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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

THE EXPERIENCE OF AFFECTIONAL AND GENDER MINORITY STUDENTS
AT CACREP ACCREDITED COUNSELING PROGRAMS HOUSED WITHIN
CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS: AN INTERPRETATIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Matthew S. Tis

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
Counselor Education and Supervision

August 2020

This Dissertation by: Matthew S. Tis

Entitled: *The Experience of Affectional and Gender Minority Students at CACREP Accredited Counseling Programs Housed within Conservative Christian Institutions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counselor Education and Supervision.

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ABSTRACT

Tis, Matthew S. *The Experience of Affectional and Gender Minority Students at CACREP Accredited Counseling Programs Housed within Conservative Christian Institutions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2020.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to explore the lived experiences of affectional and gender minority students who currently attend or previously attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within Conservative Christian Institutions (CCIs), and the sense they make of those experiences. Eight themes emerged from individual interviews conducted with five participants, with most themes existing across all participant accounts. Participants described discriminatory environments in their master's programs, the damaging effects of those experiences, and the safe spaces and relationships that mitigated that damage. They also discussed the ways in which those experiences impacted their spiritual development and stunted their development with respect to counselor identity and affectional and gender identity. The results of this research highlight the opportunity and responsibility that CCIs have to both protect these vulnerable student populations and provide models for them. The study also underscores the need for the counseling field to align the expectations of practitioners with the expectations placed upon training programs regarding the treatment of individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, CACREP, Christian, discrimination, development

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.

– Freire, *The Politics of Education*

A recent dilemma in the field of counselor education has arisen regarding concern that counseling programs housed within conservative Christian institutions (CCIs) may discriminate against students who identify as affectional and gender minorities. These concerns center on the question of whether such students are negatively impacted by the policies, codes of conduct, and culture of CCIs. Further, counselor educators have begun to question how the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) can accredit these programs in light of this issue (e.g. Smith & Okech, 2016a & 2016b). With CCIs on one side, affectional and gender minority communities, their allies, professional codes, and ethical standards on the other, and CACREP somewhere in the middle, there is no obvious resolution in sight.

There has been relative silence since this concern formally appeared in the professional literature (largely housed in the June 2016 publication of the *Journal of Counseling and Development*); a thorough literature search found few professionals and counselor educators weighing in on the issue in the form of peer-reviewed publications. While their input is valuable and more of it is needed, an important voice is missing from the conversation. Understanding the perspective of students who identify as affectional

and gender minorities who experienced this potential discrimination firsthand by attending CACREP accredited CCIs is critical as the field wrestles with how to respond. The current absence of their voice from the professional discourse is consistent with Barton's (2010) assertion that, "[g]ay people are often *talked about* but seldom *listened to*; rarely are they asked about their own oppression and the individuals and institutions oppressing them" (p. 466). This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) centers on the lived experiences of students who identified as affectional and gender minorities while attending a master's level counseling program at a CCI, and the meaning they make of those experiences. Specifically, the researcher explored how these students perceive the connections among the setting and their development with regard to affectional identity, gender identity, spirituality, and counselor identity. From a theoretical perspective, the study was also framed by the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2007).

The remainder of this introduction presents the specific focus of this study, followed by relevant background information to provide context for understanding the history and current climate in the counseling field and the conservative Christian community as they relate to affectional and gender minority communities. Next, a brief introduction to relevant developmental models is provided. This leads into the statement of problem, purpose, and rationale for the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of researcher assumptions, study delimitations, and definitions of key terms and constructs.

Focus of the Study

Institutional values and policies have the potential to support or detract from student development and well-being (Carroll, 2011; Zahniser, Rupert, & Dorociak, 2017). This is especially true in counselor training programs where, in addition to academic learning and skill acquisition, a strong emphasis is placed upon personal growth and development (e.g., American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Blount & Mullen, 2015). CCIs were brought to the forefront of this dialogue by counselor educators due to CACREP's accreditation of institutions that disaffirm or disallow affectional minority status and/or expression. In this study the phrase "conservative Christian institution" or "CCI" refers to, "private colleges and universities whose academic missions, institutional policies, and codes of conduct are informed by conservative Protestant Christian religious doctrine" (Smith & Okech, 2016a, p. 254). This is not meant to intentionally single out conservative Protestant Christian institutions; while other faith-based institutions of higher learning with similar policies and codes certainly exist, none of them have CACREP accredited counseling programs, making CCIs the only sample of institutions available for study on this particular issue (Smith & Okech, 2016a).

Though the ability to adequately train *all* students in a CCI has been called into question, those students who identify as affectional and gender minorities have been identified as particularly vulnerable in these institutions because of policies and guidelines that explicitly address diverse affection and gender identities, and associated behaviors. These policies include language such as, "Students cannot participate in any sexual activity outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage," "God's design and intent

in creation is male-female complementarity in human sexuality,” and “We are to avoid such sinful practices as drunkenness, stealing,...homosexual behavior” (Smith & Okech, 2016a, p. 261-262). At many CCIs, violations of these policies can result in discipline up to and including dismissal from the program (Smith & Okech, 2016a).

While the policies in question at CCIs explicitly address diverse affectional orientations, they are largely silent on gender identity (Smith & Okech, 2016a). There is some precedent for researchers separating affectional orientation and gender identity (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009), and though they are distinct constructs, more recent literature suggests a holistic, inclusive, and intersectional approach (Chan, Cor, & Band, 2018; Kuper, Wright, & Mustanski, 2018). Additionally, policies and codes of conduct at a few CCIs *do* speak to the matter of gender identity. For example, a document outlining the expected behaviors of students, staff, and faculty at one CACREP accredited CCI includes the following statement: “Sexual relations outside of a biblically ordained marriage between a *natural-born man* and a *natural-born woman* are not permissible” (Fain, 2017, para. 4, emphasis added). Finally, the following excerpts come from the student handbook at a CACREP accredited CCI in the Midwest:

College decisions regarding student admission and retention, employment hiring and retention, housing, restroom usage, and other related matters will be made according to one’s given biological sex established at birth...The college rejects claims to differential treatment in housing, restrooms, or locker rooms on the grounds of gender identity that differs from someone’s given biological sex established at birth. (Geneva College, 2018, “Statement on Sexual Identity” para.

4)

Given the fact that such language has begun to show up in the policies and guidelines at CCIs, and the lack of research regarding students who identify as affectional and gender minorities at CACREP accredited CCIs, this study sought to cast a wide net with future research potentially exploring the nuances of particular sub-groups.

Background and Context

With regard to the phenomena being studied, there are a number of important considerations. A treatment of the historical tension between the traditional conservative Christian position and affectional and gender minority communities (and the resulting oppression and discrimination) provides necessary background for the study. Next, an examination of the current culture, both inside and outside of CCIs, regarding diverse affectional and gender identities offers context for the study. A survey of relevant CACREP standards and professional codes of ethics governing mental health training and practice defines the stance of the field. Against this backdrop, a more nuanced understanding of the concerns voiced by counselor educators and CACREP's response to those concerns will be explored. Next, existing literature on spiritual growth and development, affectional and gender identity development, and the process of integrating the two will be reviewed as it relates to the goals of the study. Finally, the way that all of this may shape counselor development will be considered.

Historical Context

There is a long history of discrimination and oppression toward affectional and gender minority communities in American culture with many individuals considering diverse affectional orientations and the associated behaviors and identities to be, "bad, immature, sick, and inferior to heterosexuality" (Herek, 2004, p. 14). Consistent with, or

perhaps a driver of the culture of stigma and shame that is levied upon affectional and gender minorities, the majority of Christian denominations consider minority status and the behaviors associated with it to be immoral, sinful, disgusting, diseased, and perverse (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Sherkat, 2002; Whitman & Bidell, 2014). And this is not just true of the general U.S. population, but within the counseling field as well; after their review of the literature, Whitman and Bidell (2014) concluded that even among counselors, conservative religious belief is strongly associated with more biased views toward LGB individuals. The result of these biases and beliefs has been widespread discrimination and oppression against affectional and gender minorities for decades in the U.S. (Berrill, 1990; Herek, 2009; Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004; McKay, Lindquist, & Misra, 2017; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995).

Current Culture and Climate

In order to have a thorough understanding of this issue, it is also important to survey the beliefs, texts, and doctrines that undergird the conservative Christian position on diverse affectional and gender identities. The basis for the conservative Christian stance on sexuality is largely built upon the Biblical text, both what it says and what it does not (Stanton, 2014). The conservative argument typically includes appeals to a handful of verses that appear to condemn same-sex practice, the creation account in Genesis where God creates a man and a woman in the garden, and the lack of any other sexual relationship being praised or modeled throughout the text (Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Stanton, 2014). The general conclusion arrived at by a conservative interpretation of scripture (as evidenced in the policies and codes of conduct in CCIs) is that any sexual

relationship outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage is counter to what God intended (Smith & Okech, 2016a).

Despite this being the traditional, conservative Christian view of human sexuality, it does not represent the entire Christian community. As Balkin, Watts, and Ali (2014) contend, “Each major religion encapsulates as much within-group variation as they do between-religion variations... there are also significant differences between various denominational/religious group perspectives and a surprising amount of diversity within various denominations/religious groups as well” (p. 187). Many progressive Christians (and even some conservatives) have come to a place of acceptance, inclusion, and advocacy for individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities (Alkousaa, 2017; Believe Out Loud, n.d.). This is due in part to alternate interpretations of the Biblical texts traditionally used to support the conservative viewpoint; some affectional and gender minority affirming Christians believe that traditional exegetical and hermeneutical procedures were carried out incorrectly (Nkosi & Masson, 2017).

While improvement in the treatment of individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities has been made culture-wide and within religions communities, pockets of discrimination, animosity, hatred, and even violence still exist (McKay et al., 2017). Certainly this is true at the individual level, but perhaps more concerning is when discrimination appears at the institutional or systemic level. To provide just a few examples: Farmer (2017) noted that, “Conversion therapy or reparative therapy remains legal in 45 states despite being discredited and ethically opposed by all major mental health professions, including the ACA” (p. 114). In 2016, legislation was passed in North Carolina mandating that in government facilities people must use the bathroom consistent

with the biological sex on their birth certificate [portions of which have since been repealed] (Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, 2016); Mississippi enacted a law that businesses and workers, including state government employees and counselors, can deny service to LGBT individuals based on religion grounds (Mississippi Protecting Freedom of Conscience from Government Discrimination Act, 2016); and Tennessee passed a bill allowing counselors to refuse LGBT clients on the basis of the counselor's religious beliefs (Tennessee HB 1840, 2016).

The issue of institutional discrimination has come to a head in counselor education due to the policies in place at a number of CACREP accredited CCIs. The policies in question not only directly influence students who identify as affectional and gender minorities, but may also reflect and even shape the attitudes of faculty, staff, and other students, potentially creating a hostile environment. It is possible that these policies and the culture created by them cause significant distress for students at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities; researchers have found that identity formation in affectional minorities can be further complicated by institutional prejudice (Herek, 1988) and fear of rejection (Halpin & Allen, 2004) – both of which appear to be present at CCIs.

Standards and Ethical Codes

The mental health field has its own troubled past when it comes to treatment of affectional and gender minority communities – even listing “homosexuality” as a form of pathology in the DSM until 1973 (Burton, 2015) – but much progress has been made and is reflected in current standards and codes in the profession. For example, the 2016 CACREP accreditation standards include requirements that programs engage in

“continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students,” and “recruit, employ, and retain a diverse faculty” (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015, p. 6). Going a step further, the most recent edition of the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics specifically addresses diversity and discrimination with regard to affectional and gender minorities. Most explicitly, section C.5 states that, “Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination against prospective or current clients, *students*, *employees*, supervisees, or research participants based upon age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, *gender identity*, *sexual orientation*, *marital/partnership status...*” (ACA, 2014, p. 9, emphasis added). Additional professional organizations have adopted similar guidelines and policies as well, such as the American Psychiatric Association, the American School Counselor Association, and the National Association of Social Workers (Whitman & Bidell, 2014).

Recent Dialogue in Counselor Education

As mentioned in the introduction, much of the recent formal discourse on the topic of CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs took place in a series of articles published in the June 2016 edition of the Journal of Counseling and Development (JCD; see Sells & Hagedorn, 2016; Smith & Okech, 2016a & b). The reader is referred to that publication for a full treatment of the discussion, but a summary is provided here for context. As mentioned earlier, the discussion in these articles was limited to LGB students and that is reflected below, though the current study is including the experiences of individuals who identify as gender minorities.

The debate on this issue appeared in JCD when a survey of counseling programs housed within CCIs prompted questions of whether the values and policies at those institutions are discriminatory toward affectional minority students (Smith & Okech, 2016a). Additionally, the initial article raised concerns that the culture of CCIs might negatively influence not just affectional minority students, but all students, faculty, staff, and future clients of the students trained in that program. There was also debate regarding such programs' ability to adequately meet national accreditation expectations. The ethical standards in the mental health field appear to contradict certain elements of CCI policies and guidelines, which led Smith and Okech (2016a) to call for further conversation and development of literature on this issue.

In response, Sells and Hagedorn (2016) appealed to the need to respect the rights of both affectional minorities and faith-based institutions, as well as argued that an atmosphere of "convicted civility" can emerge where both sides of this debate can coexist while remaining firm in their positions (p. 265). They contended that CACREP accreditation ensures students are trained to meet the ethical mandates of the field (Sells & Hagedorn, 2016). Their argument also included a discussion of the needs and desires of students; Sells and Hagedorn (2016) posit that students seek out programs housed within CCIs because of an opportunity to integrate their faith with their work, and to study under faculty who serve as models for how to live out that balance.

Smith and Okech (2016b) countered by suggesting that despite the good-faith effort, Sells and Hagedorn failed to adequately address the issue of disaffirming and disallowing policies at CCIs, which stand at odds with the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and standards put forth by CACREP. They went on to

contend that the policies and codes of conduct at the CCIs they reviewed marginalize and disaffirm the sexual identities of non-heterosexual students, and concluded “that there is no place in the counseling profession for students to fear expulsion from a CACREP-accredited program because of their sexual orientation” (Smith & Okech, 2016b, p. 281).

In an attempt to clarify their position on the concerns raised by Smith and Okech, CACREP (2016) published a response reiterating that while the organization puts forth accreditation standards, “they do not dictate the manner in which programs may choose to meet standards” (p. 1). CACREP (2016) went on to state that though they support the recruitment of diverse faculty and students, they do not define what diversity means. However, they do list “sexual orientation” and “gender” in their definition of “multicultural” in the glossary of the 2016 standards, a definition that begins with the phrase, “term denoting the *diversity* of... (CACREP, 2015, p. 41; emphasis added). One could make the argument that “multicultural” and “diverse” are synonymous. They also emphasized the fact that all accredited programs must comply with and train students to operate under the ACA Code of Ethics (CACREP, 2016), which contains clauses (e.g. section C.5 quoted above) that explicitly condemn discrimination based upon affectional orientation or gender identity.

Though Smith and Okech (2016a) catalogued excerpts from policies at 16 CACREP accredited programs that explicitly forbid expression of and/or advocacy for diverse affectional and gender identities, CACREP’s (2016) response referred to these institutions as those that “*allegedly* ‘disaffirm or disallow diverse sexual orientations’” (p. 1, emphasis added). Some of the policies in question place “homosexual behavior” on lists of student misconduct that also include sexual harassment, sexual abuse, rape, and

incest. Students who even simply promote diverse sexual orientations are threatened with discipline up to and including dismissal. Based upon this information, Smith and Okech (2016a) suggested that these policies and positions can logically lead to LGB students concluding that they are being discriminated against.

While CACREP (2016) expressed their desire to navigate the fine line between protecting the expression of both religious freedom and diverse affectional and gender identities, this did little to put to rest the question of whether CCIs discriminate against these students. Conversely, a close look at the policies in question suggests that there is a culture of discrimination at these institutions, at least at an administrative level, which may negatively impact students. In order to move the discussion forward, counselor educators need to explore the impact this is having by listening to firsthand accounts from students who identify as affectional and gender minorities.

Developmental Models

There are a number of important theoretical perspectives to consider when investigating this phenomenon. While an IPA study such as this one does not seek to test a particular theory, the developmental models introduced below and discussed further in Chapter II provided valuable background for the researcher both in having a sense of what I may expect to hear from participants and in helping to frame the results (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The IPA approach seeks to balance giving voice to the participants while also making sense of or interpreting the data, a process “which is grounded in the accounts, but may use psychological concepts to extend beyond them” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 101).

The study explored participants' spiritual or faith development using Pargament's (2013) spiritual transformation model as a backdrop. As mentioned previously, counselor training programs involve not just the transmission of knowledge and skill development, but should address students' personal growth and health, including, "emotional, physical, mental, and *spiritual well-being* to best meet their professional responsibilities" (ACA, 2014, p. 8, emphasis added). The ACA (2014) Code of Ethics goes on to explicitly state that, "self-growth is an expected component of counselor education" (p. 14). In this light, the spiritual growth and development of any counselor has bearing on their clinical work, but the literature suggests that this developmental process may be particularly challenging for Christians who identify as affectional and gender minorities (e.g. Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Walton, 2006).

Next, D'Augelli's (1994) LGB identity development model and Lev's (2004) transgender emergence model provided frameworks for understanding affectional and gender identity development, and assisted in researcher interpretations of the study findings. Like spirituality, affectional and gender identity development is an important component of the personal growth of a counselor and may also be especially complex and difficult for Christians who identify as affectional and gender minorities. Finally, the study examined how these facets of each participant's identity interacted with one another, and together helped shape their identity as a counselor. The hope was to provide deeper understanding about how these multiple identities intersect in the lives of individuals who identified as affectional and gender minorities while attending CACREP accredited CCIs, and the role that culture at those institutions played in participants' identity development.

Statement of the Problem

The complex connections between the theological and social position of CCIs on affectional orientation and gender identity, the struggle of identity integration for students at those institutions who identify as affectional and gender minorities, and the influence those factors have on the person and counselor identity of those students has yet to be examined in anything but an anecdotal sense to the knowledge of the researcher. The field is indebted to Smith and Okech (2016a; 2016b) and Sells and Hagedorn (2016) for getting the conversation started – unfortunately little additional investigation has taken place, at least in the form of scholarly research. Understanding the experiences of affectional and gender minority students enrolled in CACREP accredited counseling programs housed in CCIs and how those experiences influenced their spiritual, affectional, gender, and counselor identities is critical for the counseling field as it wrestles with how to address this dilemma. No current literature could be located that solicited firsthand accounts of these experiences or sought students’ perspectives on the issue. The emic view of the phenomenon can and should inform the debate as it moves forward.

The existing literature does contain many studies examining spiritual development (e.g. Heywood, 2008; Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002; Mahoney & Pargament, 2004; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998) *or* affectional and gender identity development (e.g. Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Greene & Britton, 2012) with fewer researchers addressing the intersections among those identities (e.g. Barton, 2010; Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Dahl & Galliher, 2012). At the time of writing, no literature was found that addressed that interplay while also considering any subsequent influence on

counselor identity development. This study seeks to fill that gap in the literature, and to do so with the marginalized voices of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities.

Purpose

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore the lived experiences of members of affectional and gender minority communities who currently attend or previously attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs, and the sense they make of how those experiences shaped their development with regard to spirituality, affectional and gender identity, and counselor identity.

Research Question

- Q1 How do affectional and gender minority individuals who attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within conservative Christian institutions describe the impact on their identity?

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study is based upon the concerns voiced by some counselor educators surrounding CACREP's accreditation of CCIs, the charge that they discriminate against students who identify as affectional and gender minorities, and whether the policies in question negatively affect student development. Smith and Okech (2016a; 2016b) and Sells and Hagedorn (2016) formally began a discussion in the public arena that is extremely important for the mental health field. Unfortunately, the field has largely been silent on the topic since. Related debates (both productive and unproductive) have appeared on listservs, but little formal research has been conducted to advance the discussion. Such research is necessary, and perhaps none more so than hearing from the actual students affected by disaffirming and disallowing policies at CCIs. To reiterate and

paraphrase Barton's (2010) contention regarding affectional minorities, they are frequently talked about, but not asked or listened to with regard to their oppression and their oppressors. Unfortunately, this appears to be the case on the issue of discrimination at CCIs.

This study hopes to move the conversation forward by exploring the experiences of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities who have actually attended CCIs and the meaning they make of those experiences. A few years have passed since this debate played out in JCD, yet the field appears to be no further along. CACREP's brief letter appeared to be an attempt to stay neutral on the issue and did not move the field toward any resolution. The current state is unsustainable – in the words of Feldblum (2006), we appear to be “in a zero-sum game: a gain for one side necessarily entails a corresponding loss for the other” (p. 87). The field of counselor education cannot continue to live in this tension and the voices of the students who identify as affectional and gender minorities who have walked through it must be a part of any meaningful solution. As discussed in the statement of the problem above, the emic view elucidated by this study will hopefully inform the systemic changes and cultural shifts that need to be made as the mental health field continues to move toward inclusivity, equality, and social justice.

Assumptions

Considering researcher assumptions and biases is an important part of any qualitative inquiry (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). In an IPA study, where the researcher is involved in interpretation of the data, bracketing preconceived ideas and fore-understanding of the phenomenon in question are especially important (Smith et al.,

2009). By actively pursuing awareness around the impact that the researcher has on the research, one can seek to minimize and mitigate, or at least acknowledge and own that impact. The researcher's assumptions and biases will be briefly attended to here with further detail provided in Chapter III.

I have a deep and personal connection to the phenomena investigated in this study. I was raised in the conservative Christian tradition and earned a master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from one of the CCIs listed by Smith and Okech (2016a) as disaffirming and disallowing of affectional minority identities. I signed the statement of faith and code of conduct at that institution. However, I would not be able to sign those same documents today; my position on diverse affectional orientations and gender expansive identities has shifted from one of discrimination to one of full acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy.

While I disagree with the position of CCIs on diverse affectional and gender identities, much of my personal change in perspective on the topic occurred *during* my time there. Interactions with faculty and peers in both formal and personal settings contributed to that change. Therefore, I look back on that time in my life (and my beliefs on this issue) with both embarrassment and gratefulness. Despite the values at CCIs that I disagree with, the time I spent enrolled in one such program was formative and perhaps I would not have grown or changed in the ways I did without it. Having earned an MA in clinical mental health counseling from a CACREP accredited CCI, and experiencing mixed feelings about that myself, I suspected that participants might share stories and experiences that reflected a similar ambivalence.

With those experiences providing a backdrop, I believe that while CACREP attempted to sidestep this issue, the dilemma faced by the counseling field is not going away. I believe that in the coming years CCIs will need to change their position and policies with regard to affectional and gender minorities, or they will lose CACREP accreditation – and I believe they should. I believe that the policies in question are absolutely discriminatory and that they shape the experience of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities (and all stakeholders in the intuition) in negative ways.

