the respondents from their upbringing through today. It is in this next section that the function of the role models in the identity development process will be explicated.

Identity Role Models

Moving from place to place served as key points in time for development. Additionally, role models helped guide the subjects through their identity development processes. Role models are people that explicitly or implicitly told or demonstrated how to act or think about a particular topic – in this case the different elements of their identities. Subjects only had positive and negative role models for their sexual orientation. With race, no subjects could identify negative role models, despite an abundance of them existing in conversation. And with gender, no subjects could identify positive male role models. In terms of sexual orientation, gender, and race, positive role models for sexual orientation provided the most guidance.

Media figures, both real and fictional, provided these gay white men the ability to imagine a world where they could live openly and without fear of rejection or failure. Regardless of the age of the subject, many of them named Ellen DeGeneres as a role model that showed them they could be successful, happy, and openly gay. Tim described how Ellen affected him in this way: “I would watch Ellen, like it was on every day when I came home and she was just like so comfortable with who she was that it did give me hope like that I could, I could find that same comfort at some point.” Liam explained that it wasn’t only the fact that she was comfortable in who she was, but also as just a public figure in a space and time when there weren’t any others like her.

I didn't have any gay role models or people to look up to as like successful gay people. I mean it sounds relatively cliché just because I feel like it's been... but Ellen coming out as a lesbian was like a huge thing in my life. Um, like being able to see that very publicly was like amazing.

For Liam, Ellen's pure existence enabled him to envision a future beyond the closet, opening him up to identity exploration. Martin echoed this feeling about Ellen as a beacon of light within the dark, saying that he specifically remembers the episode of Ellen's TV show where she came out of the closet. Others mentioned Elton John in a similar fashion. Peter, however, recalled wanting to be similar to or romantic with Brian Kenny from *Queer as Folk*.

Everyone knows he's gay but that's cause he's like having all the gay sex. Like, it wasn't because of a certain fashion choice or certain expression...so I like idolized him. I would like sneak downstairs [when] my parents were asleep to watch this show. And the opening scene is like a bunch of guys in their underwear, like dancing at like any gay bar. But like, it was my first time ever seeing like... that alone was like the best porn ever. Like it just was like, so incredible. I was like, "Oh my God, like gay men, like dancing together" and like there's something about gay clubs. Um, and so I very much wanted to... probably to be with him, but also to be him. So I mean obviously fictional role model there. Um, I don't know. I guess I always kind of was more attracted to... or like inspired by, I don't know, men who I might know for a really long time that were older than me, let's say professors or teachers or, you know, professionals, and I would later find out they were gay. And there was something about that that was really, really attractive to me... It was like, "Oh, I, I wasn't able to clock you". Um, but I guess I always kind of wanted to be that way too.

This turned out to be exactly how Peter chooses to express his gender identity to this day. In our interview, he mentioned feeling positively about his ability to pass due to his masculine presentation and the excitement that this translates to in hyper-masculine sexualized spaces like "Queen!", a queer dance party at Smart Bar on Sunday nights.

Not all role models were famous or fictional, of course. Greg mentioned both personal and fictional role models and the different ways that they affected the development of his gay identity.

I think the first one was who was one of [my] managers at that store. And so he was probably the first one where like he was a really nice kind guy. People really responded well to him. Um, there didn't seem to be that question of if someone would like him if he was gay or straight, like he was just a lovable guy. People really liked him. He was well dressed, well mannered, but educated. And uh, it was kind of like my probably wasn't my first crush, but he was like the first crush that I actually engaged in like behavior with....And the other person that comes to mind is like Will And Grace...I was like coming, you know, to terms in that era and like, so like the concept of Will at like a very like simple form of like...I didn't feel like I was Jack, like this flamboyant, like putting my business out there and acting overly feminine. So like Will was the other option. So it's like I'm more of a Will, you know?

The ability for Greg to see himself in another person with a similar identity allowed him to envision the possible ways he can exist in the world as a gay man, encouraging him to continue to explore and express his gay identity His husband also served this role by having explicit conversations to explain that it was not necessary for Greg attempt to conform to standards of heterosexual men. This also invited him to explore more pieces of his identity.