However, knowing these things about myself, I approached this research with an open mind. I expected to hear stories of loneliness, pain, fear, and shame. But I also expected to hear stories of relationship, comfort, encouragement, and validation at the same time. My goal was to accurately and honestly represent the voices of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities who attended CACREP accredited programs housed within CCIs, regardless of whether or not their perspectives aligned or agreed with mine (a formal discussion of bracketing my preconceived ideas and fore-structures is presented in Chapter III). I also endeavor to be transparent in the research process so that the reader can assess whether or not this goal was accomplished.

Delimitations

The study was intentionally limited in a number of ways in order to focus on the phenomenon in question. Only individuals who previously attended or currently attend CACREP accredited programs housed within CCIs were included for consideration as participants. Additionally, the study centers on affectional and gender minority communities – individuals who represent diverse affectional orientations *and/or* gender expansive identities. Although the policies and codes of conduct at CCIs seem to be

focused more on affectional orientation than gender identity and some literature supports approaching those constructs individually (e.g., Moradi et al., 2009; Smith & Okech, 2016a), other contemporary scholars suggest a more holistic and intersectional approach (e.g., Chan et al., 2018; Kuper et al., 2018).

Definitions of Key Terms

Conservative Christian Institution (CCI)

In this study the phrase “conservative Christian institution” or “CCI” represents institutions of higher learning that are founded on and/or operate under the guidance of conservative Christian values. By nature of the issues being studied, only CCIs that have CACREP accredited counseling programs (or did at the time a participant attended the institution) are considered for inclusion in the research.

Affectional and Gender Minority

For the purposes of this study, phrases such as “affectional and gender minority” and “diverse affectional and gender identities” will be used when referencing diverse affectional orientations and gender expansive individuals, terminology which is consistent with current literature and recommendations from relevant competency standards in the field (e.g., Chan et al., 2018; Goodrich et al., 2017; Griffith et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2013; Scroggs, Miller, & Stanfield, 2018). Affectional orientation was chosen over “sexual orientation” as it better represents the spectrum “of sexual, relational, affectional, and romantic attraction” (Griffith et al., 2017, p. 212).

The decision not to use an acronym (e.g., LGBTGEQ+) was made in order to be as inclusive as possible and due to the fact that acronyms representing these communities often change, meaning that over time any acronym used in this study may leave certain

groups out. Additionally, some consider acronyms and labels to be confining and overly simplistic (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 2012). That being said, at times other terms and acronyms are used in this document, such as when referring to studies that defined their population differently or when quoting a participant. In those cases, the language used in this study mirrors the source being cited (e.g. queer, LGBT, LGBTGEQ+, gender nonconforming, etc.).

Religion/Faith

In this study “faith” or “religion” will most often be used in conjunction with organized or institutionalized belief systems that align with a particular denomination, tradition, or set of doctrinal positions. This distinction is important as portions of the study include participants describing struggle with and even abandonment of a particular faith or religion, but this does not necessarily mean that they abandoned spirituality or a sense of the sacred in their lives. There is much debate about the differences between religion, faith, and spirituality; some contend that they are distinctly different constructs, while others argue that such separation is destructive (Cashwell & Young, 2011; Pargament, 2007). A full treatment of that discussion is beyond the scope of this study and the reader is pointed to sources such as Cashwell and Young (2011) and Pargament (2007).

Spirituality

In general, “spirituality” will be used to refer to an individual’s connection to the divine or “search for the sacred” (Pargament, 2007, p. 32) and not used as a synonym for faith or religion per the above definition.

Organization of the Study

Following this introduction to the study, Chapter II will provide a more thorough treatment of the background, context, and rationale for the research. Chapter three lays out the study methods, including justification of the research genre, theoretical lens, and methodological framework. The methods section also includes a detailed description of the study procedures such as considerations regarding sample, data collection, and data analysis. Chapters four and five present, respectively, the results of the study and a discussion of those results.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will expand upon information provided in the previous one regarding the history of oppression and discrimination toward affectional and gender minority communities, and the current climate in both the broader context of American culture and within conservative Christianity. Following this is a detailed look at affectional and gender minority considerations in the mental health field, including a treatment of relevant ethical codes and professional standards. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a section discussing relevant developmental theories with respect to affectional, gender, and spiritual identity, how those interact with one another, and implications for counselor identity development.

Historical Context

History of Discrimination in American Culture

Before exploring the current state of this issue, a brief look back at the historical treatment of affectional and gender minority communities in the United States will help provide context. There is a long history of discrimination and oppression toward affectional minorities in American culture, and it has remained quite prevalent in recent decades. In a 1984 survey conducted by the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 94% of the 2,074 gay or lesbian individuals sampled reported some type of victimization, with 92% experiencing victimization “more than once” or “many times” (Berrill, 1990, p.

275). And this history of discrimination and oppression is not limited to adults; in a study of 194 LGB youth between the ages of 15 and 21, Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) found that 83% had experienced some form of victimization ranging from verbal abuse to physical violence. Studies have also found that gender expansive individuals not only experience violence at a high rate, but also starting at a young age (Stotzer, 2009).

Physical violence may be a more extreme, and thankfully less pervasive form of prejudice experienced by affectional and gender minority communities, but subtler forms of discrimination have historically been much more widely encountered. After a meta-analysis of research regarding anti-gay violence, Berrill (1990) concluded that “the quantitative and qualitative data gathered thus far are a frightening testament to the human cost of anti-gay bigotry” (p. 291). Berrill’s (1990) analysis also found that across three surveys of anti-gay violence and harassment on college campuses (Yale, Rutgers, and Penn State), 65% of respondents had experience verbal assault, 52% feared for their safety, and 91% anticipated future victimization.

These studies and others like them confirm that in recent U.S. history, “Although the academic environment is ideally one in which diversity and pluralism are cherished values, anti-gay prejudice and violence are serious problems at many colleges and universities” (Berrill, 1990, p. 284). This is especially true at faith-based institutions of higher learning, where the culture of discrimination and fear experienced by students who identify as affectional and gender minorities appears to have a dramatic impact on their mental health (e.g., Craig, Austin, Rashidi, & Adams, 2017; Cunningham, 2017; Wolff & Himes, 2010). Affectional and gender minority students at faith-based colleges and universities were found to have statistically significantly higher levels of depression,

family distress, and social anxiety than their affectional and gender minority peers in the general college and university population (Cunningham, 2017). These findings are in agreement with Barton's (2010) conclusion that, "...negative social attitudes about homosexuality caused a range of harmful consequences in their lives including the fear of going to hell, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness" (p. 466)

History of Discrimination in the Christian Community

Cunningham's (2017) study of faith-based college campuses provides a segway into a specific discussion of the traditional Christian view of affectional and gender minority communities. Unfortunately, discrimination within the Christian church and in connection with conservative Christian belief has been as aggressive and disenfranchising, if not more so than in the broader U.S. culture. According to Herek (2004), "As the Christian Right increasingly demonized gay people in the 1990s, being a "born-again" Christian became, for many Americans who embraced it, an identity that carried with it a deep antipathy toward homosexuals" (p. 13). This opposition was not simply built upon Christians' moral or ethical position, but involved the spread of fear-based misinformation and destructive stereotypes. The Christian community played a significant role in propagating the myth that affectional and gender minorities "were social deviants responsible for the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic," and instilling fear by suggesting a connection between same-sex attraction and pedophilia, a claim that "has been heavily refuted by the American Psychiatric Association" (Wolff & Himes, 2010, pp. 442-443).

Examples like these are all too common. Christian organizations contributed to passage of a federal law known as the Helm's Amendment, which banned federal tax

dollars from being used for AIDS prevention and outreach efforts in schools (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Those organizations also fought for Proposition 64 to be placed on the 1986 state ballot in California; had the law passed, it “would have allowed the state to quarantine gay men with HIV, further perpetuating beliefs that GLBT persons were a threat to society” (Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 442). Herek (2004) describes this as both an individual and a systemic or cultural problem, explaining that, “a complete understanding of antigay hostility requires analysis of its roots in culture and social interactions, as well as in individual thought processes” (p. 11). Both are relevant for the current study as the culture at CCIs both shapes and is shaped by individuals. There is interplay between CCIs’ position on affectional and gender minorities, the personal beliefs of faculty, staff, and students, and the influence of the overall cultural forces in this country.

Foundation for the Conservative Christian Position

In order to more fully understand the history of discrimination and oppression toward affectional and gender minorities within the Christian tradition, it is also important to explore what the conservative Christian position is based upon. Many Christians consider the Bible, made up of the Old Testament and the New Testament, to be the final authority on all matters (Drane, 2011; Verlarde, 2009). They believe it to be God speaking to them through the use of human authors; a sacred book that is “God-breathed” (Cockroft, 2018; 2 Timothy 3:16).

While certain denominations use slightly different versions or translations of the Bible (some of which contain different passages, sections, or even entire “books”), discussion of Biblical text in this study will refer to the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise stated as this is one of the most widely used translations, especially

among conservative Christians (Silliman, 2015). The NIV is a collection of 66 books, with 39 in the Old Testament (OT) and 27 in the New Testament (NT). Out of over 31,000 verses in the Bible, only a handful appear to directly address same-sex relationships: 4 in the OT and 3 in the NT (Shore, 2013). With regard to the OT passages, many modern Christians do not feel bound by the rules and “laws” found there (Hays, 2001). A common understanding is that Jesus instituted a “new law” built on love, faith, and compassion; he did away with the legalism of the old law in favor of a new ethic based upon the heart and spirit of the old law, rather than the exact letter of the law (Beale & Bibza, 1986; Hays, 2001). Many biblical passages affirm this interpretation, perhaps none more explicitly than Hebrews 7:18-19 and 8:13, which say respectively, “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” and “By calling this covenant “new,” [God] has made the first one obsolete.”

For this reason, conservative Christian positions on affectional minorities tend to be built around the three NT references, often referred to by affectional and gender minority communities and their allies as the “clobber passages” (Shore, 2013, p. 3).

These three passages, all written by the Apostle Paul (who wrote about half of the NT) are as follows:

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27)

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. (1 Timothy 1:9-10)

The conservative Christian position – and the policies at CCIs – is largely built upon the foundation laid by these excerpts. A surface level reading of these verses as translated in the NIV may seem to present a fairly straightforward case. However, interpretation of these verses is contested, and the counter arguments are addressed later in this chapter.

To be fair, other arguments for the conservative position have been made. Some have built a case from the fact that the Bible doesn't explicitly endorse or condone same-sex relationship anywhere, arguing that this reveals God's stance on the topic (Stanton, 2014). Other proponents have argued that God's plan for affectional and gender identity is clear based upon the creation story in which the first humans are a male and a female (Stanton, 2014). A full treatment of these alternative arguments is beyond the scope of this discussion and what the Bible explicitly says, rather than what it does not or what it alludes to, remains the basis of the argument for most conservative Christians. For this reason, the current study will focus on the "clobber passages" in subsequent discussion of this issue with the progressive viewpoints presented later in the chapter.

With these texts and interpretations as a backdrop, Christians have traditionally concluded that any romantic or sexual relationship outside of heterosexual marriage is in contradiction to God's plan for humanity and should be treated as such. This view is still widely held and forms the foundation for the policies in question at CCIs, though there is growing movement within the Christian community toward a more inclusive, accepting, and even allied or advocating position.

Current Culture and Climate

Current Context in American Culture

Widening back out to the broader U.S. landscape, while things have improved in certain arenas and the tide may be shifting toward a more equitable position, this remains a divisive issue. Support for affectional and gender minority communities has grown in recent years, but animosity and discrimination are still prevalent, especially in the current political climate (Tillery, 2018). Sexual minorities experience large scale attacks, like the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, but also face higher rates of other violent crime and harassment than their heterosexual peers (Dashow, 2017). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2010) conducted a survey and found that 44% of lesbian women and 61% of bisexual women “experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner,” compared with 35% of heterosexual women (para. 3). Results also showed that while 17% of heterosexual women have been raped in their lifetime, the rate was nearly triple that (46%) for bisexual women (CDC, 2010). A more recent survey of college students found that compared to their heterosexual peers, “sexual minority students were about four times more likely to report sexual assault, two times more likely to report sexual harassment and physical abuse, and about 1.5 times more likely to report psychological abuse” (Beaulieu, Dunton, Williams, & Porter, 2017, p. 1728).

In addition to violence and harassment, recent high-profile court cases and legislation highlight the ongoing discrimination faced by members of affectional and gender minority communities on a daily basis. One example is the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2017), which

involved a Christian baker in Colorado who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple's marriage ceremony. The baker claimed that making the cake would go against his religious beliefs, namely that marriage should only be between a man and a woman, while the couple argued that his actions constituted discrimination. The case worked its way up through the legal system and ultimately the Supreme Court sided with the baker, though the ruling was largely based upon the court's determination that "the Colorado Civil Rights Commission showed hostility toward the baker based on his religious beliefs," leaving the major constitutional issues in the case unsettled (de Vogue, 2018, para. 2). The narrow ruling and failure to set any precedent regarding the tension between religious freedom and discrimination against affectional and gender minorities has already led to new legal battles. Most notably, another lawsuit was filed involving the same bakery (Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Elenis, 2018) stemming from the owner's refusal to bake a cake commemorating a woman's seven-year anniversary of coming out as transgender.

In 2015 the Supreme Court decided that same-sex marriage was a constitutional right, making it legal in all 50 states (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015). While this marked a victory for affectional and gender minority communities, it also highlights the fact that basic rights and protections continue to be denied to this population in our current culture. It was only in 2003 that the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Texas law banning consensual sex between two adults of the same sex (Lawrence v. Texas, 2003). Also, new legal and legislative challenges are brought against affectional and gender minority communities every year. The Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ civil rights

organization, reported that in 2017 over 100 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced across 29 states (Miller, 2017).

Cultural Implications for the Counseling Field

Some of the recent legislation directly impacted the counseling field, such as laws in Mississippi and Tennessee that allow mental health counselors to refuse service or refer affectional and gender minority clients if the therapist believes that providing care would contradict their sincerely held religious beliefs (Mississippi Protecting Freedom of Conscience from Government Discrimination Act, 2016; TN HB 1840, 2016). In other instances, it is not the current laws on the books, but a lack of legislative protection putting individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities at risk.

As mentioned in the introduction, conversion therapy is still legal in 41 states and practiced by some licensed mental health providers, despite being condemned and opposed by nearly all major health organizations (Lawson, 2018; McGeorge, Carlson, & Maier, 2017; Moitozo, 2018). A recent report by the UCLA School of Law estimated that approximately 700,000 individuals have undergone conversion therapy, with half of those receiving treatment as adolescents (Mallory, Brown, & Conron, 2018). Just a sample of the organizations speaking out against the practice, especially regarding minors, includes:

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (Adelson, 2012)
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists (2015)
- American College of Physicians (Daniel & Butkus, 2015)
- American Counseling Association (2013)
- American Psychiatric Association (2000)
- American Psychological Association (2009)
- American School Counselor Association (2016)
- National Association of Social Workers (2015)
- Pan American Health Organization (2012)
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2015)

This type of “treatment” not only lacks sufficient empirical evidence of its efficacy, but instead may even cause harm (American Psychological Association, 2009; Sandley, 2014). The overwhelming disapproval from leading health organizations is encouraging, but the fact that the practice continues across the country reveals widespread bias toward and lack of education around affectional and gender minority communities, even within the counseling field.

Current Culture at Conservative Christian Institutions

Unfortunately, the stigma and discrimination experienced by affectional and gender minority communities is not simply the result of the prejudice of certain individuals or isolated incidents; these attitudes are present on a systemic level in institutions of higher education across this country. As discussed earlier, this is a problem that exists on both the individual *and* system level. This may be true in more subtle ways in other institutions, but it is explicit and defended at CCIs. As evidence of the pervasiveness of this issue in higher education, Barton’s (2010) survey of post-secondary institutions concluded that, “Over 200 colleges and universities have policies prohibiting homosexuality or homosexual behavior. In the student handbooks of these institutions, homosexuality is framed as sexual misconduct, and identifying as homosexual or engaging in homosexual acts, grounds for expulsion” (Barton, 2010, p. 475). The impact of these policies can be devastating. After analysis of narratives from 271 LGBTQ former and current students at religious colleges and universities, Craig et al. (2017) concluded that the structure and institutional policies at those institutions create a “culture of fear” for LGBTQ students which results in isolation, shame, suffering, and increased suicidal ideation and attempts (p. 7). The study reported that “Several students considered their

suicidality and poor mental health as punishment for their inability to repress their LGBTQ identity” (p. 13).

Not only do the policies and culture at CCIIs negatively impact affectional and gender minority students, but research raises concerns regarding their impact on all students’ ability to offer competent and ethical treatment to *clients* who identify as affectional and gender minorities. After controlling for level of education, political conservatism, and interpersonal contact with LGB individuals, Bidell (2014) found that more religiously conservative counselors had “significantly lower levels of LGB-affirmative counselor competence” (p. 175). Farmer (2017) found similar results in a study of 453 counselors, counselor educators, and counseling students. In a study investigating how religious identity is related to multicultural competence and homophobia, Balkin, Schlosser, and Levitt (2009) concluded that “[a] counselor’s religious values could influence unconditional positive regard or the ability to be genuine with a client” (p. 425).

These conclusions seem to undercut the idea that the administration and faculty at CCIIs’ can uphold their biased, discriminatory policies, but still train counselors to be competent in their work with affectional and gender minority clients. And it is not just an issue of counselor competence; research has shown that the more rigid and authoritarian a counselor is in their religious beliefs, the more prejudiced they are toward LGB individuals (Balkin et al., 2009). Findings like these “strongly suggest that...counselors are influenced by their conservative religious beliefs regarding attitudes and *actions* toward LGB individuals and social issues” (Bidell, 2014, p. 175, emphasis added). One might expect this conclusion with respect to “attitudes,” but the “actions” piece is even

more concerning. It suggests that the conservative religious beliefs of counseling students at CCIs, reinforced by the policies and culture at the institution, may actually translate into biased *behavior* as students and as professional counselors entering the field. Wolff and Himes (2010) contend that such policies “are harmful and unethical, and they foster environments of intolerance toward an incredibly vulnerable group” (p. 454). This biased and intolerant environment likely has implications for the identity development of counselors-in-training at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities, something that this study specifically explored.

Standards and Ethical Codes in the Counseling Field

In addition to concerns regarding the negative influence on affectional and gender minority students and the impact on counselor competence for all students, some of the policies and positions endorsed within CCIs appear to be in direct violation of numerous codes, guidelines, and competencies put forth by the counseling field. Just within the 2016 CACREP (2015) Standards and the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics there over ten guidelines that pertain to this topic (see Appendix E for full list). Some of the most condemning for CCIs include CACREP (2015) standards 1.K. and 1.Q., which respectively state that “The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community” and “The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to recruit, employ, and retain a diverse faculty to create and support an inclusive learning community” (p. 6). These guidelines are echoed in the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics sections F.11.a, b, and c. A casual reading of these standards by anyone in the mental health field might lead them to assume that affectional and gender minority status

would be included in the intended diversity required here. However, given the debate on this topic, further explanation is needed.

While CACREP maintained in their letter published in JCD that “the 2016 CACREP Standards do not define diversity” (2016, pp. 1-2), they do define “multicultural” as “the *diversity* of racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage; socioeconomic status; age; *gender*; *sexual orientation*; and religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as physical, emotional, and mental abilities” (2015, p. 42, emphasis added). In common use the words “multicultural” and “diverse” are often seen as synonymous. On a more formal level, Merriam-Webster defines multicultural as “of, relating to, reflecting, or adapted to *diverse* cultures” (2018, emphasis added). The ACA (2014) Code of Ethics even frequently uses the phrase “multicultural/diversity,” lumping both terms together. Most notably, in CACREP’s (2016) response to the articles published in JCD, they reiterated their expectation that all programs will “provide the training necessary to prepare students to serve *multicultural* populations” (p. 2, emphasis added). Given the context and occasion of the letter, the use of this word would seem to include affectional orientation and gender identity.

If, then, the type of “diversity” that CACREP requires *does* encompass affectional orientation and gender identity – which it appears to, based upon their own definitions and usage, and common use of the term in the field – then CCIs are in clear violation of both standard 1.K and 1.Q. This researcher cannot speculate as to why CACREP has failed to take a firm position on this other than to reiterate their own desire to maintain “[t]he delicate tension between institutional rights to serve specific cultural groups and program responsibilities to train ethical, competent professionals” (CACREP, 2016, p. 2).

The notion that CACREP intends to formally make the distinction that “diverse” does not include affectional orientation or gender identity, while “multicultural” does, and that certain standards involve consideration of only one and not the other feels convoluted at best.

The ACA (2014) Code of Ethics also includes standards that CCIs are currently not meeting. Perhaps the most explicit is section C.5. which states:

Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination against prospective or current clients, students, employees, supervisees, or research participants based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital/ partnership status, language preference, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or any basis proscribed by law. (p. 9)

Given the clear language in this standard and the current state of CACREP accreditation, counselors in the field are held to this requirement, but apparently training programs are not.

The ACA has also adopted competencies and standards that are specific to affectional and gender minority communities. Developed by a taskforce of members of the Society of Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities (SAIGE; formerly ALGBTIC), the LGBQQIA (Harper et al., 2013) and transgender (Burnes et al., 2010) competencies cover much ground that is relevant to the current discussion; the reader is directed to those documents for further review, but the following LGBQQIA competencies are particularly poignant (and are mirrored in the transgender competencies):

E.11. Advocate with and for LGBQQ on various ecological levels of community systems (e.g., micro, meso, and macro; Toporek et al., 2009) to provide affirming, accepting, and supportive counseling services (e.g., educating the community and promoting changes in institutional policies and/or laws as the mental health of LGBQQ is often affected by stigma and oppression). (Harper et al., 2013, p. 17)

F.8. Advocate for and with LGBQQ and support the empowerment of LGBQQ to advocate on their own behalf to promote inclusive policies and practices in the workplace as they are applicable on a microlevel (e.g., training on LGBQQ in the workplace), mesolevel (in local communities), and macrolevels (e.g., in the larger communities with policies, legislations, and institutional reform). (Harper et al., 2013, p. 18)

With ACA formally adopting these competencies, it is again difficult to see how CCIs can be deemed to meet the standards of the field.

This call to advocate on behalf of individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities is perhaps the most glaring discrepancy between the practice at CCIs and the professional codes that regulate the counseling field. There is a clear expectation of mental health practitioners and educators to pursue social justice on behalf of individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities, yet CCIs not only fail to advocate for or affirm this population, they embody precisely the kind of institutional policies that these standards are calling counselors to fight against. The CACREP (2015) standards require that students receive training regarding “advocacy processes needed to address *institutional* and social *barriers* that impede access, equity, and success for clients” (p. 9, emphasis added). It seems inconsistent and indefensible that the training programs themselves do not have to follow this same expectation, and can instead *create* such institutional barriers through disaffirming and disallowing policies. CCIs are not just out of compliance, but are in dramatic opposition to the codes and guidelines of the counseling field.

Past and present treatment of affectional and gender minorities in the U.S. on individual, institutional, and cultural-wide levels places such students at CCIs in a precarious position. The history of discrimination and oppression has been particularly poignant in the conservative Christian community, directly impacting the counseling field

from policies at training programs to current legislation in many states. While an understanding of the background and history surrounding these issues is important for the current study, the research must also be framed by relevant theoretical models. The following section includes a review of developmental perspectives pertaining to spiritual, affectional, gender, and counselor identity along with explicit connections to the study.

Developmental Models

Though an IPA study does not endeavor to test or evaluate psychological theories or models, such frameworks can be used to provide background understanding for the researcher and aid in interpretation of results (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, selected developmental models provided the researcher with context for what participants may share, guidance in the creation of the interview schedule, and also offered possible lenses through which the data could be interpreted. These models, discussed in detail below, deal with spiritual development, affectional and gender identity development, and counselor identity development. It also merits mention that although the following models are useful, treating different aspects of identity as separate constructs is difficult because of the ways they develop “in tandem;” these disparate models and any insight they provide must be held in tension with a holistic view of “intersecting and mutually linked identities as opposed to mutually exclusive, flattened identity categories” (Chan et al., 2018, p. 63).

Spiritual Development Model

Scholars have put forth many models and frameworks describing spiritual growth and faith development (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Some of the more traditional and widely known have become the most criticized as understanding around development has

evolved. For example, stage models, which tend to assume a structured, linear progression, such as Fowler's (1981) stages of faith, have garnered criticism for their rigidity, hierarchical design, irreversible progression, and the lack of focus on process (e.g. Coyle, 2011; Day, 2001; Heywood, 2008). However, there are alternatives such as Pargament's (2006) spiritual transformation model. After decades of research surrounding religion and spirituality, Pargament (2013) put forth a model that is fluid, cyclical, can involve both growth and decline, attends to socio-cultural context, specifically addresses spiritual struggle and upheaval, and allows space for individuals who ultimately radically transform their spiritual approach to life or even abandon it completely.

As Pargament (2013) puts it, "Spirituality does not refer to a static set of beliefs or practices around the sacred. It is instead a searching process that can shift and change over the lifespan" (p. 274). The model describes the basic spiritual development process as consisting of three activities: "discovery of the sacred, efforts to conserve or sustain a relationship with what is perceived as sacred and, when necessary, transform this relationship" (Pargament, 2013, p. 274). This process involves a person responding to some identifiable precursor by undertaking a purposeful, gradual alteration in the meaning or role of the sacred in one's life, resulting in either regressive or progressive change (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Figure 1 below contains a visual representation of the model for more detail.

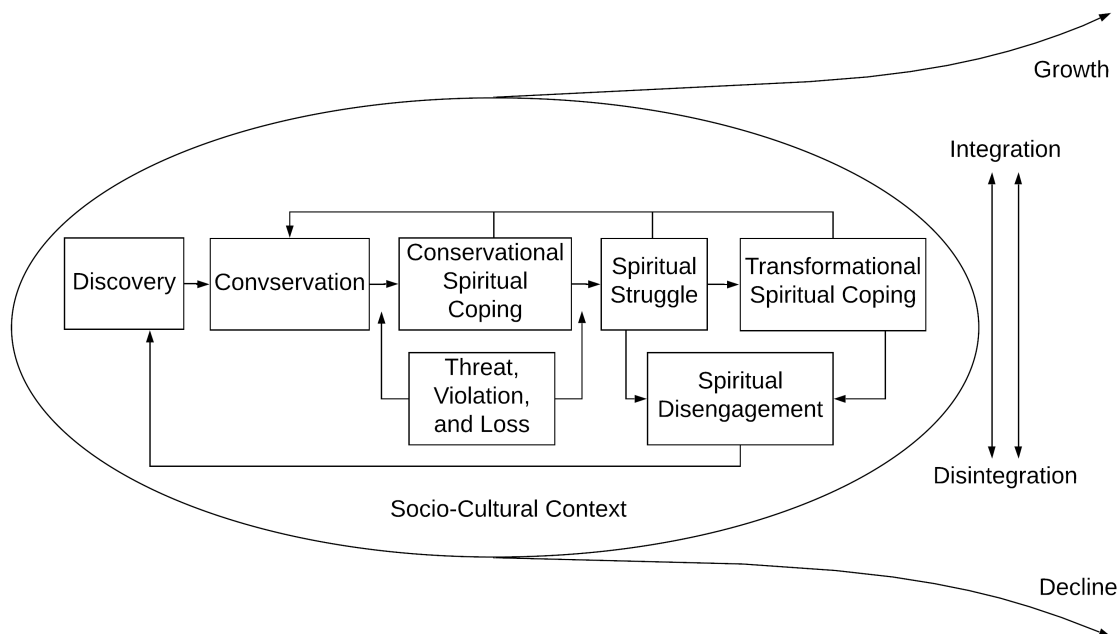


Figure 1. Spiritual Transformation Model. Adapted from Pargament (2013, p. 275).

Pargament’s approach offers many benefits, including its non-hierarchical perspective and cyclical understanding of spiritual development which accounts for the fact that the spiritual journey often involves significant reevaluation and restructuring of one’s belief system (Pargament, 2007). This model allows for a wide range of outcomes in the spiritual development process as well, including disengagement or a rejection of a particular spiritual practice or path, which proved relevant to participants in this study (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Sherry et al., 2010; Walton, 2006). There is also an appreciation for the fact that not all spiritual experiences are beneficial or growth oriented. As Pargament (2007) puts it, “For many people, though, struggles represent a major turning point in life, a spiritual fork in the road that can lead to renewal, growth, and positive transformation in one direction, or despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness in the other” which may ultimately “signal a temporary or lasting disengagement from the

sacred quest” (p. 115). Pargament’s model is well suited for use in this study as literature regarding the integration of affectional and gender minority identity and Christian faith suggests that the majority of participants will have experienced spiritual tension and conflict, and may have disengaged from their faith in the process (e.g. Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Sherry et al., 2010; Walton, 2006).

Affectional and Gender Identity Development Models

As with spirituality and faith development, there are a wide range of models or lenses available through which one can view affectional and gender identity development. Stage models in this arena have drawn similar criticism to what was previously presented with regard to spiritual development, including a rejection of their rigid, hierarchical structure and assumption of a universal experience that ignores individual and contextual differences (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Though these models present clearly defined stages, “the coming-out process... is generally more fluid, with stops, starts, and backtracking” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 26). The stage models are criticized for not only being too rigid, but also too heavily reliant on small samples sizes of adult gay men reflecting back on earlier experiences, resulting in models that fail to appreciate differences in the development processes for individuals who identify outside of those narrow categories (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

The prevalence of these models in the literature speaks to the fact that there is some truth to them, but each one struggles to accurately represent such a complex process for a wide range individuals (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Instead, this study will utilize both D’Augelli’s (1994) LGB identity development model and Lev’s (2004) transgender emergence model, both of which view development as a non-linear, lifelong process that

takes into account “the complex factors influencing the development of people in context over historical time,” including “the person’s social network, neighborhood and community, institutional settings, and culture” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 317). The interactional and contextual nature of these models lends itself well to both an IPA study design and the exploration of an oppressed group.

D’Augelli’s (1994) LGB identity development model. After surveying the affectional identity models in the literature, Bilodeau and Renn (2005) concluded that although none of the current models available “can fully address the intersections and complexities of non-heterosexual identity, D’Augelli (1994) offered a ‘life span’ model of sexual orientation development that takes social contexts into account in ways that the early stage models did not” (p. 28). They went on to suggest that “D’Augelli’s model has the potential to represent a wider range of experiences than the theories relating to specific racial, ethnic, or gender groups,” and that it “addresses issues often ignored in other models” (p. 28). Perhaps most important for the current study, D’Augelli (1994) surmised that “for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, a critical piece – sexual identity – has resisted the heterosexist imperative and remains discordant, *rendering other identity dimensions unstable*” (p. 316, emphasis added).

Regardless of D’Augelli’s original intent, I do not mean to suggest here that individuals who identify as affectional minorities are “unstable,” but I do agree with the notion that struggle in one facet of identity development can be disruptive or further complicate development in other areas. I am also not suggesting that this struggle or dissonance is inherent in the formation of diverse affectional or gender identities – for many individuals, such dissonance is a result of cultural expectations, stigma, and

discrimination, all of which can be magnified in a conservative Christian setting. Often these individuals have been taught since they were young that anything outside of a heterosexual, cisgender existence is sinful, “absorbing a destructive mythology before they appreciate that it is meant for them” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 315). This concept is critical as the affectional identity development of participants in this study was negatively impacted by the culture at CCIs, contributing to the instability of other dimensions of their identity, including their counselor identity.

In understanding D’Augelli’s (1994) model, there are some important underlying assumptions to consider. First D’Augelli (1994) asserted that “Individuals develop and change over the entire course of their life span...The development of sexual orientation is a lifelong process” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 319-320). The model also assumes a certain degree of developmental plasticity, or the idea that “human functioning is highly responsive to environmental circumstances and to changes induced by physical and other biological factors” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 320). Related to or perhaps flowing from this plasticity is the idea that each individual’s affectional identity development is unique; while there may be similarities or patterns, every person’s development represents a distinct journey (D’Augelli, 1994). D’Augelli (1994) argues that more deterministic models or views of behavior, such as the stage models mentioned above, “underestimate the impact that individuals have on their own development...Individuals and their families are not passive respondents to social circumstances; behavior development also results from conscious choice and directed action,” but this is still shaped by culture and context. (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 322)

The D'Augelli (1994) model posits six identity processes, which are non-linear and “operate more or less independently” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 29). Those six processes include 1) exiting heterosexual identity, 2) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual (LGB) identity status, 3) developing an LGB social identity, 4) becoming an LGB offspring, 5) developing an LGB intimacy status, and 6) entering an LGB community (D'Augelli, 1994). Existing heterosexual identity involves recognizing one's affectional orientation as non-heterosexual and requires that the individual understand and label the nature of their attractions (D'Augelli, 1994). It also means “coming out” or telling others about one's non-heterosexual identity (D'Augelli, 1994). Though this begins with the first person the LGB individual tells, coming out is a continual process necessitating the development of a method for asserting affectional minority status because of “the pervasiveness of heterosexist assumptions” (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 325).

Developing a personal LGB identity status is a complex process of cultivating “a sense of personal socioaffectional stability,” which may include a series of revisions as the individual learns how to live out their affectional orientation, especially in social and relational contexts (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 325). Another important component of this step is recognizing internalized myths regarding non-heterosexuality (D'Augelli, 1994). These may include common stereotypes as well as more subtle assumptions such as the idea that affectional minorities do not have committed, long-term relationships or that they will be rejected by their families (D'Augelli, 1994). These views must be challenged and revised as the individual has contact with people who serve as exceptions to those myths (e.g. interacting with individuals in long-term non-heterosexual relationships, talking with parents who fully accept their LGB children, etc.) (D'Augelli, 1994).

Another facet of diverse affectional identity development is “creating a large and varied set of people who know of the person’s sexual orientation and are available to provide social support,” something that D’Augelli (1994) refers to as developing an LGB social identity (p. 326). It is important for the LGB person to know that this affirmative community can change over time (D’Augelli, 1994). The fourth process, becoming an LGB offspring, involves repairing any ruptures that occurred within the family of origin due to the individual’s disclosure of their affectional orientation (D’Augelli, 1994). D’Augelli (1994) suggests that although these “relationships are often temporarily disrupted,” there is also often “a return to the predisclosure state, though possibly only after the passage of some time” (p. 326). This may seem like an overly optimistic assessment, but research supports the idea that many families move through a grieving process that ultimately ends in a place of acceptance (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; LaSala, 2000).

Developing an LGB intimacy status can be problematic given the fact that the current culture reinforces heterosexism (D’Augelli, 1994). As D’Augelli (1994) puts it, “[t]he lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, but it also forces the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms, which should be more personally adaptive” (p. 327). The final set of identity processes that D’Augelli (1994) proposes is entering an LGB community, which can involve social and political action born out of a deepening understanding of heterosexism, barriers to development, and one’s own history of oppression (D’Augelli, 1994). It is also important to note that this step may never occur

for LGB individuals who see their affectional orientation as strictly a private matter (D'Augelli, 1994).

Individuals may move through these six identity processes at different rates as they are shaped by specific culture and contextual influences, and flow out of the interaction between three sets of factors that D'Augelli (1994) referred to as personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. Figure 2 on the following page provides a visual representation of the model along with brief description of the three sets of factors.

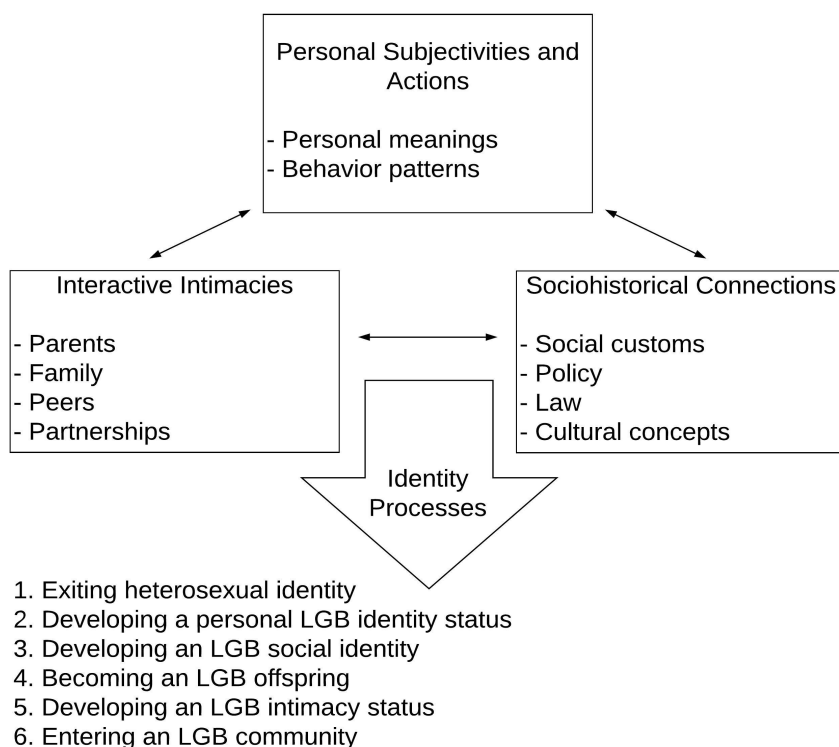


Figure 2. LGB Identity Development Model. Adapted from D'Augelli (1994, p. 319).

Lev's (2004) transgender emergence model. While more research is needed regarding gender expansive identity development, relatively recent developments in the field have generated some models and frameworks (e.g., Devor, 2004; Hiestand & Levitt,

2005; Lev, 2004; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). These models, and specifically Lev's (2004) transgender emergence model in this case, can provide helpful background and context for this study. Though technically a stage model, the transgender emergence model appreciates the "complex interaction of development and interpersonal transactions," and sees gender identity development as socially constructed and fluid (Lev, 2006, p. 4). Lev (2004, 2006) also explains that individuals do not necessarily move through the stages in a linear fashion, with gender identity development being impacted by "other identity issues," including the influence of power and systems (2006, p. 4) – both of which are relevant in the current study.

It is also worth mentioning here that some current thought on the topic has pushed back against the very idea that gender is an aspect of one's identity or self, such as Butler's (2010) contention that gender identity is a performance. Butler (2010) "[calls] into question whether there is a stable gender in place and intact prior to the expressions and activities that we understand as gendered," and posits that, "the presumption that gender is a metaphysical substance that precedes its expression is critically upended by the performative theory of gender" (p. 147). The developmental models presented here can provide helpful context for the study, but the researcher also acknowledges trends in field that are challenging the very foundations of this discussion.

The transgender emergence model includes six stages. The first – awareness – often involves great distress as the gender expansive individual begins to feel as though they do not fit in to traditional gender identities or roles (Lev, 2006). The second stage of seeking information and reaching out, the individual seeks people and resources to provide education and support of their emerging identity (Lev, 2006). Stage three,

disclosure to significant others, addresses the idea that “gender variant experience is not simply an internal psychological process that needs to be navigated...but it is also a relational and systemic dynamic,” something which may be especially challenging for students at CCIs who identify as gender minorities given the culture at those institutions (Lev, 2006, p. 12).

The fourth and fifth stages of “exploration - identity and self-labeling” and “exploration – transition issues/possible body modification” involve an individual finding new ways of articulating and expressing their gender identity, and surveying options for presentation, including body modification (Lev, 2006, p. 4). Integration – acceptance and post-transition issues is the final stage and is marked by the individual being able “to integrate their gender identity into their lives in productive and meaningful ways” (Lev, 2006, p. 12). Through all of these stages, Lev (2004, 2006) emphasizes the complexity of the process and the need to take into account the web of systems that each individual operates within; this is both a personal development and interpersonal, relational endeavor.

Many of the processes outlined by these models may be disrupted if the individual who identifies as an affectional and gender minority is in a conservative Christian environment, such as attending a graduate level counseling program at a CCI. In addition to the already elevated levels of stigma, shame, and discrimination faced by individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities in society at large (Beaulieu et al., 2017; CDC, 2010; Dashow, 2017; Tillery, 2018), at CCIs these students may be especially vulnerable to discrimination, rejection by peer groups and families, and formal

punishment or dismissal from their counseling program (Balkin et al., 2009; Barton, 2010; Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Bidell, 2014; Smith & Okech, 2016a).

Family rejection is a particularly significant concern as studies have found that “twenty-six percent of LGBT+ youth who come out to their families are kicked out of their homes because parents cannot reconcile their religious beliefs with their child’s sexual orientation” and nearly one third “suffer physical violence from a family member after coming out” (VanderWaal, Sedlacek, & Lane, 2017, p. 73). There is also evidence to suggest that parents experience their offspring’s coming out as a profound loss, and perhaps may even face their own discrimination and rejection (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; LaSala, 2000). This may be another consideration that complicates the coming out process for individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities and grew up in conservative Christian families.

These contextual factors provide a strong rationale for the use of D’Augelli’s (1994) model in the current study; as the author explains, “[l]esbian and gay identity processes must be described using a conceptual model that explicates the complex factors influencing the development of people in context over historical time,” which includes, “simultaneous descriptions of the person’s social network, neighborhood and community, *institutional settings*, and culture” (pp. 317-8, emphasis added). In an article regarding LGBT students on college campuses, Poynter and Washington (2005) stated that “[i]t may be best to view the development of students with multiple identities not as a linear series of stages, but as complex processes of simultaneous tasks and challenges” (p. 42). This statement supports the use of both D’Augelli’s (1994) and Lev’s (2004) models in

this study, with their attention to context and the developmental processes taking place with respect to many different aspects of the individual's life.

Integration of Spiritual Identity with Affectional and Gender Minority Identities

For Christians who identify as affectional and gender minorities, the integration of different aspects of identity can be a very complicated and difficult process (Barton, 2010; Beagan & Hattie, 2015). As Barton (2010) concluded, many LGBTQ individuals who were raised in Christian homes “[engage] in a deep and prolonged struggle to reconcile their sexual identity with their religious upbringing” (p. 478). Wieferich (2005) echoes this sentiment in her contention that “a compounded challenge for the LGBTQ community is in considering the question of where does religion/spirituality/faith fit for them” (para. 1). With respect to the integration of these aspects of identity, McNeill (1996) stated that individuals who identify as affectional minorities “ask different questions, have different needs, and, therefore, need to work out the special theological and spiritual implications that are rooted in the gay and lesbian experience” (p. xvi). Unfortunately for participants in this study there may not have been a safe space within the culture of CCIs to ask such questions – no place to work through the difficult task of identity integration without threat of negative repercussions.

Many students who identify as affectional and gender minorities and are enrolled in counseling programs housed within CCIs grew up in conservative Christian cultures or communities, often being taught that any diverse affectional orientation or gender identity is antithetical to their faith. Later in life these individuals find that “[t]he disentangling of introjected identity concepts from personal history and individual characteristics is an

enormously difficult task” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 315). This is consistent with Dahl and Galliher’s (2012) advisement against examining any aspect of identity development “without recognizing the multiple factors that interplay on developmental processes,” reminding readers that “identity development does not occur in a vacuum” (p. 218).

In a study of the interaction between faith development and affectional identity development, Dunn et al. (2015) found that “colleges and universities need to provide spaces for exploration of identity, both sexual orientation and faith, as both separate and intersecting constructs” (p. 382). They concluded that although many campuses provided resources to help students navigate this journey, more support was needed (Dunn et al., 2015); many CCIs offer no such space or resources for these important developmental processes and instead actively discourage such exploration, or even threaten it with punishment (Smith & Okech, 2016a). Though the purpose of such policies might be to keep affectional and gender minority students from attending programs at CCIs, “the real impact is upon students who may begin to realize their same-sex attractions while attending the institution. These students may feel trapped, isolated, and helpless without a means for support or guidance” (Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 455).

Dunn et al. (2015) also found that relationships were a critical component in the process of integrating affectional identity and faith development, which is another area that is less available or even dangerous for individuals at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities due to the culture of condemnation and discrimination. CCIs have the opportunity to be places support; instead it would seem that more often they are places that continue to shame, ostracize, and threaten this population of students rather than providing space for them to engage with their identity development and integration.

According to Beagan and Hattie (2015), for individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities struggling to reconcile these identities with their spirituality, “[e]xperiences of exclusion and isolation were intense and pervasive” (p. 112).

Unfortunately, this exclusion and isolation happens on both sides for Christians who identify as affectional and gender minorities. A participant in Beagan and Hattie’s (2015) study said, “don’t tell your Christian friends you’re queer and don’t tell your queer friends you’re a Christian” (p. 110); another shared, “Finding a place for myself as a queer within the Christian community, and finding a place for myself as a Christian within the queer community. There’s room for both. But I haven’t found it yet” (pp. 110-111). According to Beagan & Hattie (2015), people who identify as LGBTQ and also involved with Christianity experience “shame, guilt...anxiety...low self-esteem, depression, and self-loathing, often accompanied by addictions, self-harming, and suicidal ideation” and “frequently experienced profound losses of faith, community, friends, and family” (p. 111). The possibility of also losing standing in their graduate program and potentially the ability to pursue their career in counseling simply compounds this issue for affectional and gender minority students at CCIs.

Beagan and Hattie (2015) identify four potential outcomes of this identity integration process: “rejecting the gay identity, rejecting the religious identity, compartmentalizing the gay self and religious self, or identity integration” (p. 95).

Though identity integration may appear to be the ideal, it may also feel unattainable with such seemingly discrepant identities. As mentioned earlier, the conservative Christian position on affectional and gender minority identities is largely built upon a traditional interpretation of the “clobber passages” found in Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10,

and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. However, Christianity, like many faith systems, has a great deal of within-group variation (Cashwell & Young, 2011). While there is certainly much agreement among those who call themselves Christians, there are plenty of topics – affectional and gender minority communities being one – on which Christians take a variety of positions.