Scott talked about some of the goals or dreams he had for his life that he thought were incompatible with being gay. It only took one moment with one gay cousin to change that for him.

Scott: My mom and a few of my other, um, family members went to this big family reunion for my mom's side. And at the family reunion... It was this whole thing, it was like kind of ex, not excommunicated but... This cousin... my mom's cousin who hadn't really talked to the family in a long time was coming back for family reunion, but they're like... the drama was that he would bring his partner and their two-year-old daughter.

Me: Aww!

Scott: Right. Amazing. And I remember it was one of the first times that 1) that I had actually like really interacted with a gay man who I knew was a gay man. And 2) I was like "Oh wow! Like you have a family... like you can like... cause...that always been for me a goal. Like

I want a family someday. And so it's just like, "Oh wow you, you have this part of me that I didn't really think was compatible with having family", which now I feel, "Oh my gosh duh". But like at 18 I felt very like dichotomous, so to see that I was like, okay. So it was like a very brief interaction. Like that one day we didn't really talk that much, but I remember being... that stuck with me kind of like an itch in the back of my mind. It's like, okay, like I could actually be similar to that apparently.

Scott's desire for a family only became a possibility in his mind once he saw it in action. Role models can come in many forms and with varying degrees of closeness to those they affect. Fortunately for many gay youths, just seeing LGBTQ+ people be happy and successful can encourage them to live in a way that will support their dreams and wellbeing. This was the case with Scott, and so it was with Noah as well.

Role models? Um, are probably these three lesbians...that were my clients: Alexa, Diane, and Leslie because I was able to see people like them... like those three individuals showed me without telling me that they can thrive in life being openly gay. And that was something I had not had before.

Positive gay role models account for a significant majority of the role model figures that subjects describe in the telling of their identity development stories. This is partially due to the primary salience of gay identity. Additionally, positive gay role models are what most of the respondents crave as closeted, fear-ridden youths. Seeking out these specific role models may make them more present.

Unfortunately not all role models are positive figures in people's lives. Often, family, friends, community members, politicians, and even famous persons deter people from developing around their gay identity. Sometimes just not having any role models at all can prevent someone from understanding an element of their identity. Noah also spoke on this point. "So there were no, there were no lesbians, no gay men, no transgender individuals. No one that was open anyway, um, um, around

me growing up. And, uh, so I didn't necessarily know that that was something that I could be.”

Max painted a bit more of a bleak picture from his personal experience growing up. The only images that he received from most of society were relatively negative.

I had never met any gay men. Um, I, the only representation of it that I saw was just like people dying of AIDS and people being like discriminated against and all the religious stuff that you can imagine like growing up in Nebraska. So I just didn't really see it as well. I guess part of it was I didn't see it as a very feasible life for myself. Like I didn't line up with, you know, I wanted to find like a partner to be with for a long time. I wanted a family and kids. I wanted it to be healthy. And I didn't really think that that was possible...Just growing up thinking that it's like a sin and thinking that it's, you know, like not healthy and that it's not something that should be like discussed or thought of or you know, anything like that. Like, uh, growing up my parents always [had] us avoid like any music, any movies or writings ever with like gay people in them. It just like wasn't, uh, wasn't, uh, like they, they teach to avoid things that would be like unclean or sinful or whatever. The church that grew up in so my parents counted like gay characters or gay like anything as part of that, yeah.

Max's parents, like his church community and most media he had consumed at an early age, either shamed, hid, or perpetuated negative false narratives about gay people. Max mentioned before wanting to hide this part of him away until he went to college and saw gay men living happy lives openly. These negative role models, the people who maintained enforced heterosexuality as his only way toward a good life, affected him deeply for a majority of his life. They severely stagnated his gay identity development process.

Martin had a more intense negative role model that served as his primary barrier to self-acceptance as mentioned earlier. “Like at my high school there was one openly gay kid and it was like a small high school like 900 people and he was

just like physically abused constantly and like had to withdraw for a year.”

Continuing to talk about this one gay classmate, he described a sense of frustration seeing him being openly gay when it was causing him so much physical and emotional pain.

Martin: It was very weird cause he was the only one and...so like, what's this like little boy doing? Like living like this and so it was confusing.

Me: Do you feel like that had impacted your, um, perception at all of like how to be gay or like, your feelings towards being feminine?

Martin: Oh yeah, totally. I think that for a lot of like...it's probably not unique, a lot of people like...growing up gay and [seeing] those people like that and think...well I don't want to be like that person or whatever.

Seeing another gay man express his femininity and have others respond with violence encouraged Martin to stay closeted for nearly a decade thereafter, depriving him of the opportunity to further connect with and explore his gay identity. Martin's family owned a small building that they rented out when he was little. One of the two renters was a gay man. During our conversation, Martin declared that finally observing a gay man being both out and safe opened up new possibilities for his future.

Most of the respondents avoided discussing much of their gender at all as detached from their sexual orientation. Greg was the only one who noted a specific and significant male role model in his life, and it certainly wasn't a positive one.

Um, so gender is an interesting one I think because um, growing up in that type of environment, my father passed away when I was really young, so I had a stepdad who um, wasn't very nice and didn't really like me a lot. And so, um, I kind of leaned more towards my mom and uh... So my mom and then my grandmother who had a really soft spot in her heart for me 'cause I was like her first grandchild. Right? Um,

and so my influences growing up were very much kind of formed by women. And then like the male form was kind of really negative because of just, you know, the um... I think there was abuse in there and just like he had his two kids from his first marriage. So like there was just stuff, right? And so the, the male influence wasn't really positive until I started to socialize and understand gay men.

The only explicit role modeling he had around his gender when he was young reinforced harmful images of masculinity as aggressive, abusive, and unkind or uncaring. These messages made him closed off as a youth and it wasn't until he started interacting with gay men that he learned how his gender could be reinterpreted toward compassion and connection with others.

While there may have been no positive role models for gender amongst the subjects, there were no explicitly negative role models for developing the interviewees' racial identity. However, a few did name some of the people in their lives that supported the development of their white identity through getting them to think more deeply about race generally. These positive racial role models took many forms, but often they were friends of color that brought up their personal experiences, changing the individual's perception of how race functions in the world. Asking about his racial identity development, Max explained that was how it worked for him.

One of my best friends, uh, that I met my freshman year of college is biracial and she grew up in the Chicago, greater Chicago area and we bonded like immediately as soon as we met in school. Um, and just getting to know her and just hearing about how like her education and her upbringing and just how she was like adjusting to life at university and stuff that she was running into really just kind of opened my eyes to lots of issues that I had never really thought about before.

Relationships created the focal point for future development. While white people maintain relationships strictly with other white people, their ability to understand their racial identity remains limited.

The only other respondent to identify relationships that addressed racial identity development specifically was Noah. He sought out relationships intentionally in order to build his understanding of his own race. Once a month he meets for dinner with this group called the “breaking bread group”, as mentioned above.

It's a space, it's a non-judge nonjudgmental space for the four of us to come together and have brave and courageous conversations. And um and, it's wonderful. So you have the gay dude from the South who is works at a social service agency. You've got um, a well to do gay attorney who's like amazing and then a black trans woman who's also an activist and then a black lesbian from the South side who works for the city. And like the identities and the experiences we bring to the table is great, but that's how you can learn from and expand and grow and I think... I guess [they're] role models... because I can connect with them on a much deeper level and um, and ask sometimes stupid questions and be okay in that space.

White respondents often felt uncomfortable talking about race and worried about being perceived as racist when not understanding their own racial identity or how race functions in the US. Having close connections with people of color and feeling comfortable to discuss issues of race pushed Noah to gain new insight into his white identity.

Finally, Martin also had racial role models, but unlike Noah and Max, Martin never met them, nor does he know who they are by name.