This progressive shift should not come as a shock. There is historical precedent for conservative Christians taking controversial positions on other sensitive subjects, and then gradually transforming their beliefs in response to a changing culture. As Smith and Okech (2016a) noted:

...a literal interpretation of the Bible has been used, and at times widely, to support slavery, to oppose the abolitionists and the civil rights movement (Noll, 2006), to deny social equality for women (Rogers, 2009), to marginalize persons with disabilities (Olkin, 1999), and to oppose interracial marriages (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Over time, most theologically conservative Christians abandoned these forms of discrimination. (p. 257-8)

One of the ways that change has occurred with regard to the conservative Christian perspective on affectional and gender minority communities is through alternative interpretations of the clobber passages. Some progressive Christians have argued that what has been translated “homosexual” in those verses does not refer to same-sex relationships as they are understood in our current culture, but rather represents non-consensual and exploitive sexual relationships between men and young boys or between powerful men and their slaves (Shore, 2013). Paul is condemning “the coercive, excessive, and predatory same-sex sexual activity practiced by the Romans” (Shore, 2013, p. 8). This view is seen in Beagan and Hattie’s (2015) study of 35 LGBTQ adults where they found that “[i]nterestingly, those who had studied Christian theology intensely appeared to have much less internal conflict about their LGBTQ identities.

They saw teachings condemning homosexuality as (flawed) human interpretations of Biblical teachings” (p. 104).

Despite these alternative exegetical options, Shore (2013) laments that too often: Christians draw no moral distinction between the homosexual gang rape in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the orgies to which Paul refers in his letter to the Romans, the wild sexual abandon Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians, and consensual homosexual sex between loving and committed homosexual partners. (p. 5)

This may sound extreme, but the lack of distinction Shore is referencing here can be seen in the policies at CCIs, which contain statements such as, “Morally unacceptable practices...such as...rape, adultery, physical homosexual behavior...will not be tolerated,” and prohibitions against inappropriate sexual behavior that include “sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, incest,...homosexual behavior” (Smith & Okech, 2016a, pp. 261-262; quotes taken directly from CCI codes of conduct and/or doctrinal statements).

Another point of focus for the progressive Christian movement highlights the simple fact that the Bible talks about “homosexuality” only a handful of times while talking about things like equity, love, compassion, and the like hundreds of times (Shore, 2013). Given that information along with the possibility that the three NT verses in support of the conservative position have plausible alternative interpretations, some Christians conclude that “a tragic misreading of scripture has produced a harvest of bitter fruit: injustice, oppression, mercilessness, degradation, and hatred or indifference,” and move instead “into deep solidarity with LGBT people” (Gushee, 2015, p. 153).

An additional approach to integration can be seen in a process that Wilcox (2002) refers to as “sifting,” whereby individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities screen out certain aspects of Christianity in order to construct a cohesive

identity (p. 501). This approach is consistent with the growing move toward religious individualism, a cultural shift that “may facilitate LGBT Christians’ efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities” (Wilcox, 2002, p. 500). It is for reasons like these that some Christians who identify as affectional and gender minorities are able to integrate those seemingly disparate identities in ways that feel authentic and honoring to both (O’Brien, 2004; Wilcox, 2002). One thing the current study hopes to explore is ways in which the struggle to integrate identities may cause some to abandon the endeavor, but for others may help to forge an even stronger concept of self. Pargament (2007) posits that “struggles represent a major turning point in life, a spiritual fork in the road that can lead to renewal, growth, and positive transformation in one direction, or despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness in the other” (p. 115).

After a thorough, respectful, and eloquent discussion of the arguments for and against the traditional Christian view on “the LGBT issue,” Gushee (2015) concludes:

The fundamental "LGBT issue" is that a misreading or at least a misapplication of six texts in scripture taught many Christians a tradition of contempt toward sexual and gender minorities. That teaching of contempt has cost many lives, fractured many families, and wounded the mental health of millions. It has driven many away from God and church. The LGBT issue is a Gospel issue, a human dignity issue, a family wholeness issue, a church unity issue, an adolescent health issue, a justice and love issue, a solidarity-with-the-oppressed issue, and a reconciliation-in-Christ issue. It is not fundamentally a sexual ethics issue (p. 153).

Infinitely more could be said here; any reader who wishes to dive deeper into the debate on this topic would do well to start with work like Gushee’s.

That being said, conservative interpretations are obviously still prevalent, especially among white evangelical Christians, only 35% of whom support same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center, 2017). This can lead to one additional position on identity integration: some Christians who identify as affectional minorities affirm that

orientation along with a continued commitment to conservative Christian beliefs on the topic, resulting in a decision to abstain from romantic or sexual relationships in favor of a life of celibacy (Boorstein, 2014).

Counselor Identity

Finally, with regard to counselor identity, rather than working from the perspective of a specific model, this study sought to understand the ways in which all of the above context shapes the development and counselor identity of counselors in training (CITs) who identify as affectional and gender minorities. Research has shown that “[t]he process of reconciling or integrating religious and sexual/gender identities appears to strengthen spirituality, self-acceptance, and acceptance of others” (Beagan & Hattie, 2015, p. 95). All of those constructs – spirituality, self-acceptance, and acceptance of others – are important aspects of being an effective counselor (Cashwell, Bentley, & Bigbee, 2007; Lawson, Venart, Hazler, & Kottler, 2007; Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011). Additionally, Moss, Gibson, and Dollarhide (2014) posit that a fundamental task in professional identity development for counselors is integration of their personal and professional lives, rather than separation or compartmentalization.

Based on these findings, if students at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities are able to navigate process of integrating their spiritual, affectional, and gender identities, it stands to reason that it could actually strengthen their counselor identity development. Conversely, lack of integration regarding these identities – a process made more difficult when the individual also adheres to a conservative Christian spirituality – can lead to instability in other facets of identity development (D’Augelli, 1994). As this instability spills out into other areas of development, it is possible that

counselor identity would be negatively affected for students at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities.

Using a grounded theory approach, Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010) found that the development of a professional counselor identity involves integrating personal attributes with professional training, requiring both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. Given that study's findings regarding the importance of "personal growth" and "relationships with professors, supervisors, and others," (Gibson et al., 2010, p. 34) it stands to reason that the counselor identity development process may involve additional challenges for CITs at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities because of the discriminatory policies and culture at those institutions. Additionally, Balkin et al. (2014) found that "[t]o truly reconcile discrepant counselor/client value systems, it is important for counselors to have role models who have wrestled with the same issues and come to terms with their value conflicts" (p. 192).

CCIs have an opportunity to provide such role models as there are certainly faculty members, staff, and fellow students who have gone through the struggle of trying to reconcile Christian spirituality with affectional and gender minority identities. Instead, students who identify as affectional and gender minorities may not feel safe to share their journey because of the real or perceived threat of negative repercussions, up to and including dismissal from the program. Additionally, "The documented effects of hiding one's sexual orientation include low self-esteem, cognitive preoccupation, and emotional distress," all of which may inhibit counselor efficacy and identity development (Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 450)

Gibson et al. (2010) define counselor identity as being comprised of three components: the integration of 1) the personal self and 2) professional training to form the “self as professional,” which is then 3) “tested via feedback from others” (p. 22). Again, the culture at CCIs makes this an even more challenging process for students who identify as affectional and gender minorities, especially with regard to the relational nature of that third component. The fear and shame reinforced by the conservative Christian values at CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs may substantially interfere with students’ development with regard to their spirituality, affectional and gender identity, and ultimately counselor identity as well.

This chapter aimed to review the professional and academic literature relevant to the experience of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities and who also attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs. The chapter began with an in-depth look at the oppression of affectional and gender minority communities in both historical and present contexts, with specific focus on discrimination from conservative Christians and the theological foundation for their position. Next, professional codes and ethical standards germane to the issue were explored. Finally, a discussion of spiritual, affectional, and gender identity development models, the difficult task of integrating those identities in conservative Christian settings, and how that process may influence counselor identity development provided background and context for the study.

Before moving on to methodology, it is worth noting here that, “[w]hile theories [and models] can provide important points of reference for experiences or processes of identity development, utilizing them in isolation oversimplifies the complexity of identity

development, especially for students with multiple marginalized identities” (Huang, 2017, p. 96). This is important to keep in mind in the current study and underscores the value of an IPA approach, which is well suited for exploring that complex intersection of identity development. Huang (2017) goes on to contend that:

a student’s own narrative and experiences must be the driving factor. Utilizing a critical understanding of a student’s context to provide guidance to co-construct an understanding of their narrative and experiences creates a student-centered process that validates and appreciates each unique story. (p. 97)

The following chapter outlines the methodological considerations for this study, including a discussion of the research genre, methodological framework, and theoretical lens. A detailed description of the study procedures then provides information regarding participant selection and sampling, data collection and analysis, and methodological integrity. The chapter concludes with further discussion of researcher stance and reflexivity.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Given the dearth of formal research regarding the experiences students at CACREP accredited conservative Christian institutions (CCIs) who identify as affectional and gender minorities, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is appropriate for this study. The following chapter will provide rationale for that choice along with a discussion of the theory which guided the study and specific methods regarding the sample, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with treatment of researcher assumptions and reflexivity.

Justification of Research Genre

The intent of this study was to explore the experience of current or former students who identified as affectional and/or gender minorities during their time in a counseling program at a CCI. Participant accounts of that experience included their reflections on their time in the program, how they feel it shaped their spiritual, affectional, and gender identity development, their beliefs about how that interplay influenced their counselor identity, and the meaning they make of those experiences. To accomplish these ends, the researcher used a qualitative approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) contend that, “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).

To this definition Creswell (2013) adds that qualitative research and the subsequent written account, “includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contributions to the literature or a call for change” (p. 44). These two general definitions, though from different epistemological and theoretical traditions than used in this study, begin to lay the groundwork for the appropriateness of a qualitative approach in this study.

Qualitative inquiry was also a good fit for the present study because little is currently known about the experience of students at CACREP accredited CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities. As Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest, researchers engage in qualitative research in order to develop a detailed understanding of a phenomenon. This deep level of understanding “can only be established by talking directly with people...and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (p. 45). Specifically, in-depth interviewing is well suited to assess areas like participants’ intersections of identities and their relationships to institutions (Narváez, Meyer, Kertzner, Ouellette, & Gordon, 2009).

In addition, the field of qualitative research has been evolving in recent years, with a noticeable shift toward collaboration and social justice (Denzin, 2010; Johnson & Parry, 2016). Qualitative research in general, and IPA more specifically “is often used in researching marginalised [sic] groups because it involves attending carefully to the experiences of such people, whose voice may otherwise be suppressed by the prevailing assumptions that others make about them” (Griffin & May, 2018, p. 519). These recent shifts in the field of qualitative inquiry reinforce its use in the current study, which looked to amplify the voices of participants and bring about a call for change. The importance of

creating space to hear marginalized voices is vividly captured by hooks' (1989)

contention that:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (p. 9)

Finally, beyond just general recommendations or abstractions, a review of the literature identified a vast array of actual qualitative studies examining similar phenomena to what this project explored, such as intersections between LGBT identity and spiritual or religious identity (e.g. Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Dunn et al., 2015; Goodrich, Buser, Luke, & Buser, 2016; Levy & Edmiston, 2014). These studies demonstrate precedence for using a qualitative approach with this population and in this area of inquiry.

Methodological Framework

The IPA research design chosen for this study is concerned with exploring how participants make sense of major life experiences and is informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2009). Despite IPA being less prescriptive than some methodologies, and more of a flexible framework, understanding those theoretical underpinnings is critical (Smith et al., 2009). From a phenomenological standpoint, IPA draws upon foundations laid by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, but does not fit neatly within any one camp (Smith et al., 2009). Still, IPA stays true to phenomenology's commitment to exploring the lived experience of the participant and the meaning they make of that experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Consistent with the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, IPA also relies on underpinnings from hermeneutics, which is concerned with interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). In a break from more traditional forms of phenomenology, IPA studies involve not just the participant's interpretation of a phenomenon or experience, but also the researcher's interpretation of that process (Smith et al., 2009). This "double hermeneutic" means that in IPA studies, "the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of *x*," in an attempt to both see things from the participant's perspective, but also approach the phenomenon from a second order perspective informed by the researcher's own experience and relevant psychological models (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). The current study balanced the outside/external viewpoint of the phenomenon – the etic perspective – with the emic perspective of "internal perceptions, memories, and judgments" of the affectional and gender minority students who actually experienced it (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). Holding both the etic and emic views in tension is ultimately what will allow the field to find a holistic, non-dualistic solution, but in order to do that the subjective viewpoint of these participants must be heard and considered.

Another central concept from hermeneutic theory commonly employed in IPA studies is the hermeneutic circle, or the idea that the whole is interpreted in light of the parts, and vice-versa (Smith et al., 2009). This iterative process can be seen as occurring within each participant encounter (i.e., parts of the interview inform overall considerations, and the whole of interview aids in interpretation of smaller parts), but also on a larger scale with each interview constituting a part and the entire study comprising the whole (Smith et al., 2009). These hermeneutical principles highlight the level of interpretative activity that the IPA researcher engages in, representing a clear break from

traditional and transcendental forms of phenomenology (Miller, Chan, & Farmer, 2018). As Smith et al. (2009) state, “There is a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but detective work is required by the researcher to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened” (p. 35).

Along with phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA studies rely on idiography and its deep commitment to the particular, in contrast to the nomothetic approach taken by most psychological research (Smith et al., 2009). It is certainly still possible to draw generalized conclusions, but IPA studies are concerned first and foremost with “understanding how particular experiential phenomena...have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). Practically speaking, this means that researchers in IPA studies begin with a detailed examination of each individual participant’s account before tentatively moving to an exploration of themes and patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

Due to its roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA is particularly well suited for and has been widely adopted in the study of sexuality and identity, and “can challenge understandings which are based around ‘othering’ people, or medicalizing and pathologizing behaviours [sic]” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 143). Given that the counseling field is currently being called to reconsider its policies and practices regarding the CACREP accreditation of programs housed within CCIs, and the fact that the voices of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities are missing from the conversation, IPA was not just appropriate, but ideally suited for the current study.

Bracketing

What Husserl called *epoche* – often referred to as bracketing – pertains to the researcher’s attempt to acknowledge and set aside assumptions as they approach a study; transcendental phenomenologists sought a pure, complete form of bracketing whereby they might uncover the true essence of a phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). In IPA studies this is seen as a dynamic, iterative process where “one may only really get to know what the preconceptions are once the interpretation is underway” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 26). Given the possibility of new or previously unrecognized preconceptions emerging in the midst of the project, researcher reflexivity is seen as a component of the hermeneutic circle that must be attended to throughout the entire research process (Smith et al., 2009). This form of bracketing represents a shift from traditional, transcendental phenomenological thought, with the impetus for the change being an acknowledgement that the researcher cannot fully set aside pieces of themselves, but rather pre-conceived ideas about a phenomenon should be bracketed so that they don’t have an “uncontrolled effect” on the study (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2016, p. 61). The use of the phrase “uncontrolled effect” is of particular note as it suggests that the researcher’s stance, beliefs, preconceptions, and assumptions *will* have an effect on the study; the goal then is to identify, acknowledge, and manage them.

This approach is consistent with Groenewald’ (2004) contention that, “the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise” (p. 45). However, this is not a license for the researcher to approach their study from a naive lack of self-awareness; examining presuppositions helps to, “to the greatest degree possible, prevent the data from being prematurely

categorized or ‘pushed’ into the researcher’s bias” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 49). Finally, Smith et al. (2009) encourage a less problematized understanding of bracketing: “Here we would emphasize the importance of the positive process of engaging with the participant more than the process of bracketing prior concerns, in the sense that the skilful [sic] attention to the former inevitably facilitates the latter” (p. 35). In addition to a good-faith effort of identifying preconceptions and biases up front (discussed at the end of this chapter), this study made use of a researcher journal, which is consistent with current recommendations for conducting IPA research (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Miller et al., 2018). Key learnings from the journal are presented in Chapter V of this report in order to provide context for the researcher’s interpretations.

Theoretical Lens

A research study’s theoretical framework describes the lens through which the researcher sees the world, and includes considerations of their axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the transformative theoretical framework (Mertens, 2009) was chosen as it fits well within not just a qualitative design and IPA, but is also appropriate for the topic and population in question. The transformative paradigm provides an approach for researchers who find that “the post-positivists impose structural laws and theories that do not fit marginalized individuals or groups,” but also that, “the constructivists do not go far enough in advocating action to help individuals.” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25). These distinctions become evident upon examination of the philosophical underpinnings and practical implications of transformative theory.

Axiology

From an axiological perspective, which deals with beliefs about ethics and morality, transformative theory highlights, “the importance of respecting cultural histories and norms in the interactions in order to conduct research that has the potential to increase social justice” (Mertens, 2012, p. 3). This axiology fits well with a study of the experience of students at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities as the project has clear ties to social justice. Researchers operating from a transformative perspective ask questions such as, “How can I incorporate the voices of members of communities that have not traditionally had a seat at the table when decisions about what is ethical or not ethical were made?” (Mertens, 2012, p. 4). Again, here there are obvious connections to the current study; the heart of the project was soliciting the voices of marginalized individuals who have, thus far, not formally been included in the discussion about the potential discrimination at CCIs and the ethics of accrediting programs in those institutions.

Ontology

With regard to ontology, or one’s perspective on the nature of reality, transformative theory embraces the idea that individuals have different perceptions and versions of what is real (Mertens, 2012). Though built on some constructivist principles, the transformative paradigm goes a step further by asserting that while perceptions of reality are socially constructed, some of those constructions are privileged over others due to cultural context and historical oppression with respect to factors including gender, religion, and affectional orientation (Mertens, 2007, 2012). These privileged versions of reality “need to be critically examined to determine what is missing when the views of

marginalized peoples are not privileged” (Mertens, 2012, p. 5). The researcher operating from this theoretical perspective can join in the work of giving voice to oppressed groups; this is a process described by hooks (1989) in her assertion that, “In resistance, the exploited, the oppressed work to expose the false reality—to reclaim and recover ourselves” (p. 3). The current study endeavored to do just that: to privilege the views and the lived experience of affectional and gender minority students at CACREP accredited CCIs. This is critical in an arena of professional dialogue where their perspective has been absent thus far.

Epistemology

Epistemology pertains to the nature and origins of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Underlying the transformative paradigm is the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, but also situated in a complex historical context that is influenced by power and privilege. Researchers must consider the impact those forces have on the creation of knowledge and seek to establish an interactive, trusting relationship with participants if they hope to understand what “valid knowledge” is for the population being studied (Mertens, 2009, p. 56). This includes not simply the historical context of oppressed groups, but also the power dynamic that exists between researcher and participants; researcher-participants relationships should be “interactive and empowering” (Mertens, 2009, p. 56). In this study, great care was taken to both explore the idiographic perspective of the participants and to situate their narratives in the broader social, political, and historical context. There was also a high degree of emphasis placed upon collaboration with participants. Finally, I was aware of and embraced the idea that

this type of research comes with a responsibility and obligation to the populations being studied, and that such projects have the opportunity to disrupt oppressive systems.

Methodology

Methodology relates to a systematic approach to the research process (Mertens, 2012). This study employed an IPA methodology informed by the transformative paradigm. Mertens (2009) posits that operating from the transformative paradigm leads researchers to “[involve] community members in the data-collection decisions...build trust to obtain valid data...make the modifications that may be necessary to collect valid data...and tie the data collected to social action” (p. 60). Similar to the discussion of epistemology in the section above, methodology informed by the transformative paradigm should involve collaborative, trusting relationships and take into account culture, power, discrimination, and oppression (Mertens, 2007).

One way the current study addressed these guidelines was through the researcher’s collaboration and consultation with members of affectional and gender minority communities in designing the study, refining interview questions, and interpreting the data. This was done informally through conversations and meetings with peers and colleagues, but also through the formal dissertation process as members of the dissertation committee represent diverse affectional and/or gender identities. As discussed further in the data collection section below, this study used researcher self-disclosure to build trust, as well as follow-up interviews and member checking to address Merten’s (2009) recommendations regarding valid data. The goal of this process was to foster meaningful collaboration so that the voices of the participants were accurately represented and reflected throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Finally, the interpretative component of this IPA study addressed the call to leverage the data for social action and social justice; the meanings and interpretations generated by the study have bearing on important social justice issues in the field of counselor education. Researchers who are familiar with more tradition paradigms may be uncomfortable with the level of advocacy, or at the very least, perceived lack of neutrality that comes with an IPA study and the transformative paradigm. In response, Mertens (1999) warns against using terms such as, “objectivity and neutrality to mask dismissal of issues related to social injustice, discrimination, and oppression” (p. 3). While researchers certainly need to be aware of potential bias in their work (Roulston & Shelton, 2015), the historical context of power, privilege, and oppression that exists surrounding affectional and gender minorities (and all minorities for that matter) places a responsibility on the qualitative researcher to see their work as an “agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researcher’s lives” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25).

Some researchers in this paradigm go as far as to contend that their role is, “as a supportive, reflective activist who works to challenge the status quo” (Mertens, 2012, p. 6). This controversial stance seems consistent with Black and Helm’s (2009) call for the “informative and challenging scholarship” of researchers to “passionately challenge commonly held knowledge” (p. 84). The American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) also recommends that it’s members “endeavor to promote advocacy beyond the direct support of clients to include public policy decisions, advances in human welfare services, public health, systems of care, training and education, consultation, *research*, funding, and issues that affect the well-being of the public at large” (p. 46; emphasis

added). In a review of an earlier version of this APA publication, Mertens (2012) concluded that the APA, “recommends that the researcher serve as an agent of pro-social change to combat racism, prejudice, bias, and oppression in all their forms” (p. 5).

Though a transformative framework may feel uncomfortable for some researchers, it is well suited to study “issues such as oppression, domination, suppression, alienation, and hegemony” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25); this social justice and advocacy minded stance has value in giving a voice to historically marginalized participant groups, such as the affectional and gender minority participants in this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) contend that the transformative research paradigm “is emancipatory in that it helps unshackle people from the constraints of irrational and unjust structures that limit self-development and self-determination. The aim of this approach is to create a political debate and discussion so that change will occur” (p. 25). The connections drawn here between transformative research and how it addresses barriers to development are especially relevant for the current study, where the research explored how participant experiences at CCIs shaped their spiritual, affectional, gender, and counselor identity development. The current study sought to not only continue the debate on this topic, but hopefully foster meaningful institutional and systemic change for students who identify as affectional and gender minorities.

In keeping with this focus on systemic change, a transformative theoretical approach encourages and provides a framework for researchers who see their work as an act of social justice (Mertens, 2012). According to Mertens (2009), a transformative approach “directly engages the complexity encountered by researchers and evaluators in culturally diverse communities when their work is focused on increasing social justice”

(p. 10). Again, this is consistent with the APA's (2017) call on members of the psychological field to, "aspire to understand power differentials, power dynamics, and privilege lying at the core of multicultural tensions in the United States and the impact of these on societal structures and institutionalized forms of oppression" (p. 46).