Um, there were some people on, I have no idea who they are now, but like there are definitely some people who would like post more about stuff like about that on Tumblr... like in early years of Tumblr where people would just have all these rants and stuff like that. And, but

they're mostly productive though. Even if you don't agree, you still kind of get like thinking about like why people are ranting like that or whatever. I feel like people don't talk like that in day-to-day life, like about like going on rants about like racism, whatever.... If you were just like talking to a guy on the bus or someone here, then people around you would think like what is this crazy person doing here or whatever. And so there's this kind of a new way for people to engage about this kinds of issues online.

Martin identified a few posts and Tumblr pages that specifically helped him think more deeply about race. As an online platform, he read both sides of these “rants about racism” and began to understand how his white identity interacted with both institutions and other individuals.

Whether a close personal connection, a famous person, a fictional character, or an online personality, role models support individuals in their identity development process. They show people how to engage with their identities and push them to do so by presenting new information or barriers for them to overcome. Without these identity role models, the subjects in this study would not have been able to fully comprehend who they are and what each part of their identity means to them.

DISCUSSION

A significant majority of previous research on identity development focuses on the linearity of stage models. As certain traits develop or experiences occur, people move from stage to stage toward one particular end goal. Most of these stage or typology models focus on one particular piece of an individuals' identity. This study sought to uncover the holistic process that gay white men undergo to understand what their identities mean to them.

The focal research question queried how gay white men develop their racial identity in comparison to their gender and sexual orientation. After the completion of 14 interviews with gay white men between the ages of 21 and 42 who all live in Chicago, I found several key patterns to their developmental processes.

The first pattern focuses on gay identity development. Imagine a steel mechanical wall that lowers into the ground notch by notch until flush with the ground. On one side of this wall stands the gay man in his early development – fearful, anxious, closeted. The wall represents all of the people, experiences, and stressors that force him to stay on his side. He cannot see over the wall, nor imagine the possibilities beyond the wall. As the negative reinforcements in the gay man’s life lessen, which previously maintained the prominence of the wall, the mechanism allows it to descend into the floor. This process opens up the possibility of self-love and acceptance of his gay identity. Additionally, when he can peek over this impasse, he sees other gay figures – friends, family, strangers on the street, celebrities – who accelerate the decline of the wall. Gay identity development functions primarily through the removal of negative punishments in this way, as opposed to the more popular narratives of community and love birthing new possibilities for openness and self-acceptance. This finding demonstrates that if cultural narratives perpetuating homophobia and transphobia exist alongside growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ people,

difficulties with self-acceptance will continue and the fundamental mechanism holding the wall in place will remain unchanged.

Second, white identity among these subjects developed in the exact opposite flow from gay identity development. For white identity, instead of a wall coming down, subjects had to pole vault over a tall bar. Every attempt and failure to fling himself over the bar represents incidents wherein the gay white man's previous understandings of the normalcy of white values and beliefs are challenged, but not enough to fundamentally change his perception of his identity. As he has more of these experiences, he will eventually come to one that gets him over that bar and unleashes new possibilities for how to see his white identity. These experiences often involved challenges to post-racial societal expectations, seeing firsthand the discomfort that racial conflict brings to people of color or to oneself for a lack of racial awareness or sensitivity. However, a fantastic coach can accelerate this process in the form of education, direct trainings on identity, or close relationships with people of color. Through formal or informal education around racial inequality and through living in racially heterogeneous communities, the gay white men in this study uncovered new understandings of their racial identity.

Third, salience of a particular part of one's identity takes primacy when others make it apparent that they deviate from the norm. With gay identity development, this often meant pointing out feminine traits of boys when they are young or facing homophobic harassment or violence. With

white identity development, this meant existing in spaces where the individual is a racial minority – an unlikely and uncommon experience. The shift from individuals feeling salience internally to a primarily externally initiated experience provides evidence for identity occurring through social processes, and removes some agency from the individuals in driving this action.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, all individuals came to new understanding of their identity by living in new spaces. This process can be either positive or negative. By this I mean, moving *to* a new place enables a person to experience new cultures, build relationships with diverse peoples, and interact with communities that support their marginalized identities. Additionally moving *from* a place may remove negative stimuli that inhibit an individual from exploring or developing a particular part of their identity. In many cases, these two benefits of movement occur simultaneously. Given that no questions in the interview schedule asked specifically about movement and its effects on identity development, this finding is likely the most prominent as every subject mentioned this in telling their story of how they came to understand themselves.

Fifth, role models serve a key function in identity development for gender, sexuality, and race. These role models explicitly tell people how to act and think or how not to do so, or they demonstrate possibilities for the future. Role models appeared with varying degrees of closeness to the subjects. While they were important for development, subjects only explicitly

discussed both positive and negative role models for their sexual orientation. None described racist people in their lives as negative racial role models; and none detailed positive male role models, despite both of them existing in their narratives of identity development. This may indicate a level of reflection and salience in the realm of gay identity development that does not exist in the elements of the subjects' identities. The fact that most of them described their gay identities as of primary salience supports this notion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this project both supports and refutes the stage and typology models. While all of the subjects' current understandings of their race or their sexual orientation place them relatively clearly in one typology or stage of almost every model articulated in the literature review, these models are too narrow, linear, and static to accurately depict the complexity, struggle, and tension of single elements of identity. And these certainly cannot grasp the ways in which multiple identities within the same individual mutually affect one another. Moreover, the models fail to demonstrate the transitions between the stages or typologies, which this study portrays. If the reader imagines boxes with descriptors of each stage running left to right, then this study represents the arrows between each box identifying the *process*, more so than any one moment in time.

This brings me to the main point of this research. Only one subject identified what it meant to them to be a gay white man as an intersectional

identity. All other subjects discussed each part of their identities as segregated processes. The inverse nature of the two developmental processes (gay and white) created unconscious conflict, making the cohesive unit indescribable. Gay identity development continues passively as barriers to self-acceptance decline, while white identity needs constant and conscious education, reflection, relationship building and intense moments of seeing racism to develop. Intersectionality may dominate literature that discusses multiple forms of identity within a single individual, yet these individuals themselves may not perceive the path to making sense of their identity as intersectional. Instead, these processes are separate and segregated from one another, as in the case of the 14 gay white men I interviewed herein.

However, this conflict to create a cohesive identity may only occur for people who view themselves as both gay and white. Or it could be for any parts of one's identity that are recognized on opposing sides of a power dynamic – one with systematic power and advantage and one without. In the gay and white example, gay people living within a cis-heteronormative society recognize their gay identity early and this process would be significantly different to uncovering an understanding of one's white identity within a society that normalizes white values and beliefs.

Although these findings contribute to sociological understandings of identity, they are limited in a number of important ways. First, a small sample size limits the generalizability of these findings. Second, the sample is limited to gay white men in Chicago who are in the Millennial generation.

These findings may only describe the experience of a specific group in a specific place at a specific point in time. And finally, two limitations exist within the recruitment of the subjects. The time-space sampling method limits the sample pool to those who match the criteria of the study and who visit venues designed for that group. This leaves out, in this case, gay white men who do not partake in the bar scene or who primarily do so in bars not designated as gay. It also possibly eliminates a sector of the gay community struggling with alcohol addiction, which is higher than the general population and may affect the data. Additionally, as a gay white man interacting with other gay white men in hyper-sexualized gay bars and clubs, subjects may have only interacted with me if they found me approachable or attractive, limiting the sampling pool further.

Future research can look at whether or not any of these patterns hold water in other groups with different identities, particularly the primacy of place and conflictual identity processes. Furthermore, research may ask whether these findings for gay white men exist in other age groups or in other locations within or outside of the US. The same study can even be replicated within Chicago with an alternative style of recruitment, more traditional interviewing techniques, or with a researcher who does not also identify as gay, white, and male.