Qualitative inquiry, an IPA methodology, and the transformative theoretical paradigm are all philosophically and practically consistent with the intended purpose and methods of the current study. Formal discourse on the topic has come from a position of power and privilege, but this study emphasized the oppressed, marginalized voices of the individuals who may have the most at stake. Concern that the policies at CCIs are discriminatory towards students who identify as affectional and gender minorities centers on the question of whether programs at those schools represent the kind of the institutionalized oppression that the APA is referring to; the findings in this study help to inform that debate by beginning to explore some marginalized perspectives.

Procedures

The following section addresses the methods taken in procuring a research sample, collecting data from that sample, and the analysis of that data. As mentioned above, the structure of an IPA study is quite flexible and allows for creativity in design and process. Accordingly, special attention is paid here to sample size and data analysis as there is considerable variation in the field regarding these components (Smith et al., 2009).

Participant Selection

Participant selection for this study involved a delicate balance between finding a sample that is homogenous in some ways, but heterogeneous in others. In any

phenomenological research, with IPA being no exception, the participants must all have experienced the phenomenon in question (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this particular study, the experience of having identified as an affectional or gender minority while attending a CACREP accredited counseling program housed within a CCI must be common to all cases. However, the study was open to and benefitted from diversity on a host of other demographic markers outside of the phenomenon of interest. The procedures for obtaining the sample are discussed below.

Experience with the Phenomenon

In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to have attended a counseling program housed within a CCI that had policies or codes of conduct that disaffirmed or disallowed affectional and/or gender minority identity/expression. The program must have been CACREP accredited at the time of the participant's attendance and the participant must also have identified as an affectional and/or gender minority, either publicly or privately, during their time in the program, regardless of how they identify today. It was not necessary that they graduated from the institution, but they must have attended for at least one academic year in order to have sufficient experience to fully participate in the interview process. Currently enrolled students were eligible for participation. Like other relevant study data, information regarding program attendance was gathered through self-report of the participants.

Sampling Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (see appendix F for approval letter), this study used purposive sampling procedures and attempted to use a snowball process as well. Purposive sampling is often

used in qualitative research where the goal is not to determine statistical significance, but rather to *purposefully* select participants who “can best inform the researcher about the research problem under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). Initial invitations to participate were made through current contacts in the researcher’s professional network (e.g. peers from previous training programs, professional colleagues, former faculty members, etc.) as well as through the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) listserv. Both methods of solicitation generated participants for the study, with three coming from the researcher’s professional network (e.g., a peer put the researcher in contact with a potential participant) and two being found through the listserv.

Each time the researcher was able to make contact with a potential participant, they were asked not only about their own participation, but also if they know of any other individuals who would possibly be able to participate (i.e. individuals who identified as affectional or gender minorities while attending CACREP accredited programs within CCIs). If applicable, they were asked to reach out to those individuals, provide them with some basic information about the study, and invite them to contact the researcher if they are interested in learning more. Despite the attempt at a snowball sample and some participants offering to reach out to other potential participants in their networks, to this researcher’s knowledge none of those secondary contacts ended up engaging in the study.

In order to build trust with potential participants the researcher conveyed to them an attitude of affirmation and advocacy for affectional and gender minority communities, both in the initial contact and throughout the interview process. This was accomplished in part by using some self-disclosure and explanation of the researcher’s stance in the initial

email contact with new potential participants. It was important that participants knew the researcher was approaching the project from a place of advocacy, and not in support of the position of CCIs, something which could have been ambiguous given the researcher's background and intersecting privileged identities. An example script of the initial email contact can be found in Appendix A.

As a final note on the participant recruitment process, a discussion of some pushback I received feels pertinent. With regard to use of the CESNET listserv, after the second request for participation went out to the community another listserv member made a public response challenging the use of the word "discrimination" in my post and calling into question the credibility of the research. My committee and I went back and forth about how to respond, but ultimately decided to simply acknowledge the individual's feedback and move on. While the individual's criticism of the study design and my approach were inaccurate and misinformed, I suspect the reasons prompting that criticism had more to do with the subject matter than the methodology, especially given this individual's history of posts on the CESNET listserv. I mention it here because it felt as though this were another attempt to silence the very voices I was seeking to lift up in this study; it highlighted how much the field needs to hear from affectional and gender minority students on this topic, rather than speculating about what they may or may not experience, think, or feel.

Sample Size

Another important sampling consideration was how many participants to include in the study. There is no agreed upon consensus in field regarding the number of participants needed for an IPA study, but given the idiographic nature of this approach,

relatively small sample sizes are recommended with an emphasis on quality over quantity (Smith et al., 2009). Many IPA studies employ a case-study design with an in-depth analysis of a single participant; while this approach would undoubtedly provide valuable insight in the current study, the lack of research regarding the population and phenomenon in question prompts me to cast a somewhat wider net. This broader view will provide the ability to tentatively compare and contrast participant accounts.

Moving away from a single case study design, IPA still relies upon detailed exploration of individual experiences and many studies include between three and six participants, which “should provide sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). Smith et al. (2009) go on to contend that it is actually more problematic to have a sample that is too big, rather than too small in an IPA study. Based on these recommendations, this study aimed to land in the three to six participant range, with five individuals ultimately participating in the interview process. Participants also engaged in both an initial and follow-up interview; this “bolder design” is more demanding, but can also generate even richer data (Smith et al., 2009, p. 52). This will be discussed in greater detail in the data collection and analysis sections below.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection formally beginning, informed consent was obtained from each participant in writing (see Appendix B for sample informed consent document). The initial interview followed a semi-structured format (see Appendix D for interview schedule) in order to keep interviews focused on the phenomenon in question while still leaving room for diverse experiences and perspectives. Interviews were audio recorded to

ensure accurate preservation of participants' statements for verbatim transcription.

Notable non-verbals (e.g., laughter, significant pauses, sarcasm, etc.) were represented by bracketed text.

Participants engaged in an initial face-to-face interview (max. 110 minutes; min. 84 minutes; avg. 98 minutes) and a follow-up phone or video conference interview (max. 60 minutes; min. 20 minutes; avg. 37 minutes). The initial interviews tentatively adhered to the interview schedule (Appendix D) while the follow-up interviews addressed any areas where clarification was needed as well as additional topics or questions that emerged as meaningful through the interviews with other participants. In this way, interview questions and flow were updated and improved through an iterative and collaborative process involving research participants, which continued to narrow and deepen questions to improve data collection. The follow-up interview also allowed participants time to reflect on and process the content of the first interview, identify any new insights to share, and comment on the themes that had been shared as part of the member checking process.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with audio recordings of the interviews transcribed verbatim by the researcher. In an IPA study the first step in the analysis process is to be immersed in the data by multiple readings of the transcript (Smith et al., 2009); the transcription process itself allowed for this immersion to begin for the researcher in this study. Member checking also started at this point, with each participant receiving an electronic copy of their transcript prior to analysis. During this early stage of analysis, the researcher noted any reactions or tentative interpretations in order to assist in

the process of bracketing those while focusing solely on the participant's voice (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher did not want to lose those first impressions or initial observations, but wanted to avoid "our habitual propensity for 'quick and dirty' reduction and synopsis" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82).

Next a thorough and detailed initial set of notes was created in the right-hand margins of each transcript (Smith et al., 2009). Though seminal works in the IPA literature are not prescriptive, this stage often involves descriptive comments, meanings identified by participants, and similarities and differences within accounts, but also tentative researcher interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Consistent with the interpretive nature of IPA and its double hermeneutic, later in the analysis and summary of the study these interpretations "may well move away from the original text of the participant. What is important is that the interpretation was inspired by, and arose from, attending to the participant's words" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 90). This early step of listing initial interpretations alongside pieces of the transcript helps to maintain that connection and IPA's commitment to hermeneutics without losing its phenomenological foundations.

To increase the validity of the results, a co-coder engaged in this detailed notetaking process independent of the researcher. The individual serving as co-coder has intimate knowledge of the research project and is a master's level mental health professional who graduated from a CACREP accredited program housed within a CCI. Once each coder had completed initial analysis of a transcript, they compared notes and engaged in the next step together, which involved developing emergent themes by identifying patterns and relationships in the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2009). This is one way in which the hermeneutic circle is used in an IPA study whereby each part of the

interview informs interpretation of the whole and vice versa (Smith et al., 2009).

Tentative themes were coded in the left-hand margin of the transcripts.

Once themes had been generated and consensus reached between the research and the co-coder, focus shifted to searching for connections between those themes in an attempt to knit them together in a way that highlighted the most important or interesting aspects (Smith et al., 2009). This entire process was completed with one transcript or case at a time, while each time attempting to bracket off what was learned in previous cases during initial analysis of any subsequent case; the goal was to allow each participant encounter to stand on its own, enabling the researcher to remain open to new themes (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, once all cases had been analyzed in this manner, the final step was to look for patterns and relationships *across* cases (Smith et al., 2009). Again the hermeneutic circle is in play as the researcher allows individual cases and overarching, study-level themes to influence one another, moving from the part to the whole and back to the part again (Smith et al., 2009).

While there are many ways to go about this final across-case process, the researcher and co-coder found that visually laying the themes out and physically moving them around was helpful in identifying connections and grouping like themes. The researcher wrote each theme for each participant on a separate notecard, using a different colored marker for each participant. Those cards were spread out across the floor and then the researcher and co-coder began sorting, consolidating, and organizing the themes. That process started with 35 total themes, though most were shared across participants. Through discussion and debate, the process tentatively concluded with consensus around eight overarching themes, some with sub-themes.

Though 8 themes was much more manageable than 35, it was important to ensure that tentative themes and interpretations accurately reflected the experiences and meanings participants ascribed to those experiences. To accomplish this, participants again engaged in member checking (Kornbluh, 2015). As Creswell and Poth (2018) stated with regard to qualitative research, “To further deemphasize a power relationship, we may collaborate directly with participants by having them review our research questions, or by having them collaborate with us during the data analysis and interpretation phases of research” (p. 45). With a stated goal of this study being to illuminate the marginalized voices of participants, member checking was a critical component as it was perhaps the most effective way to avoid misrepresentation of those voices (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In addition to sending each participant a copy of their transcript, each was provided with a list of tentative themes. This took place after their initial interview, but before the follow-up interview so that any concerns or questions could be addressed in that subsequent meeting. The member checking described here represents not only a method to increase the trustworthiness of the results, but also a collaborative way to involve participants in the research.

After all interviews have been concluded and all member checking completed, final themes and interpretations were solidified. In addition to the feedback of the co-coder and the dissertation committee and chair, the study also made use of a research auditor to serve as an additional check regarding the trustworthiness of results and conclusions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The research auditor was a Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral student with specific training in conducting qualitative research, and was provided with the raw transcript data and the theme list for

each participant. This is a common occurrence in IPA research and Smith et al. (2009)

define the auditor's role as:

attempting to ensure that the account produced is a credible one, not that it is the only credible one. This speaks to the particular nature of qualitative inquiry. The aim of an independent audit is not to produce a single report which claims to represent 'the truth,' nor necessarily to reach a consensus. Instead the independent audit allows for the possibility of a number of legitimate accounts and the concern therefore is with how systematically and transparently this particular account has been produced. (p. 183-184)

Following an independent review of the data, the auditor confirmed that the themes seemed to accurately represent the data and flow organically from it, rather than being imposed upon the data by the researcher and co-coder.

In conjunction with Smith et al.'s (2009) statement, it seems pertinent to acknowledge that while the hope was to make analysis as transparent and replicable as possible, a different coder might group statements differently, perhaps come up with different categories, or even outright disagree with the conclusions presented below. This may be an unavoidable part of doing research – as discussed elsewhere in this study, I shape the research and it shapes me – arguing otherwise is naïve. Additionally, this is not unique to IPA or even qualitative inquiry, but all research. Anytime a decision is made in the research process, from design to collection to analysis, the person or people making the decision influence the process in ways they realize and in ways they do not. Honesty and transparency in each step of the process both safeguards against bias and allows readers to hold the researcher accountable when that bias is not sufficiently mitigated or acknowledged.

Data Storage

With regard to data storage, all physical data is secured in a locked file cabinet in the care of the researcher and will be destroyed after five years. All electronic data is stored on a password protected computer in the care of the researcher and will also be destroyed after five years. To protect participant privacy and anonymity, any written reports or publications based upon the study used pseudonyms chosen by the participants and de-identified data. The researcher will never confirm nor reveal participant identities. Only the researcher, co-coder, the research auditor, and the faculty advisor will be permitted to review raw transcript data and pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions, so the researcher will be the only individual who has access to participant identities. A key of identities and their associated pseudonyms will be kept in a password protected file on a password protected computer in the care of the researcher.

Methodological Integrity

In qualitative inquiries, the trustworthiness of a study pertains to the quality and rigor of the research and is referred to by various terms such as validity, credibility, authenticity, or others depending upon the source (e.g. Creswell, 2014; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). Generally, this construct deals with the accuracy of the findings in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). Recently, the term “methodological integrity” has been posited as a more all-encompassing means of conveying “the worthiness of research and whether the claims made are warranted” (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017, p. 9).

Born out of a concern regarding the often inflexible and inconsistent treatment of rigor in qualitative research (in both the writing and review processes), Levitt and

colleagues (2017) suggest using the concept of methodological integrity as a way to “[encourage] researchers and reviewers to shift from using standardized and decontextualized procedures as criteria for rigor toward assessing the underlying methodological bases for trustworthiness as they function within research projects” (p. 2). Traditionally, trustworthiness pertains to the confidence one can have that a particular study accurately captures the phenomenon of interest; Levitt et al. (2017) “use the term *integrity* to specify the methodological basis of that confidence” (p. 9).

The methodological integrity framework involves two primary processes: fidelity to subject matter and utility in achieving goals (Levitt et al., 2017). Fidelity speaks to how well data collection and analysis captures the essence of the phenomenon in question, while utility refers to how well study design and methods work together in order to achieve the goals of the project (Levitt et al., 2017). Each component of the framework is broken down into guiding principles that help researchers conceptualize and operationalize methodological integrity.

Fidelity

Particularly when highlighting the voices of marginalized populations, qualitative researchers strive to, “as closely as possible reflect the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the people who participate in our research” (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006, p. 444). Addressing fidelity in qualitative study entails attending to both data collection and data analysis, and involves four components: 1) adequate data, 2) perspective management in data collection, 3) perspective management in data analysis, and 4) groundedness (Levitt et al., 2017). Following is a treatment of each component along with specifics regarding how they were incorporated into the current study. Overall, the iterative and collaborative

process discussed above in the procedure section helped ensure that fidelity was maintained throughout the project.

Adequate data. According to Levitt et al. (2017), data adequacy is not simply about the number of participants or amount of data in a study, but “[r]ather, it asks researchers how well they gain access to the comprehensiveness of and variations in the subject matter” (p. 11). Part of this comprehensiveness includes differences in experience of the phenomenon; rather than a lack of consensus in some areas of the data representing a problem or a threat, Levitt et al. (2017) suggest that variations may actually be a strength that speaks to the breadth and depth of the data. Consistent with the idiographic focus of this IPA study, “adequacy of data depends not on numbers of participants, but on the quality and sufficiency of information as it provides close access to the richness of the subject matter” (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 12). In keeping with the tenets of an IPA approach, this study used in-depth interviews to “invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences,” something which helped to ensure adequate data was captured (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56).

Perspective management in data collection. The next proposed principle of fidelity is perspective management in data collection, which involves the researcher’s transparency regarding their personal beliefs and biases, and the appropriate limitation of their impact on the data collection process (Levitt et al., 2017). In this study, the researcher took steps to align with this principle in both the research design and anticipated interview protocol. From a design and methodological standpoint, extensive reflexivity, bias, and bracketing discussions were provided so the reader is clear on the researcher’s experience with and assumptions regarding the phenomenon. With respect to

the actual interview process, Levitt et al. (2017) recommend open-minded inquiry that does not simply seek to confirm the researcher's perspective. This would include the use of open-ended, non-leading questions and inviting participants to address anything that has not been asked (Levitt et al., 2017); both of these suggestions are reflected in the interview protocol for this study (see Appendix D).

Perspective management in data analysis. Researcher perspective must be attended to not only in data collection, but in analysis as well (Levitt et al., 2017). Perhaps the most well accepted method of accomplishing this aspect of fidelity is through member checking (Kornbluh, 2015). This is something the current study employed throughout the research process as participants were asked to collaborate on many aspects of the study, including verifying themes and interpretations. Levitt et al. (2017) also recommend practices such as “dialogue with participants,” or engaging “third parties in cogenerating research findings,” both of which were used in the study (p. 13). Ongoing dialogue with participants occurred throughout the data analysis process, while consultation with the dissertation committee, collaboration with a co-coder, and the use of a research auditor assisted in the cogeneration of findings.

Groundedness. The last fidelity principle is groundedness, which “refers to the degree to which the meanings identified in the analysis are rooted in data of good quality” (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 14). Including participant quotes that support themes and interpretations is a common way that qualitative researchers demonstrate groundedness, a tactic which is consistent with IPA and was utilized in this study. The coding procedures discussed above also facilitated this connection, especially the generation of emergent themes in the margins of individual transcripts. Groundedness, like the previous

principle, can also be increased through collaboration with participants regarding data analysis (Levitt et al., 2017). This study accomplished such collaboration through member checking and soliciting participant feedback.

Utility

Levitt et al. (2017) “propose that the appropriateness of the data collection and analytic procedures selected can be evaluated by whether they usefully allow a study to meet its aims” (p. 14). This conceptualization of utility, like fidelity, is supported by four underlying principles: 1) contextualization of data, 2) catalyst for insight, 3) meaningful contributions, and 4) coherence among findings (Levitt et al., 2017). The crux of the utility component is whether decisions made in the research process move the study toward its intended goals. One way utility was increased in this study was by continuing to evaluate after each successive interview whether the interview questions and subsequent participant responses appeared to be providing rich, thorough data in regards to the research question posed by the study.

Contextualization of data. This principle entails researchers providing adequate information regarding the context of the study – history, setting, participants, and self of the researcher – in order for readers to determine how those may have influenced the findings (Levitt et al., 2017). Contextualization can be accomplished by methods such as “[providing] a historical account of the phenomenon or community under study, the consideration of demographic data, [or] details about participants’ or researchers’ experiences with the phenomenon” (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 15). In this study, chapters I through III provide detailed information about the historical context as well as the researcher’s experience with the phenomenon. Demographic data and details regarding

participants' experiences will be provided in chapter IV, with the latter forming the heart of the study from this point forward. Attending to utility in these ways improves the transferability of the study findings to other related contexts (Levitt et al., 2017).

Catalyst for insight. The collection of rich data helps to maximize the researcher's ability to engage in insightful analysis (Levitt et al., 2017). An example provided by Levitt et al. (2017) is pertinent for the current the study: "interviewers' status or perceived privilege may negatively influence their ability to elicit generative responses and may reduce participants' willingness to disclose insightful data" (p. 15). This is especially relevant to the current study as this researcher provided some self-disclosure regarding affectional and gender minority affirmation and advocacy during initial contact with potential participants in order to counter any participant uncertainty about the purpose of the study. Levitt et al. (2017) also suggest enhancing relational interviewing skills and asking interview questions that show sensitivity. This researcher's formal training and background in clinical work will aided in both the creation of a sensitive interview protocol and the ability to solicit rich data during the interview process.

Meaningful contributions. As the name implies, this principle has to do with utilizing research methods that allow the study to make a meaningful contribution in relation to study objectives (Levitt et al., 2017). Practically speaking, this could include, "forming questions that augment or challenge current representations of a phenomenon in the literature...and demonstrating the ability of findings to solve problems posed in their research (e.g., ability to prompt *institutional change*)" (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 16, emphasis added). Levitt et al. (2017) go on to contend that meanings should be consistent with research goals, methodological approach, and study characteristics. The current study is

strong in this area; the study design (qualitative), methodology (IPA), and theory (transformative paradigm) compliment and intersect one another, and are well-suited for research with oppressed populations. Specifically, exploring the experiences of students at CCIs who identify as affectional and gender minorities and giving those students a voice may promote exactly the kind of institutional change that Levitt and colleagues mention.

Coherence among findings. The final principle, coherence, pertains to differences or variations within the study findings (Levitt et al., 2017). When data comes from diverse sources and voices, and represents a complex phenomenon, it is reasonable to suspect that some differences will emerge. While this is not inherently a problem, these discrepancies (and perhaps contradictions at times) should be explained for the reader to help develop a level of coherence in the data.

This new basis for assessing trustworthiness – methodological integrity – does represent a shift in the field. However, it builds upon previous work and provides a practical framework for researchers, reviewers, and readers. Fidelity and utility are both necessary components in any research study; fidelity without utility is not very useful in answering important questions, and utility without fidelity may misrepresent the data (Levitt et al., 2017).

Researcher Stance

Before any attempt can be made to bracket one's personal beliefs and biases, they must first be identified through introspection and acknowledgment. I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender male, all of which come with different layers of privilege, power, and potential blind spots. As mentioned in the first chapter of this report, I also have

some strong personal connections to and feelings about the phenomenon in question. I identify as a Christian, despite feeling more uncomfortable with that label every day given what it has come to represent in our current culture. Part of that discomfort is due to the traditional, conservative stance on diverse affectional orientations and gender identities; a stance with which I agreed at one point in my life. I grew up believing that the Bible clearly teaches that heterosexual marriage is God's plan for humanity and any sexual relationship outside of this is sinful and to be avoided. I had no reason to question this, nor did I personally know anyone who disagreed or lived an alternative lifestyle until early adulthood. This is not an excuse for those beliefs, but merely the context of my childhood and adolescence.

However, upon entering my graduate studies at a CACREP accredited counseling program in a CCI (having earned a college degree from a conservative Christian undergraduate institution in the Midwest), my position began to change. I met people who lived and/or advocated alternative understandings on this issue; people that I respected and looked up to. Many faculty and peers held views similar to the ones I grew up with, but some did not. Faculty may have been limited in their ability to formally endorse alternative positions because of the policies in place (perhaps grounds for future research), but peers were not, especially in private conversations outside of class. It was in some of these conversations that I began to realize what a narrow and small view I held of Christianity.

To my surprise, there were many Christians who believed very different things than I did on a wide range of topics including affectional orientation and gender identity. I may not have been able to identify it at the time, but these interactions and subsequent

realizations began what would become a seismic shift for me. This is not to say that all of the change in my life on this topic occurred during my master's program, but it certainly seems to have started there.

This creates a mix of emotions for me as I reflect on my journey, and specifically my time attending a CCI. Despite some core principles and values that I now take issue with – including those that form the context for this study – I also found there to be spaces where students were encouraged to wrestle with alternative viewpoints, whether the institution formally endorsed those perspectives or not. Faculty often withheld their view on a particular topic or played “devil’s advocate” in order to push students to consider issues from new angles. However, the discriminatory policies and codes of conduct still exist; students know the official stance the institution takes on many topics, including diverse affectional orientations and gender identities.

Since my time at that institution, my personal growth continued and I have come to a place today that is quite literally 180 degrees from where I started. It has been a long emotional, cognitive, and spiritual process, and one that I neither engaged in lightly nor flippantly. It has come with personal costs and caused some relational fallout, though certainly nothing even close to what participants in this study and other affectional and gender minorities endure in their personal and professional lives. Still, it has given me some personal experience with and insight regarding taking an affectional and gender minority affirming position in a conservative Christian context. Today I fully embrace and advocate for individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities; I believe that this is not only *acceptable* as a Christian, but that it is *necessary because of my faith*. I want to echo the words of Wolff and Himes (2010), who concluded the following after

reflecting upon their own journeys as alumnus of conservative religious institutions of higher education:

It is the character of Christ, who embodied compassion and love for all, that we attempt to be mindful of as we suggest there is something horribly remiss in the institutional policies held by so many Christian colleges and universities against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other sexual minority students. Furthermore, it is in the spirit of academic excellence that we turn toward the most recent empirical literature as well as our own clinical experiences as mental health professionals to understand the impact that such policies have upon sexual minority youth. (p. 440)

At the heart of Christianity is the call to love, serve, and defend the marginalized and the oppressed (e.g. Psalm 72:14, Proverbs 22:22, 31:8-9, Isaiah 58:9-10, Amos 4:1-2; 5:11-12, Zechariah 7:9-10, Luke 4:18, 11:42, John 8:1-11). For too long those who have gone by the name “Christian” have done exactly the opposite with regard to affectional and gender minorities and a host of other marginalized groups (Smith & Okech, 2016a).

This extensive personal history may seem unnecessary; surely it is my current beliefs that have the most bearing on the study one might presume. Perhaps this is true, but I felt it important for readers to understand that I have found myself on both sides of this debate throughout the course of my life. Creswell & Poth (2018) echo this sentiment, explaining that background information on the researcher helps “readers learn about the researcher’s experiences [so they] can judge for themselves whether the researcher focused solely on the participants’ experiences in the description without bringing himself or herself into the picture” (p. 76). One might read the study differently knowing I had always been an affectional and gender minority advocate versus understanding that I have actually undergone significant shifts in my beliefs on the topic. Perhaps readers who side with CCIs on the issue will pause to consider that I understand their position; I have been where they are and know much of why they hold that position. In no way have

I set out to disrespect, disparage, or caricaturize their position – though I do sincerely disagree with it. Finally, I would like to believe that my own personal journey will provide hope for the readers who are fighting for change on this issue. If individuals like me can change, then perhaps systems and institutions can as well.

Assumptions

The next step in bracketing is to identify researcher assumptions about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014; Vagle, 2016). This is especially important when operating from the transformative paradigm since this approach often involves a researcher having a social justice agenda, such as “helping individuals free themselves from constraints... in the relationships of power in educational settings” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25). Given the phenomenon of interest in this study and the hope of giving voice to an oppressed population, there are clear connections to social justice, advocacy, and pushing back against the misuse of power in systems.

My passion for and position on this topic should not disqualify me from conducting the study; surely most researchers choose topics they are personally interested in, which would also assume a position or stance. It would be naïve to think otherwise.

Wolcott (2010) confronted this directly when he said:

Our readers have a right to know about us. And they do not want to know whether we played in the high school band. They want to know what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study. (p. 36) (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018)

That being said, I approached the study with an open mind and genuine interest in the experiences of participants. While I may have had some similar experiences, namely those associated with attending a CACREP accredited program housed within a CCI, I encountered those experiences from a position of power and privilege. Therefore, I have

no direct familiarity with or personal understanding of what it is like to be a student who identifies as an affectional or gender minority at a CCI and relied upon participants' feelings, beliefs, meanings, and interpretations.

With regard to specific assumptions about the phenomenon in question, I expected that some participants may feel and express a similar ambivalence as I do about their time at the CCI; a mix of good and bad experiences. I presumed that part of their negative experience was due to their need to hide or deny parts of who they were during their time there for fear of shame, aggression/attack, discipline by the school, or even removal from the program. I entered into the research wondering if, overall, participants would look back on their time with a sense of it being a difficult period that, whether good or bad, helped them solidify their identity. I also considered that some might see it as a significant trauma that caused them to shut down, foreclose on parts of self, leave the program, leave their faith, or some combination of those. I anticipated this would have much to do with relationships; whether or not they were able to connect with other students who identified as affectional and gender minorities, allies, or mentors who walked with them and helped them navigate and process their experiences.

Based upon conversations with colleagues around this topic, I also suspected that some participants may not have spent much time prior to our interview processing their experiences in their master's programs. Anecdotal evidence I had encountered suggested that perhaps students who identify as affectional and gender minorities and who attended CCIs were mostly focused on survival and getting through the experience. Upon graduation they may move forward without stopping to reflect on their time in the program and what it meant for the different aspects of their identity and development.

Perhaps it was too painful, or simply that life is busy and does not often lend itself to deep reflection.

With regard to attempting to account for and bracket these assumptions, Giorgi's (2009) treatment of the topic is germane, in which he explains that the task involves not allowing past experiences, knowledge, and beliefs to be engaged when analyzing and interpreting the experiences of participants. Giorgi (2009) goes on to compare this to a judge instructing a jury to consider a piece of information inadmissible; obviously the jury has already heard the information and cannot literally forget it, but the assumption is that one is able to suspend or set aside that information and not allow it to cloud judgment of new information. In the same way, while acknowledging my personal experiences with and beliefs about the phenomenon in question, my goal was to let participants' stories and meanings speak for themselves without fitting them into what I expected to find. Moustakas (1994) captured the essence of this desire in describing the stance of the qualitative researcher as one "in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time," though he also readily admitted that this is rarely fully achieved (p. 34).

Reflexivity

Being reflexive in qualitative research entails "critically thinking about the research process and your role in it" (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 320). It is imperative for the researcher to examine the influence they have on the research process in order to either mitigate or at least acknowledge that impact. As Creswell and Poth (2018) contend, "All writing is "positioned" and within a stance. All researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about

it in their writings” (p. 228). With my previously mentioned personal experiences and reflections providing a backdrop, I do have some biases and presuppositions around this phenomenon. As discussed earlier, I disagree with the conservative Christian position on affectional and gender minorities, and therefore the CCI policies and codes in question. I am disappointed in CACREP’s response and also convinced that this issue is not going away. I believe that CCIs need to change their position and policies with regard to diverse affectional orientations and gender identities, or they will (and should) lose CACREP accreditation in the years ahead. I believe that disaffirming and disallowing policies are discriminatory and negatively impact not only students who identify as affectional and gender minorities, but all stakeholders in the institution.

However, in order to protect against these biases and remain open to participant experiences that may fall outside of my current perception, I engaged in a number of strategies (e.g. prolonged engagement, audit trail, weighting the evidence, exploring outliers and following up on surprises, and providing thick description) (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Prolonged engagement was particularly important in this study and was achieved through the initial interview, follow-up interview, member checking, the collaborative efforts described in the data analysis section, and by the researcher engaging in the transcription and analysis process, rather than hiring that work out to a third party. These and other methods are useful for bridling biases and increasing credibility (See Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) for their full list of 24 strategies). Member checking is perhaps the most effective way to ensure that participant voices are accurately represented. Additionally, use of the co-coder and research auditor, and the oversight of the dissertation committee and chair will provide added levels of protection.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Participants

There were five participants who took part in this study. Each participant engaged in a face-to-face initial interview lasting approximately 90 minutes and all but one participated in a follow-up video-conferencing interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Table 1 provides demographic information for each participant based upon their responses to the demographic questionnaire (Appendix C), which they filled out prior to their initial interviews. Following the table, some brief background and timeline information is provided for each participant in order to add context to their stories.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Affectional Orientation	Pronouns
Richard	36	White	Transman	Bisexual	he/him/his
Luke	34	White	Male	Gay	he/him/his
Leon	36	Native American/Latino and Spaniard	Male – gender nonconforming	Bisexual	he/they
Daisy	32	White	Female	Pansexual	she/her/hers
Alexei	42	White	Male	Gay	he/him/his

Richard

Richard was 36 at the time of our interview, identifies as a white bisexual transman, and uses the pronouns he/him/his. He graduated from a CACREP accredited counseling program housed within a CCI, and then went on to earn his PhD in counselor education and supervision. He currently holds a tenured faculty position teaching in a master's level counseling program. Richard also sees clients in a private practice, which is where we met for the initial interview. He grew up in a conservative Christian home and attended a conservative Christian undergraduate program, though this was at a different institution than where he received his master's degree.

During his undergraduate and master's programs Richard identified (at least privately) as a lesbian, though he did not openly embrace that identity until the tail end of his PhD program. During his doctoral work he also began to socially transition with regard to gender:

So then I knew that I didn't fit the whole concept of what it meant to be a lesbian either. I just, like... you know, I wore men's clothing and it just got progressively more and more into that. I cut my hair off. I did all that kind of stuff. Really starting to not feel feminine at all and really being anti anything feminine.

At that point Richard felt like, "this is as far as I can go." Coming out as a lesbian had been such a struggle and had involved so much loss that he decided, "I can't come out again. I can't, like – I'm okay in this space. I pushed the boundary of gender as much as I can and everyone's still surrounding and loving me. And I did that for about six years."

However, after completing his PhD he experienced a "huge mental break" he realized, "I can't stay stuck in that space." Shortly thereafter he began hormone treatments and the physical transition process. In addition to the freedom and relief that has come with his transition, he also talked about some of the unexpected losses and

changes he has experienced. For example, his identity as part of the queer community is very important to him, but he feels that he often simply passes as a straight, white male. He is still in the process of unpacking what that means for him, both personally and professionally:

...what do I do with this new white male privilege, in a sense, but how do I navigate in connecting with clients and maybe having to disclose that so they know that there's this – I'm not just your typical white male.

Luke

Luke was 34 when we sat down for our initial interview. He identifies as a white gay male and uses the pronouns he/him/his. After completing his master's program at a CACREP accredited CCI, he opened a private practice, which is where we met for the interview. He grew up in a conservative Christian family, joined the military after high school, and then pursued his bachelor's and master's degrees. Prior to and during his counseling program, Luke attended ex-gay ministry programs (sometimes referred to as reparative therapy, conversation therapy, or sexual orientation change efforts [SOCE]; e.g., Exodus International and Where Grace Abounds) and went into his master's degree with the hope that he could change his affectional orientation. However, his perspective changed during his master's program and by the end of that degree he had moved off campus in order to live with his partner, something which he hid from his program. Today he fully accepts his affectional identity and lives openly as a gay man.

Leon

Leon was 36 years old when we met for the initial interview and identifies as bisexual. His gender identity has been somewhat fluid, but he currently identifies as a gender non-conforming male. Although male pronouns do not entirely fit, he does not

take issue with them, and generally prefers he/him/his to they/them/theirs. He also identifies as Native American/Latino and Spaniard. He attended a CACREP accredited program housed within a CCI, starting a private practice during his time there, and continues to operate that practice today. We met at his office for the interview.

Leon went into his master's program hoping that he could change his affectional orientation and gender identity to align with his conservative Christian upbringing. He had attempted change through reparative therapy and felt that attending this master's program was his last hope. Today Leon is in a relationship with a man and is an outspoken advocate and activist on behalf of affectional and gender minority communities. For a time he even led "the world's largest non-profit dealing with sexuality and spirituality" which, at the time, "had 40,000 members across the globe."

Daisy

Daisy was 32 years old when we met for the initial interview. She identifies as a white pansexual female and uses the pronouns she/her/hers. She tends to be attracted to female identified individuals and also identifies as demisexual, which she described as, "... if you look at the asexual versus allosexual, like demisexual is in the middle." The term is also commonly used to describe someone who only experiences sexual attraction after a strong emotional connection has formed (Demisexuality Resource Center, 2015). After graduating from a CACREP accredited CCI she accepted a career counseling position in higher education. I met Daisy in the office of one of her colleagues at a counseling center near her home.

Unlike the other participants, Daisy did not grow up in a conservative Christian environment. She described this early in the interview when she said, "Okay. So my

parents – pretty darn liberal. In fact, they're from the Bible Belt – they moved away because it was too conservative. They're very liberal. Dad's Atheist, mom's Universalist.” She reported that she became a Christian toward the end of her senior year of high school and attended a secular institution for her undergraduate degree, but wanted a master’s program that would help her integrate her faith into her counseling practice. She entered her program still sorting out how she identified with regard to affectional orientation, but also assuming that it would not be much of an issue given her overall lack of attractions.

Alexei

At the time of our initial interview Alexei was 42 years old and identifies as a white gay male who uses the pronouns he/him/his. Like Luke and Leon, Alexei entered his master’s program hoping to change or “fix” his affectional orientation. He had also participated in reparative therapy and remained “deep in the closet” throughout his counseling program. Like Richard, Alexei went on to pursue his PhD, and he now owns and operates a private practice. We met for the interview in a loft he rented while traveling for a conference.

The CACREP accredited counseling program that Alexei attended for his master’s program was housed within the same CCI where he completed his bachelor’s degree. He attended another private religious institution for his PhD work, though he reported that this was not a conservative institution. He did not choose any of these programs because of their religious orientations, but simply because they were “the best school in the area.”

Themes

According to Hammack (2005), the goal of research regarding sexual orientation “is not to search for ultimate, universal truths. Rather, it’s lofty aim is to make sense of the diverse specificity of lived experience as it impacts the history of individuals, cultures, and societies forever in flux” (p. 286), and this is particularly true of an IPA study. That said, after completing the coding process and organizing the data into themes, participants’ stories shared many similarities and most themes were present in each interview. The use of a co-coder, research auditor, and member checking helped to ensure that these themes did, in fact, rise organically from the raw transcript data rather than being imposed on the data by the researcher. Following is a presentation of those themes, with nuances and differences unique to particular participants discussed under each heading. Table 2 on the following page presents a summary of the themes and displays which themes were present for each participant.

Table 2

Themes

Theme	Richard	Luke	Leon	Daisy	Alexei
1: Experienced an anti-queer culture in their master's program	X	X	X	X	X
A. Unsafe, discriminatory, and shaming toward affectional and gender minority students	X	X	X	X	X
B. This environment reinforced early messages of shame	X	X	X	X	X
C. Ambivalence regarding time in the program	X	X	X	X	X
2: Experienced a culture of control and fear in their master's program	X	X	X	X	X
3: Closeting or trying to change affectional orientation and/or gender identity was extremely destructive	X	X	X	X	X
4: The damage described in theme 3 led to a breaking point	X	X	X	X	X
A. Breaking point led to suicidal ideation	X		X	X	X
B. Breaking point led to suicide attempt(s)	X				
5: Safe spaces helped to mitigate the shame and despair of theme 4	X	X	X	X	
6: Participants' shift in perspectives	X	X	X	X	X
7: Master's program stunted development with regard to:					
A. Affectional orientation and/or gender identity	X	X	X	X	X
B. Professional development and counselor identity	X	X	X	X	
C. Sense of self or self-acceptance	X	X	X	X	X
8: Able to reconcile Christian faith with affectional and gender identities	No	No	No	Yes	No

Theme 1: Experienced an Anti-Queer Culture in Their Master's Program

One overarching theme that was shared by every participant was their experience of an anti-queer, discriminatory culture and environment at each of their respective master's programs. Participants talked about this in many different ways and it affected some more than others, but discriminatory experiences were pervasive, from "a subtle humming all throughout" (Leon) to more overt or explicit discrimination. Participants described a wide variety of sources of this discrimination: from peers and fellow students, faculty, the formal policies and guidelines of the program, and even the president of one institution. These experiences reinforced the shame and early messaging participants had received regarding their diverse affectional and gender identities prior to entering their master's programs. In places they found their programs to be tolerant of their affectional orientation or gender identity, but not affirming. This contributed to an overall ambivalence about their programs, as well as a search for meaning and purpose in the midst of the struggles and suffering they experienced.

Master's program was unsafe, discriminatory, and shaming toward affectional and gender minority students.

Richard. For Richard, this issue was abundantly clear from the very beginning of his program, when he had to sign a conduct statement: "I remember signing paperwork – to back up a little bit – I remember, cause I lived in the dorms, there was some code of conduct and they mention 'no homosexual activity,' and things like that in the dorms..." There were clear policies in place at the institution that forbid and shamed this piece of

Richard's identity, but he also encountered that shame in the classroom. When recounting early experiences in the program, Richard said:

I remember my first class I went to, like, my Theories class, and the first thing the professor asked is what kind of populations do you want to work with and then what are you absolutely not comfortable working with. And I was shocked at the honesty that people had, but the first thing I heard was, "I will not work with gay people." And so, I just thought – in that moment there was no redirection of that student. There was no, like, "Well, we really gotta look at... You're in the wrong field then." Like, "You're gonna have to, like, or let's really think about this for a moment." And there wasn't any of that. And so there was a couple of other people that said, "Yeah, I won't work with homosexuals because..."

Right from the start, it was clear to Richard that this was not a safe place. And as he became more immersed in the culture, Richard continued to come up against discrimination and shame. People he should have been able to trust, such as his dorm RA, were part of that discriminatory culture: "... I remember my RA in the dorm, he was talking about stories of catching lesbian activity on campus and very disgusted, and everyone laughing..."

Unfortunately, Richard even faced discriminatory and anti-queer rhetoric from his faculty. In one of his counseling courses, "...there was a professor talking about multiculturalism in class and he was giving out false information about the LGBTQ+ population. Like 10-year-old research too, and I was like, 'What the hell is this?'" Classroom interactions such as this led Richard to conclude, "I didn't trust all of the professors there." One of the most distressing experiences for Richard involved an anonymous online discussion as part of a class assignment. Richard recalled that, "...this one guy in our class just went on this tirade about LGBT and then, you know, in the same discussion post he's talking about owning all these guns. It was, like, really unsafe... I mean, I really felt unsafe." When asked to further describe the situation, Richard

characterized the other student's comments as, "... not as extreme as white supremacist, but like, on the edge of starting down that path... I forget what he said, but it was guns and LGBTQ kinda stuff."

The discriminatory environment and lack of safety that Richard experienced in his master's program led him and some other students to seek the creation of a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender-Sexuality Alliance); a place where affectional and gender minority students might find resources, support, and a safe space. The request was denied by the institution:

It was a very well written proposal and... [institution] said they would never accept something like that, or the university wasn't ready for an organization like that. It wasn't like a – it was a GSA! ...I mean, just more of just a support group.

Luke. At times in his master's program, Luke felt accepted, or at least tolerated by the institution, but he explained that this came with caveats:

... as long as I wasn't, you know, "in the lifestyle." If I wasn't in a relationship or wasn't advocating for the LGBT community. That there's nothing wrong with saying you're gay – you can have those feelings as long as you don't act on them... Pretty much that's what it felt like – "We'll tolerate you... as long as you're quiet and don't, uh, you know, talk, or don't saying anything, or don't question anything."

In places in the program Luke felt somewhat safe as long as he did not make any waves. Related to this, Luke felt as though the program was pushing an agenda, rather than teaching students to think for themselves: "I felt like you're being indoctrinated, not really learning. So you're told, 'Here's what you have to believe. Here's how you're supposed to believe about it.'"

However, at other points he experienced explicit anti-queer messages and discrimination:

I remember I took – I think it was my psychopathology class... I think [faculty member teaching the class] was railing against how the DSM-V was changing gender dysphoria to not be classified as a mental disorder. And I'm just like, "I cannot believe there are people that still, like, believe this."... Like, this is somebody teaching a master's level course telling me that. Yeah, I was just shocked.

Luke also encountered this discriminatory attitude when seeking an internship placement.

He stated, "I remember applying for internships I ran into that problem. Originally I wanted to work with a clinic that was LGBT affirming, but told that I couldn't." Because of his affectional orientation, Luke felt like "you had to fight for your right to exist in this community."

Leon. Like Luke, Leon felt accepted in places during his master's program, but it was conditional: "I felt accepted as long as it was something I was willing to work on. And almost kind of lauded because I told people I was trying to resolve it, rather than embrace it." However, he quickly learned just how unsafe and anti-queer the program was:

... when the current president of the institution was giving his inaugural speech, or whatever they called it – he juxtaposed the 9/11 terrorists with a gay couple at Starbucks in his inauguration speech. He said something like, "The terrorists who flew their plane into the Twin Towers – it was like this tragedy and all of this horror – and, as a Christian I have to choose to love them." And then he said, "And that gay couple who is holding hands at Starbucks, it's my job to love them." And it was just like he was comparing terrorists who killed thousands of people... And I just remember sitting in that chapel session, hearing him preach, and I was just livid. Like, absolutely livid. And so just knowing that the board had elected someone like him with that kind of violent, untamed voice – who may be so unaware of the students to whom he was speaking – really sent kind of a shock wave through me to say, like, "This isn't a safe space for someone like me, administratively." Among the students, I felt incredibly safe and loved and welcomed, but among the administration it was just, like, hold your tongue and don't say a peep.

This discriminatory statement made by the president of the institution communicated to Leon that from the top down this was not a safe place. He went on to share, "... although

I felt safe with some faculty, I knew that as a student at that institution... I wasn't completely safe there to ask the questions I needed to learn how I needed.”

With regard to interactions with faculty, Leon recounted the following inexplicable incident:

I don't know if it still is, but during my program part of our credits were sitting with a mentor – getting credits for the time you spent with that mentor – and one of my mentors was a faculty member. And we often talked about sexuality and gender, and kind of my “struggle” with it at the time – kinda quote, unquote. And there was one time where he recommended that I look at straight pornography as a way to help straighten me out. And he's a PsyD on faculty. And it was just – I mean, I knew better, thankfully – but it was just the most preposterous solution to something soooo clinically understood... And I think not only in the realm of it being student and mentor, on somewhat of a personal layer, but also as student from professor. That that professor, whom I had classes with, would recommend something...

Not only did this faculty member insinuate that changing affectional orientation was possible, but went on to suggest an outrageous method of achieving that change. Leon was offended, but also talked about the shame attached to interactions like this:

... it was almost like this institution, that was supported by CACREP, had the permission to shame me indirectly, and in a one-on-one situation. That it was – this idea that as an institution, supported by CACREP, we get the permission to tell you that who you are is dirty, damaged, and disgusting, and that there's a way that we should be able to fix this, and you should be courageous enough to take what we say, and try to change yourself.

For Leon, the issue is not just the shame he experienced at this institution, but that the shame came from people in positions of trust.

Leon also saw the anti-queer, unsafe culture in the way the program discussed and trained students to respond to affectional and gender minority clients. Regarding how such issues were handled in the classroom, we had the following exchange:

LEON: But it's also actively teaching students – who will eventually become licensed professional counselors – how to discriminate clients. And I think that that is – if not grievance worthy in and of itself, I don't know what is... a worried

conservative Christian student – straight as straight can be – would say, “Oh my God, what if a gay person walks into my office!? What do I do? I don't want to counsel them.” And the professor would give them advice on how to get rid of that client.

INTERVIEWER: Like, "Here's how you can legally sidestep that client – "

LEON: Literally. And they were giving advice in a way that discriminated against community members, and the whole point of having a licensure and registering with [state agency which oversees licensure] is to make sure that you're a practitioner who is safe to treat people in the community. And this institution is turning out students who are actively being trained how to be hurtful to the clients of the community. And I think that that is just absurd. I think it's absolutely absurd. And to do it under the guise of being culturally incompetent is just – it's hypocritical.