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Methodological Appendix:

Building Connection and Reflection through Feminist Interviewing Techniques

Using feminist interviewing techniques, I intended to break down the power dynamic between the interviewees and myself. Several subjects felt this throughout the interview and commented in different ways about our connection and the ways that it made them feel. Likewise, I shared with interviewees about the positive benefits that the process provided to me as well, which helped build rapport and encouraged them to open up and be vulnerable.

In a funny and unexpected twist, several interviewees mentioned feeling like they were in therapy, being psychoanalyzed or suggesting that I should be a therapist. These comments indicated a deep level of thought on behalf of the interviewee and a trustworthy and comfortable presence in myself, the researcher. When asking Greg about what he should do with his desire to affect change and how he processes his feelings or thoughts around that desire, he responded: "I don't know. It's a great question. Are you going to be a therapist? There's this moment – you asked a question and I was like, my therapist would totally say it like that." Noah essentially made the same comment after I asked him to expand on something he said.

Noah: I think that like my gayness, is um, is more in the forefront than my whiteness. I think.

Me: Tell me about that.

Noah: Are you like a therapist? That's what you should do next.

Me: I've been told that a lot.

Noah: Yeah. 100%.

Scott noted a similar feeling when I asked about some moments in his life that led him to how he sees himself today. He responded almost identically: "Um, I would say...Ooh, that's good. I feel like it's like a therapy session." A few minutes later in the interview we talked about his response to that question. Most of those big moments that impacted his identity were fairly upsetting or traumatic. Having him reflect on that in a bit of self-meta-analysis, he replied, "I would say it tracks. It does! And it's such like a...I like...I feel like you're just learning so much about these things I normally don't tell people." Our interview took place at a café in Andersonville. There was a spot where we were able to sit on the floor with worn out pillows beneath our bottoms and a table between us. We connected in a way that he felt comfortable enough disclosing the death of his father and an unhealthy relationship he was in, as well as about several other unpleasant moments in his life. And still, at the end of the interview he talked about the interview process in a positive light, saying, "I feel like most people like to tell their own stories... I think it's a good experience that you can offer people... I mean there's so many things today I was like, 'Oh, oh God...I'm going to go back home, I need to do some like journaling.' You caused this whole like mental shift."

Finally, a part of my conversation with Liam wherein we discussed the interviews themselves illustrates how it benefitted both of us.

Me: I love thinking about this stuff. And also I've been going through like kind of an awful time the past few months. Um, probably since like October. And these conversations have been like really healing for me in a way. Like just hearing other people's lives.

Liam: As I shared first off they're therapeutic.

Me: Yeah.

Liam: Like incredibly.

Me: Yeah. And like just seeing how people not only perceive their identities but also how they make sense of them, and how they incorporate elements of their lives that I would not have expected to be part of their identity into their construction of how they see themselves today has been really helpful for me. It makes me think about how to take, um, what I might not perceive as an opportunity, but make it into something that is positive and constructive and informative for who I want to be.

This project provides further support for the benefits of breaking down the power dynamic between interviewee and researcher by allowing the subject to choose the location, dictate some of the direction of the conversation, and likewise ask the researcher questions in return. Within an hour, sometimes minutes, subjects felt comfortable enough to openly discuss traumatic events in their lives with me. I believe the reason is three-fold. 1) Balancing the power dynamic built trust; 2) sharing similar identity markers with subjects created cultural connection that enabled a shared understanding; and 3) disclosing my own story and demonstrating vulnerability encouraged openness and vulnerability on the part of the subject. This finding flies in the face of traditional research, which attempts to minimize the Hawthorne effect. All research will have some form of the Hawthorne effect one way or another. By attempting to minimize this, we may inadvertently change our results. If I, as the researcher, had only asked questions, strictly attempted to keep subjects in line with the interview schedule, and did not open up myself to their questions, then I may have come across as cold, untrustworthy, or overly serious. These perceptions could have affected the subjects'

willingness to engage vulnerably with me in a conversation about upsetting and stressful topics. The Hawthorne effect, therefore, was altered in form, but not necessarily in magnitude.