Unfortunately, Leon even experienced the end result of this discriminatory training.

While he was attending the institution, he needed help and reached out the program for a counseling referral. They sent him to a therapist in the area who was a graduate of the program:

I can't imagine what it would be like to go – well actually I do – to call up a Christian therapist and say, “I'm a Christian, this is my journey, I don't know what to do” – I'm speaking honestly – “I'm drinking like crazy. I just crashed my car from driving drunk. I'm overly promiscuous, and I have suicidal ideation. I need help.” And then to have that Christian counselor – [*pounding on the table*] from this institution – say, “Oh, culturally I'm not competent. Sorry, I can't treat you.” I know exactly what he's saying. He's saying, “I don't want you in my practice because you're queer.” That, to me, that's a grievance. And CACREP is supporting this school to train their students how to do that particular thing. I think it's insane.

Finally, Leon highlighted the official policy of the institution as clear indication of the unsafe environment there. He explained that “... the new statements of faith and the new – I don't even know what they would call them – but the ethical guidelines as a student that they make you sign. They're blatantly anti-queer. On purpose.” Given his experiences there, he wondered about the ways in which it might be even more difficult and unsafe for other gender non-conforming students:

I can't imagine what going through that kind of program would be like as a trans person. I know one who has, but I think we're, in some ways – I think conservative Christianity is just so hung up on this idea of homosexuality, that they're light years behind on the idea of gender. And it's embarrassing... It would have been insanely painful. And I would assume majorly transphobic. The homophobia was strong; I can't imagine the transphobia.

Daisy. Like other participants, Daisy was quickly aware that her master's program was not a safe space for her because of her affectional orientation:

And, I think part of it was when I showed up. I told you I grew up in a non-Christian home and every single person at [MA program] felt like came from a Christian home and went to a Christian college... And so I think it just put me in this perspective of, like, I have to closet all of this, and none of it's safe.

Some of the ways in which Daisy experienced shame, discrimination, and lack of safety in her master's program were subtle or implicit: "There was definitely a covert, 'You do not talk about this.'" In other instances, it was more overt and explicit. Daisy is not aware of when it was developed (she did not have to sign it as an incoming student), but at some point the institution came out with "lifestyle statement" that students needed to sign:

I specifically chose you. I specifically chose you because [*pause*] like, and I'm okay if people there do not hold affirming theology and some do. I'm okay because that's how you have discourse. But that you make students sign something that they will not advocate for a different way..."

In this comment she was referring to the fact that this new "lifestyle statement" included language that not only forbid behavior associated with being an affectional or gender minority, but even prohibited advocacy for affirming viewpoints.

Another experience which highlighted the unsafe and discriminatory environment in Daisy's master's program was when a friend shared with her what she had just been taught in her Professional Orientation class:

... my friend who was in [Faculty Name]'s Professional Orientation class said – and she knew me; at this point I'd come out to a few more people – and she was just like, "I don't know how you do this." I was like, "What's going on?" She

goes, “We literally just wrote – [Faculty Name] taught us how to write in our disclosure statements that we will not serve LGBT people.”

If the program was teaching students how to turn away clients who identify affectional and gender minority clients, Daisy could clearly see that this was a place where she could never be open with those parts of her identity.

Finally, Daisy talked about a discriminatory attitude held by some people in her master’s program: “... there’s a lot of folks who associate being gay with a disorder.” The unsafe, shaming, and discriminatory environment left Daisy wondering if she had made a mistake in choosing this program. She reflected on this as she compared her experiences to the those that some of her friends (who also identify as affectional and/or gender minorities) had at more affirming institutions: “I would have loved a safer place, I think, a more support– [*pause*] I see my friends at [another MA program] and I’m like, ‘So jealous of the experience you have.’” The bottom line was that Daisy concluded, “I can’t tell anyone I’m gay here.”

Alexei. As Alexei reflected on his time in his master’s program, he described a mix of implicit and explicit anti-queer messaging. On an institutional level, he explained “...it was explicit in writing, um, in policies of the university,” and, “... some messaging from some faculty kind of reinforcing that. To stay – or, not to stay in the closet – but that there wasn’t a welcome place for that.” Alexei could also sense where different faculty stood with regard to affectional and gender minorities, even if they did not explicitly address it:

So, the beliefs of different faculty, I could read those. And so, some faculty were more conservative and their personal beliefs might have been more [*pause*] – it’s not condemning, but not affirming either. Kind of in the mindset of “everyone sins, so why are we worried about this?”

Despite his assumption that these faculty members considered an aspect of his identity to be sinful, he still did not see them as “condemning.”

Through the overt and covert messages sent by the institution and the faculty, Alexei concluded that his master’s program was not a safe place to discuss his affectional orientation. When I asked, “... were there any faculty members that you felt safe talking about this issue with or this topic with at the time?” he responded, “At the time, no.” As discussed in his brief biographical information above, complicating the situation was the fact that during his master’s program Alexei was of the mindset that his affectional orientation was sinful and he was actively trying to change it. The unsafe, anti-queer culture at the institution reinforced these ideas and contributed to his decision to keep those pieces of himself closeted.

Anti-queer environment in master’s program reinforced early messages of shame around affectional and/or gender identity minority status.

Richard. On many levels, the program and the culture created there reinforced the shame that Richard had experienced and absorbed prior to starting the program. This compounded the problem, as Richard expressed when he said, “But I think it just kind of kept piling on each other. Reinforcing.” Even in the rare instance when Richard encountered a faculty member who was supportive, he could only be somewhat open and honest with them, “... In [their] office, with the door shut.” Their support was appreciated, but the context reinforced the idea that his sexuality and gender identity was wrong, shameful, and needed to be hidden.

Luke. Growing up in a conservative Christian environment, Luke carried a great deal of shame about his affectional orientation into his master's program, as the following excerpts show:

... I was convinced it was wrong or bad... I couldn't use the word 'gay' at the time... I think "broken." That word hits a cord. Cause I think that's what it felt like. It's like I'm this broken person in the Christian community and I can't be fixed... Like, even the term "gay" to me was, like, horrifying when I first started identifying that way. I could hardly say the word, you know?

Given his upbringing, perhaps these kinds of feelings are to be expected, but the major issue for consideration in this study is how his master's program reinforced this shame:

I think shame is what drove me to really want to change and believe that for so long... my program there I don't think realizes that it is endorsing shame... one of the biggest struggles I had [during MA program] was just the shame that I had to figure out what to do with.

Leon. Like other participants, Leon carried a great deal of shame into his program from past experiences. This was highlighted even when he was filling out the admissions materials:

And even from my entrance exam. It was this really personal question on, like, describe your spiritual journey with God, or something like that. And there was no way I could *not* write that exam and kind of out myself to the institution. And so even in that it was... signed by a very a conservative, well-known Christian pastor – one of my references – and just... I remember writing – I mean, looking back on that now, it was almost like I was trying – I was writing it out of shame as though I was trying to prove why I deserved to be in the program.

As he discussed this further, it became clear that the issue was not only the shame he brought in with him, but also the shame that he experienced in and from the program:

So at first, I think that the institution – and kind of my response to it – was just reinforcing shame and – yeah, I think at that time I was just so broken, and just so lost and so desperate...

Regarding the message that this institution – and conservative Christianity more broadly – sends to affectional and gender minority students, Leon highlighted two words:

“abomination and pervert.” And went on to state:

And I think that message is subtly communicated all throughout religious Christianity, or conservative Christianity. Even in institutions. And it's – I think it's devastating that an institution could communicate that message to its students, either directly or indirectly.

Daisy. Compared to the other participants, Daisy did not seem to carry as much shame into the program. This is likely due – at least in part – to the fact that she did not grow up in a conservative Christian community or family and attended a secular college. Still, she described instances prior to starting her master's program where she lost friends and experienced rejection at times when sharing her affectional orientation.

Like the other participants, negative experiences in the program compounded this rejection and shame. After a year in the program, she finally felt safe enough with a friend to tell them about her affectional orientation. That seemed to initially be received well, but some time later she experienced this interaction with that close friend:

... [We] were driving one time – me, her, and her husband – and she's like, "Yeah, we've talked about it, we've decided we would never – we think it's important to NOT go to a gay wedding or a gay marriage event because we believe that's how we need to uphold our faith."

This led to her having to be guarded with other friends in the program:

I have struggled sometimes that some of my first friends at [MA program] that I have distanced myself from, just because I didn't want to give them the benefit of the doubt. Cause I didn't want to get hurt again.

These new experiences of shame, layered on top of prior rejections, led Daisy to conclude, “But I think it was all coming to a head of just, like, this internal identity

struggle,” a struggle that would culminate in the despair and depression discussed in theme 4.

Alexei. In a number of places during the interview, Alexei discussed the impact that early messaging had on him and how his master’s program reinforced the shame associated with those messages. At one point I paraphrased and clarified some previous statements by offering:

Okay, and so in both your bachelor's and your master's you didn't openly or outwardly identify as gay, but it was something that – it sounds like – you inwardly identified in that way, so you knew that these threats or the risk here is real for me. [ALEXEI: Right] Like, "I can't be..."

Alexei interrupted with, “Which really, at the time, added more external motivation to stay in the closet. Probably would have anyway, but it was a reinforcer.”

Intrigued by that comment, I summarized some of what he had shared, and we had the following exchange:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so that... the environment there reinforced the desire – or maybe it felt like the need – to stay in the closet [ALEXEI: Right] because it's not safe [ALEXEI: Right] to come out here. Okay. But you said you probably would have anyway at that time.

ALEXEI: Probably.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so just based on other factors in your life?

ALEXEI: Right. Upbringing. Um, I was married at the time. I didn't have kids during my bachelor's, but had young children in my master's. And [*pause*] homosexuality was just not within my acceptable worldview at the time.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so even for you personally, you felt like, "I can't be this." [ALEXEI: Right] Or, "this is something I need to fix, work on, get rid of..."

ALEXEI: Right. Right.

Two things became apparent: first, Alexei had absorbed a great deal of destructive messaging regarding his affectional orientation prior to starting his master's program. Second, the program and institution reinforced that messaging.

Later in the interview Alexei was talking about the fact that he had few, if any, close relationships with anyone in his master's program. I asked, "What do you attribute that to?" and he responded, "Um, general personality." However, as he unpacked what that meant, he shared a number of explanations, including:

I realized I was gay at 13, and that also was not very safe [INTERVIEWER: Yeah] in the 90's – late 80's, 90's. So just needing to stay in the closet – and wanting to – just reinforced very shallow friendships. So by the time I was 30 I was pretty set in personality [*laughs*].

It seemed to me at this point in the interview that perhaps it was not just "general personality," but fear and lack of safety learned at a young age and reinforced in his master's program that led to Alexei's shallow relationships. I followed up on that suspicion by saying:

Yeah, like you said, couple different reasons – couple different things feeding into the need/desire to just keep people, a little bit, at arm's length [ALEXEI: Right]. And, uh, it feels like there's maybe some connections there between your upbringing, your realization – even at 13 – that, like, "Okay, this is a part of who I am, but it's not okay, it's not something [ALEXEI: Right] I can share with other people," and then being at an undergrad and a master's program that – in some ways explicitly and then, it sounds like, in many ways implicitly – reinforced those ideas [ALEXEI: Right].

Alexei interjected with "Right" a number of times throughout my comment and nodded his head in affirmation. When I finished speaking, he responded with, "Definitely."

In a related discussion, Alexei stated that he was, "Actively fighting [his affectional orientation] from probably within a week of realizing when I was 13." This helps to reveal the breadth and depth of the pain that he carried with him into the

program. That shame and self-condemnation was deeply tied to Alexei's faith, beliefs, and worldview. It was easily reinforced by the anti-queer environment at his institution, and it even resisted any small amounts of acceptance he found in others:

INTERVIEWER: ... maybe not a ton of overt discrimination, but nowhere where there was any kind of acceptance or affirmation or "this part of me is okay."

ALEXEI: Well, even when there was I couldn't – I couldn't accept that theologically... You're saying you accept me, but you're wrong.

Ambivalence about their time in their master's program and a desire to find meaning and purpose in the pain. As they look back upon their time in their respective master's programs, all participants expressed a sense of ambivalence. While there were countless experiences of pain and shame, there were also positive experiences, meaningful relationships built which continue today, and moments of important personal and professional growth. This ambivalence came to represent a sense that participants were searching for meaning and purpose in the midst of the suffering they had experienced. Most appeared to draw strength from those challenging times, seeing them as integral to their growth and development. For some participants, this also seemed to manifest in being overly gracious toward the people, program, and/or institution, often considering things supportive or affirming that felt more neutral at best, or even still shaming in some instances.

Richard. Despite the pain and difficulty that Richard experienced during his master's program, he looks back on that time with an understanding that it played a role in making him who he is today:

I sometimes wonder if things would have been different – how fast, how long I would have been transitioned, you know? But then the other part of me has to say, "This is my journey. This is part of my story and there's a reason for everything." And, you know, some of my students have transitioned with me. Like, they have

to – I mean, they’ve seen me before testosterone, before surgery – I mean, they’ve kind of lived this experience with me. And in a sense, you know, what better education can you get on transition?

Richard seems to see the experiences in his master’s program as difficult, but essential in shaping the kind of counselor and counselor educator he would become. When asked if he would go back and do it again, he responded, “... on the one hand I feel like I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

One concrete way in which he sees this in his life is through how much he values authenticity:

... but it really does help me become a better professor because I preach wellness to my students and I’m very authentic about my struggles... I think I value that authentic relationship [with students] because of my experiences... I think there’s a reason why I had to go through all that. I have to believe that. Because the struggle of going through all that has made me such a stronger person. Maybe I wouldn’t be as authentic as I am now.

This attribution of meaning and purpose to the struggle certainly applies to Richard’s view of his professional roles, but even extends beyond that to essentially every facet of life, which he sums up by saying, “... all of this [suffering] makes me a better professor – counselor educator – makes me a better supervisor, makes me a better counselor, makes me a better friend, I mean, and also a better family member.”

Luke. I experienced Luke to be an incredibly kind, gracious person, so it perhaps should not come as a surprise that he was quite forgiving when discussing his master’s program. He seemed to give the institution the benefit of the doubt, assume the best, and find a silver lining. With regard to how the program treated him with respect to his affectional orientation he said:

I guess I feel like they were somewhat gracious to me as long as there was, kinda, like this boundary that I have to be careful not to cross, um, you know in terms of

what I do. And I would, honestly, I hid. You know, I dated somebody, and I didn't share that with the school. I'm sure that wouldn't have been approved.

His desire to paint the program in a favorable light can also be seen in comments like, “I think I tried to fight being bitter and resentful, so I was like, ‘I don’t want to be angry.’ But, I mean, I was.”

Luke addressed this topic again later in the interview, explaining that his time in his master’s program was:

... a mixture of anger, trying to fight being resentful and being bitter, cause I definitely knew students who were, and I didn't want to be that. But also, yeah, being pissed off and – yeah, it's this weird ball of emotions.

The “weird ball of emotions” that Luke references here is perhaps what makes talking about this period in his life so complex. While he was angry and hurt during his time there, Luke also found things to be thankful for:

You know, the thing I’m grateful for was I didn’t understand privilege before I went through that experience... and for the first time, when I didn’t have it, I was like, “Okay, now I get it.”

Related to ambivalence, this comment is an example of what other participants shared: an attempt to attribute meaning and purpose to the painful experiences in their master’s programs. In discussing whether or not he would go back and attend that program again, he stated that he would not, but then added, “...I don’t regret [attending MA program], but it was extremely painful to go through...”

Leon. Like other participants, Leon looks back on his master’s program with some ambivalence. He found meaning in the journey in spite of, or perhaps in some ways, because of the struggle:

At the time it almost felt like God was up to something bigger than what the institution stood for. Like, almost like saying, “Yeah, you're gonna have to go through this too, and have your program that feels like the desert to get to this

plush oasis on the other side. But if you don't go through that particular desert, you're not gonna know what that lush oasis looks like. Cause that's the only route to get to it." And it felt like, in a sense, God was saying, like, "Yeah, I know this was a desert, but you needed it." And so it kind of made returning back to that campus a little bit easy... Kind of more of a spiritual or an existential purpose, rather than just this place that's full of hateful people [*laughs*].

In this comment Leon shows both his appreciation for his experiences and the ways in which his time in his master's program shaped him, while still acknowledging the harshness of the "desert" in which he had found himself.

At times in the interview, Leon also extended grace to some of the people at the institution, including some who had hurt him. With regard to a staff member in the program, he said, "... she had read my entrance essay, and she just never, ever treated me with any sort of disrespect." Similar to what some other participants shared, Leon appeared to equate a simple lack of disrespect or discrimination with support or affirmation, even though the situation seemed to be more neutral. Speaking about people who were more openly homophobic or discriminatory, he shared:

It was easy for me to differentiate someone's unacknowledged homophobia from how they respected and maybe even loved me. Cause I definitely felt love from some of the – like, honest love – from some of the faculty. And even if they differed from me theologically, I could still differentiate that they didn't quite understand what they were doing or how their homophobia was affecting me, cause I don't think that they really knew that it was homophobia. And so it was kind of just this ability to give them grace and compassion. But I think that's – that's nothing different. I mean, that still happens today as part of the queer community; we're doing that all day long, every day, with a lot of people.

While acknowledging the pain, anger, and shame he experienced there, Leon also said things like:

I am so thankful and proud that I went to that institution, because I feel, again, it was a place where I could discover myself. Not only as a queer person – going through this desert that I keep referring to – but also it allowed me to integrate the two most profound aspects of my identity, which was that spirituality piece and sexuality piece. And to go to an institution where I learned how to converge the

two of them so beautifully, in addition to converging my identity as therapist, was just – it's a gift.

He went on to unpack this further, explaining that his time in his master's program helped him to see his sexuality and his spirituality as:

Like two puzzle pieces that had never seen each other, but they were an exact match for one another. It just – I keep using this word “serendipitous” cause I don't want to use a religious word [*shared laughter*], but in this regard I feel like I have to: it just feels like it's my calling. Like, I feel so purposeful to serve in this role and I felt like it was just my path. I had to be born in that home, to those parents, in that culture, in that church, and go through that desert, because I was destined for this oasis... I was supposed to be bathed in those hormones and born to those parents so that I could do this work on the planet. And I believe in that full-heartedly.

In the follow-up interview, I wondered if this integration happened “in spite of the program, rather than because of it,” because “the program would not have you integrate those things in the way you did,” and he responded:

This is the way it felt to me at the time, was almost like God was saying, “This is the place – this is the program that's going to ask you to do things, and those things will be the mechanisms that will transform you.” Like, for instance, we had to have a certain amount of counseling hours and the counselor that I picked was a professor, but was also a progressive Christian. And so the program made me take like four counseling sessions, or whatever, but I fell in love with the therapist. And that therapist was the one who helped me reconcile sexuality and spirituality. And then in Cultural Counseling we had to do the cultural immersion project, and I chose the gay Christian community, cause I wasn't a part of it at the time, and so I went to [name of church] which was a massively transformative place for me.

Leon explained that the way he went about fulfilling program requirements played a critical role in his integration process, even though that integration would not have been endorsed by the institution. “It's very ironic,” he said, followed by shared laughter. I summarized and paraphrased what he had stated by saying, “the program played a role, but not in the way they intended,” to which Leon said, “Right. For sure. Yes.”

As he suggested when he stated that he was born to “do this work on the planet,” Leon sees the shame and discrimination he experienced, both inside and outside of his program, as uniquely positioning him to help other affectional and gender minority individuals who find themselves in similar situations:

I could sit with a client who's at that conservative church with those conservative Christian parents, and I can say, “Dude, I know what that shame feels like, and I know the way out of it. I know what the homophobia feels like.” ... and it's because I walked through that path that now I have that perspective – as a clinician, not only just as a human.

Daisy. Like the other participants, Daisy looks back on her time in her master’s program with ambivalence. She described the shame and lack of safety discussed above, and talked about dissuading “probably almost a dozen” people from attending that program, but went on to add:

“I feel a little crappy [for dissuading the other prospective students], cause I don’t regret my education. I don’t. And I love the people I met... I met these amazing people... so I wouldn’t trade any of it for the world.”

These positive experiences seem to outweigh or at least balance out some of the negative ones when Daisy is trying to make sense of her time there.

A key piece of that evaluation appears to be not just experiences, but relationships that Daisy developed during her master’s program:

And it's like, [name of someone in MA program with her] – he was my best man at my wedding. You know, like, I met the life-long friends who got me to the point where I could come out to my family. And watching them all do the same – come out to their families or embrace dating. And I think that's the thing is that we were literally all in the same space.

This ambivalence regarding relationships even extended to those that were not so supportive or affirming. When speaking about the friend she referenced earlier who stated they would not attend a gay wedding, Daisy shared:

... like it's the hardest thing [*inaudible*]. Cause, like, I mean I have sat in her kitchen and said, "I struggle to be a Christian in mainstream Christianity because the church is just so abusive to so many minority groups, including sexual minorities, gender minorities, I mean, even racial minorities – literally at every level." I just remember crying in her kitchen. And the thing is, she fully loves me and so sometimes I have this internal struggle. Like, I purposely did push her away, and should I have given her the benefit of the doubt to stay friends, you know?

She extends so much grace to this friend, says that she “fully loves me,” and wonders if she should have “given her the benefit of the doubt,” despite the fact that this person openly told her that she would not support her marriage to another women.

Alexei. Throughout our time together, Alexei seemed to downplay how painful, difficult, and challenging his time was during his master’s program. At times I wondered if my feelings around this were examples of my own bias coming through, but there were also moments when he expressed deep despair (which will be addressed in theme 4 below). One example of ambivalence came in his discussion of his relationship with a faculty member with whom he felt a very close connection:

There was one faculty in particular that I was very close to, in both my BA and MA, and had for several classes, and would talk during office hours – very, very close to. And I knew even then that while she was generally affirming of LGBTQ in general, that she also made some very definitive statements about marriage and knew that she wouldn't be. And that turned out to be true. Obviously, after graduating, don't have nearly the same contact, but still professional contact ongoing through other organizations and things like that. And she's avoided. We didn't have any conversation at all for probably a good five years and then I ran into her – it was a conference or somewhere – I ran into her and forced [*laughs*], forced a conversation, and she didn't apologize, but she did say that – she did say that she was disappointed, but that when she saw how I still maintained my commitment to my family and my kids, that [*pause*] that she approved of that, if that makes, er, forget the exact wording, but basically because I took care of my family obligations, that I was okay. Still wasn't – well, "okay" – it's not good.

Within this statement, it felt as though Alexei was minimizing not only how painful this experience was, but also in some ways excusing this faculty member’s behavior, even

going as far as to call her “generally affirming of LGBTQ” despite how she treated him. I followed this up by wondering how it was for Alexei to have this interaction with her:

INTERVIEWER: I wonder what it was like for you to really, it sounds like, look up to this person – to feel close to this faculty member – and yet know that, like, there's a part of me that she doesn't accept or isn't okay with.

ALEXEI: Uh [*pause*] I won't say that I didn't care, cause there was a certain sense of loss there, but in a sea of losses it was one more. So it wasn't particularly poignant.

This comment suggested that part of the ambivalence Alexei expressed may be related to how much loss, pain, and shame he had experience before and during his master's program in other ways; perhaps he had come to expect poor treatment, so experiences like this did not stand out. Still, he chose to talk about it during our interview, so it has clearly stayed with him.

Alexei's also expressed ambivalence when talking broadly about the program and his overall view of it. Around the midpoint of the interview I asked if he could go back, would he still choose to attend that institution for his master's program. He responded, “If I had the experience or the understanding of advocacy that I have now, then yes, I would pretty much go in and dare them to kick me out [*laughs*].” Yet toward the end of our time, when reflecting on his program and comparing it to others in the country, he said:

I still know the faculty there, I know that this program is doing a good job with meeting the guidelines, but also the intent of ACA in affirming the LGBT community, and probably continuing to get pushback from the university. There are some other programs that I'm very afraid of.

As noted earlier, he also referred to the faculty as “not condemning, but not affirming either.” It was difficult to make sense of or reconcile how these statements fit together, but demonstrated a similar ambivalence to that seen in other participants' accounts.

Theme 2: Participants Experienced a Culture of Control and Fear In Their Master's Programs

Related to the anti-queer culture of Theme 1, participants described a culture of control and fear in their master's program and the CCIs which housed those programs. The control was experienced with regard to both their behavior and their thoughts or beliefs, and was encountered through formal policies and statements of faith, messages and teachings presented by faculty, and the resources and perspectives offered (or not) in their institutions. This culture of control led to fear around their affectional and gender identities, as well as their standing in the program for some participants.

Richard. Control and fear were present for Richard from the moment he entered his master's program when he had to sign a code of conduct:

I remember signing paperwork – to back up a little bit – I remember, cause I lived in the dorms, there was some code of conduct and, cause it's Catholic, it was like, the “no premarital sex.” And it listed all kinds of things. So, I mean, on that, again, I thought I could kinda fly [under the radar] – and they mention “no homosexual activity,” and things like that in the dorms.

The control that the institution tried to impose upon students and the threat of punishment resulted in fear for Richard.

He was afraid that he would be kicked out of the program, which would have been especially disruptive given that he was living in a new place where he had no support systems, living in the dorms, and using financial aid to help cover living expenses:

And this was this fear of one, not being accepted in a new city. Of, “I don't know anyone here” – I didn't – I don't have family there... I can't get kicked out of this program... where am I gonna live? You know, those kinds of things. Like, living off of financial aid. It was just – just a struggle.

Richard also found that the program exerted control with regard to students' religious beliefs on a broader level, pushing a particular agenda or dogma, even in the classroom:

... it's just this constant – like, I had one professor share sermons in class because it had some – I forget how she identified it with – but it had *nothing* to do with counseling. Like, how she tried to connect it didn't connect... I even walked out of class when the sermon was played cause it was very fire and brimstone kind of stuff. And I was just like, “What the hell – feel like I'm back at [BA program].” So, it was – I don't know, it was rough. It was just constant messages that this – you're supposed to believe in this way

Control and fear were nothing new; Richard discussed fear that was present prior to, during, and after his master's program. It was a constant driving force for him, which expressed when he said, “So much fear. And so that carried me through.”

Luke. For Luke, fear was something he carried into his master's program, but it was also reinforced by the institution. He shared that, “... so much of my faith was just fear-based. Like, ‘Believe this or you're gonna be in trouble.’” This fear of “trouble” was still very present in his program, where he felt, “I could have easily been a target if I was too vocal... honestly, I hid. You know, I dated somebody and I didn't share that with the school. I'm sure that wouldn't have been approved.” He also experienced the institution attempting to control student belief and behavior:

... it's not, “Let's explore your faith.” It's, “Here's how you have to believe about your faith.”... I didn't feel like I could even explore any other option. Like, if you go outside this boundary, you're doomed... your soul's at stake... don't pass this certain boundary cause once you do it's, like, a place of no return... but just feeling like that kind of summarizes how I felt about being at [MA program]. Cause it's like, there's a little bit of wiggle room maybe. You can say you're gay as long as you're not passing the boundary of doing anything. But once you pass that line, you're doomed.

Given what Luke expressed here, it would appear that not only did the institution exert control, but it did so by leveraging the existential fear he described.

Luke also experienced control in his master's program when he was getting ready to graduate:

So one of the things I was kind of upset about at the end was when they asked me to re-sign the faith statement. At the very end of the program. I mean, I was done with school and they wanted me to re-sign the faith statement. I was like, "Well, what if I say no? Like, I'm not gonna graduate?" ... So I pretty much just said, "You know what, screw you, I'll sign your paper. Give me my diploma." But I didn't align with the faith statement anymore.

He felt it was inappropriate to have students sign a statement of faith at the end of their program, reiterating his previous point: "... not even from an LGBT stance – like, any student – I'm like, 'If I had gone through this program and no longer felt like I could align with this particular statement, like, am I not gonna graduate?'" To be clear, the statement of faith he had to sign on the back end of the program did not specifically address affectional orientation or gender identity; it simply spoke to tenets of conservative Christian faith. For Luke, this was an overstep and an example of control, even if it did not directly relate to his affectional orientation.

Part of the issue here was not only that Luke's perspective had changed during his time in the program, but the stance of the program and larger institution was changing as well:

I went into [MA program] kind of in a transition period for them... So going into the program I was never asked to sign, like, a faith statement or anything like that, that I recall. In terms of, like, sexuality. I think they came out with one while I was a student there.

Luke came to a place where that control forced him into a lose-lose situation and left him questioning his integrity:

I guess that makes you think about your own morality. Like, do I feel immoral saying I agree with these things just to get my diploma? But I was like [*pause*] I feel like they put you in this bind where you really don't have an option.

Fear and control were present in Luke's life when he entered his graduate work, but those issues seem to have been exacerbated by the program's shift to a more conservative stance, while he was moving in the opposite direction.

Leon. Leon experienced control in his institution in a number of ways, but perhaps the most pronounced was with respect to the resources provided by the institution and encouraged by the program:

... any time resources – academic, scientific resources – were used to talk about homosexuality, it came from Mark Yarhouse or the Balswicks. Conservative Christian psychologists doing research in the area who would – and probably still would if they were alive, although Mark is – would say that it's a sin. It's sinful. That you can change. And even providing resources from NARTH [National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality] and Joseph Nicolosi that would say, “this is how you create change –” And that is so empirically incorrect and inaccurate, but they're still using these resources as though they have scientific claim. And to be a student coming there for the sole purpose to change sexual orientation, because Christianity purports that it was possible...

Leon went on to discuss the direct impact that this had on his mental and emotional state:

And then to step into that school, and get into their library, and start reading the books that they're providing on my syllabi that say change is still possible, to then feel like it's not possible – I'm not surprised that I was drinking like crazy and sleeping around, because I was so lost and hopeless. And I think it's just a tragedy that students who are so desperate for hope would land in these institutions, only to experience that same path.

Later in the interview, Leon reflected on what he labeled “the illusion of control” that institutions like this hold:

This idea that I have this illusion that I control your mood, and your choices, and your actions, and your appraisals of me, and your morality. And I think that that is just so incredibly narcissistic of Christian institutions... That we can preserve God and Christianity by limiting what you learn. It's, like, mind blowing.

This theme of fear and control was also present when Leon discussed the ways in which the program has changed since his time there and moved in a decidedly anti-queer direction:

... slowly over time I began seeing the school lose its ability to provide safety for queer students. And turn it from a safe place where a healthy conversation of cultural diversity and sexual diversity was happening, to a place where it was a return back to a very conservative theological unsafe place for students.

He credits the program with at least creating some space for dialogue around affectional and gender diversity during his time there, but he has since seen the institution negatively influence that openness:

And the ability that the president had to shut that kind of cultural – that dialogue of cultural diversity – down is, I think, dramatically impairing its students on how to have cultural competency.

Leon sees this not only impacting the ability of the program to train culturally competent counselors, but also to provide safety for affectional and gender minority students: "... it's lost that safety, the ability to be that for people. Which means they've lost – in my opinion – the ability to do that transformative work that a queer student would need."

One of the factors which contributed to the program feeling safer or more supportive during his time there than it is now was Leon's relationship with the program chair. That individual even hired Leon as an adjunct professor after he graduated, but he is no longer the program chair. With regard to Leon's experience teaching in the program, he said, "But that was a different institution at the time. I – after four years, when the president kind of put in some new principles and some new standards – I was not invited back to teach after my fourth year of teaching."

Due to the changes at the institution and program levels, when I asked Leon if he would go back and enroll there again, he stated:

I'm afraid that if I was a student now, and 10 years from now, I would say, "Absolutely not." Because of the new statements of faith and the new – I don't even know what they would call them – but the ethical guidelines as a student that they make you sign. They're blatantly anti-queer. On purpose.

In an earlier part of the interview Leon had used the metaphor of a desert and an oasis to describe his time at the institution (desert) and where he finds himself today (oasis); I suggested that it also sounded as though perhaps the program was a bit of an oasis within the broader desert of the institution, but that the oasis has since dried up. To this he replied, “Yep. Totally. Someone's come in and pumped the water out on purpose.”

Daisy. This theme was most present for Daisy with respect to a panel discussion on sexuality that the institution facilitated. Daisy explained that the panel included a gender non-conforming individual and gay man, but the message presented was still very in line with the positions of the institution. Specifically, the gay man on the panel discussed the fact that he believed he needed to be celibate rather than act upon his attractions. She appreciated the panel discussion to a degree and said, “I actually thought [the panel discussion] was fairly progressive of them to do, but what if they'd had an affirming voice there?... It wasn't uniform or equal footing.” She felt as though the institution was sheltering students from certain viewpoints; that the panel ‘discussion’ was more of a presentation or seminar pushing the institution’s agenda.

Daisy also saw the program move to a more conservative, anti-queer position during her time there. She explained that the program was, “3rd-way – meaning not non-affirming or affirming – [MA program] was 3rd-way-ish when I started there.” However, she noticed a marked shift, typified by the institution’s decision to “[implement] the lifestyle statement, or whatever it's called.” This “lifestyle statement” contained language which was clearly discriminatory toward affectional and gender minorities. She accessed this document on her computer during the follow-up interview and read an excerpt. While the entire excerpt is not included here in order to help maintain confidentiality, it argued

that God's intent for sexual relationships is confined to "heterosexual marriage" and included a statement specifically condemning any expression of diverse gender identity.

Related to this, Daisy's overall experience was one of not fully being a part of the community or not having a seat at the table. Even in places where the program was more tolerant of the conversation around affectional and gender minority communities, such as the panel discussion, she still felt like those communities were denied full participation. She summed up her sense of the place of voices like hers in the institution by saying, "It's like a door shutting. You can watch through the window."

She also felt this control in the lack of resources available at the institution with regard to affectional and gender minorities:

Literally all we had was "read 'The Heart of Female Same-Sex Attraction'" – that was like the only book we all had. We all read it too. Every girl with same-sex attraction's read it. [*shared laughter*] And it's so funny cause I'm like, "I liked it." Because, again, I read it when I was, like, trying to remain celibate, which is kinda what it talks about. And my friend was like, "I burned that shit." And I finally was like, "I'll burn mine too." I need some kindling. [*shared laughter*] Cause, yeah, I'm pretty sure it was [MA program faculty name] that told me about that book.

These feelings have remained beyond her time in the program; she was recently invited to speak in another panel discussion on campus, but she believes that the institution is unaware of how she identifies, and concluded, "Well, if they really knew who I was, would I be invited?"

Alexei. For Alexei, his affectional orientation certainly carried with it the possibility of severe consequences at the CCI he attended for his master's program, however, he was "still pretty deep in the closet at that point," and had become quite adept at hiding his orientation. In that sense, he may not have felt a strong sense of fear. Still,

when discussing the institution's stance on affectional and gender minorities, he offered comments such as:

it was explicit in writing, um, in policies of the university... and it was occasionally addressed – not very often – but occasionally addressed that [*pause*] just adhering to the values of the university. And it was made pretty explicit that if you didn't you could be removed.”

To this statement, I responded, “So it's a written policy, but it's also being reinforced in things like chapel, or just – like, it's being addressed from up front that, like, if you don't fit within these guidelines then your time here is at risk.” Alexei replied, “Right.” While he had no plans of coming out, he knew that there could be disastrous results if he did.

Alexei also took issue with the idea that the program would try to control student behavior outside of the confines of the institution, whether that control was related to affectional orientation and gender identity or not. When discussing the institution's policies and position with regard to diverse affectional orientations and gender identities, I said, “So it sounds like during your time there, in some ways, you may have even agreed with the policies at the school,” given his personal views at the time. He responded with, “[*pause*] Um, no, not really. Just – even at that time, being pretty conservative, I didn't think what students did – when they're not in class – mattered.”

Alexei seemed to be suggesting that even if he held the same position as the institution at the time, that they had no right to tell him how to live his life outside the walls of that institution. We had the following exchange:

INTERVIEWER: ... at that time you might have agreed, sort of, like, theologically with the position of the school on a topic such as LGBTQ [ALEXEI: Right], but as a student you're like, "You don't get to tell me what to do in every aspect of my life.

ALEXEI: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Gotcha. Okay. And so, personal religious views aside, it felt like, well, this policy is an overstep.

ALEXEI: Right.

Theme 3: Closeting or Trying to Change Affectional Orientation and/or Gender Identity was Extremely Destructive

Due to the culture and environment described in Themes 1 and 2, participants found themselves in a place where closeting was the only way to stay safe. As each participant described their experiences, it became clear that this was much more difficult than they had originally anticipated at the time they entered their master's programs. It also seemed to cause significant personal damage, much of which the participants did not fully recognize or understand at the time. There was a sense that in pushing through and simply trying to survive, they were somewhat unaware of how detrimental it was, only fully realizing that damage years later. Participants also described feeling stuck or trapped in a lose-lose situation where they were too far into the program to transfer, but also not willing to quit and lose all of the work and money they had put in.

All of the participants had been closeted to some degree, or at least in certain circles, prior to entering their programs. Some were completely closeted and even actively trying to change their affectional and/or gender identity in order to align with the norms of their conservative Christian communities. However, they went into their master's programs with a wide range of expectations. Some hoped they could be out in their program – that a counseling program would be more accepting than the larger institution; others planned to stay closeted; one even hoped the program might help them change their affectional orientation or gender identity. A common thread was that

navigating those things in such a discriminatory environment often proved to be more challenging than expected.

Richard. Even though Richard attended a conservative Christian institution for his master's degree, he went in with the hope that his program would be more accepting than the larger institution. However, he quickly realized otherwise, which he found "...very disheartening [*pause*] cause I was like, I thought a counseling program would be more accepting and understanding. And I was like, 'Crap, I'm just gonna have to stay closeted again... I thought maybe this [would] be a better experience.'" Disappointed and relegated to the idea that he would have to continue "Living a double life," Richard still felt that it would not be that difficult; he had been closeted for a long time, so how hard could a few more years be?

Unfortunately, it proved much more challenging and destructive than he expected, though he was not fully aware of it at the time:

I've been so closeted – at that time I didn't realize how much damage that was doing to my internal self, you know, my mental health... in my MA I was on medication. It was a struggle... that incongruence of knowing who I am and the messages of what society is telling me.

The "damage" and "struggle" that Richard describe largely revolved around a lack of safety and the impact that had on his well-being:

If I'm really who I am, am I safe?... safety is at the very bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And so, if I don't have that, then how am I ever going to be self-actualized? Because I'm still worried about safety...

Richard went on to explain that, "People thrive in supportive environments, you know? Instead of just surviving. I think that's what I was doing for so long, was just trying to find a way to survive." The result for Richard was a situation where he was simply trying to put his head down and get through, unaware of the damage that was doing.

Luke. Given the anti-queer culture and discriminatory environment in his master's program, Luke was very closeted for much of his time there. However, he had not anticipated how difficult that would be:

... it was challenging...confusing, stressful... it just felt, like, so disconnected... there's just such a disconnect. It's all about your head knowledge and your theology and you're just supposed to, like, disconnect from your emotions and your body. I was disconnected.

He went on to share:

... again, it's just that dualism of, like, you're supposed to just disconnect what feels like a very core piece of who you are. Sexuality is a very innate part of being a human being, that I'm supposed to just cut off? Deny? Ignore? I don't know what they want me to do with it... that's just a core piece of being a human. Part of human experience. What do I do with my attractions, my sexuality? It's just this whole piece of being a human, but the program's just like, 'We don't talk about it.'

Similar to other participants, Luke was not aware at the time of how destructive this was for him:

I wasn't consciously aware of it at the time – I mean, it's looking back on it later, and going like, okay, that's what I did. I just disassociated, disconnected, said, "I can't – I don't want to feel this depressed, so I'm just gonna shut off this piece of me for now so that I can survive, get through, do what I have to do."

Complicating this process was the fact that Luke had to navigate his experiences largely alone and unsupported: "Pretty much by yourself, I think, that's how it felt. Few little places here and there, but yeah, no support really."

In the midst of this struggle, Luke considered other options, such as transferring to another program or quitting. However, he found that other schools would not take enough of his credits, and quitting the program was unpalatable because of all of the time, energy, and money he had already committed:

I'm not gonna throw away all this money and time and stress. So I was like, "I'm just gonna keep my head down and I'm gonna get through this"... I just got to the

point where I was just like, “Screw you. Tell me what I gotta sign. Tell me what I gotta do. Get me out of the door so I can move on with my life,” is what I felt like.

Again, Luke was in a desperate situation, but dropping out simply did not seem like a viable option:

What if I realize, “okay, this isn’t something I align with.” – Well now what do I do? ... I’m stuck. Cause do I quit? Cause that’s where I was. I was like – I’d gone halfway through the program and I was like, “There’s no way in hell I’m quitting now and starting over.”

Ultimately, Luke resolved to “Trudge through. Survive. Make it through. Get your degree. Move on with life... I was willing to go through the pain.”

Luke pressed on and graduated, but the difficulty and pain continued throughout the remainder of the program:

Especially at the end when I was just like, “Screw this place... This is where I’m at. I’m gay. I’m dating a guy. I’m stuck at this school”... but you just feel stuck in that place of, “Well, what do I do now?”... and I guess that’s what sucks, is you feel like you’re just lying, faking – just feeding them what you feel like they want to hear.

Leon. As discussed earlier, Leon went into the program hoping to change his affectional orientation and gender identity, but also expecting the program itself to help in that process:

And so I went there feeling as though I was broken... I chose that particular Christian institution because I wanted to see if I could change myself. So my goal was to see if I could find something in a journal article or if, somehow, a deep, emotionally vulnerable relationship with a male mentor could help me change my gender identity and my sexual orientation.

In conjunction with these feelings of brokenness, Leon felt a sense of desperation. He believed that the program was his last chance in a literal, existential life and death situation. He was willing to do whatever he had to in order to get into the program:

I definitely had to sign a statement of faith that I just – I mean, I lied. I had to sign it because I was so desperate. But if I was – if I was honest with the institution, I wouldn't have even been accepted. I couldn't have signed the statement of faith... the alternative was to not get in, and then lose the hope that I could change. I mean going to this institution represented hope that I could be straight, and I had to sign that form because it was my last hope. It was deep theological training and access to resources I didn't have otherwise, or live powerless against my own sexual orientation... Lie on this form or go to hell.

Soon after starting the program though, a hopelessness began to set in. Leon directly connected his desperation and despair with his experiences in the program:

I started in January of 2009, and the summer of 2009 I just drank myself silly. Even while I was taking summer classes. So, yeah, and it was just this feeling of, "I'm just broken as a human." ... I was trusting people who carried that PsyD or PhD, CACREP badge with my identity and trying to make them happy on a personal level, and then intrapersonally feeling so hopeless and damaged. I just spiraled out of control. And that's, I think, why I drank so much.

Leon went on to explain that in his experiences both prior to starting his master's program and during his time there, "my religion literally taught me how to hate myself."

Daisy. When Daisy and I discussed this idea of needing to stay closeted during her master's program, she reiterated what some other participants had shared: that she went in thinking it would not really be much of an issue. In this part of our conversation, I paraphrased her previous comments by saying, "...it's not even that big of a part of my life right now. It might be who I am, but outwardly there won't be..." and she interrupted with, "And that's exactly how I went into my MA program." However, she quickly realized that there was much more to it than simply not dating someone, or shutting down some small piece of herself:

But my first year I was so much more both closeted about my personality or my gender identity, sexual identity kinda piece, but just my personality. My being. Like all of these different aspects that I had been so much more free and open about in college.

Not only was this much more difficult than Daisy expected, but as the end of that comment shows, it came as quite a shock to the system since she had been able to be so much more open and authentic in her undergraduate program. This appears to have compounded the struggle for Daisy.

Daisy ended going through her entire first year in the program without coming out to a single person at the institution: "... and I came out to the first person that I came out to [during master's program]. And it was summer after my first year. So I went a whole year there without coming out in any capacity." When she finally did work up the courage to come out to someone in her master's program – a close friend that she had built trust with – she only found more shame and rejection. It ended up being the friend referenced earlier who told her that she and her husband would never attend a gay wedding because of their faith.

In reflecting on her master's program and how closeted she needed to be, she offered, "I think we had to do our journeys the way we had to do our journeys because it was what was safe for us." And yet, this safety came at a cost. Daisy went on to say that during that time in her life, "I had never been so depressed and lonely." She ultimately decided that "I just gotta keep my head down and finish."

Alexei. At the time Alexei entered his master's program, he was not only closeted, but did not accept his affectional orientation and had been actively working on changing it. He was also married and had children, which added to his internal sense that he needed to closet and "fix" this piece of his identity. At times in the interview, he seemed to downplay the impact that being so closeted had on him. However, in some places his responses still suggested that it was more difficult and detrimental than he

expected. In the interview I asked, "... and so, going into your master's program, did you anticipate or did you expect to run up against this issue? Being in a place where it feels not safe to come out of the closet?" Alexei responded, "Um [*pause*] not really." He went on to share:

There was a lot of self-condemnation. Still very much buying in to the overall message of reparative therapy, that if you just try hard enough that this will go away. And if you're not – that you can change this – and if you're not changing this, then it just means that you're not trying hard enough. You don't have enough faith. You don't have enough belief.

Reflecting on that period in his life and comparing it to how he feels now, he said, "I'm not hiding again. For any reason." When I later suggested, "... it sounds like a really lonely time in your life," he replied, "Definitely." And again later, when I offered, "Sounds like a lot of shame around that topic," he said, "Yeah." Despite his often brief responses, it would appear that the messages and subsequent closeting in Alexei's program were damaging, even though at the time it was a normal part of his life. This notion becomes even more clear when examining his responses in theme 4 below.

Theme 4: The Damage Described In Theme 3 Led to a Breaking Point

The despair and hopelessness that resulted from theme 3, and the fact that participants were navigating this process largely alone, led to a breaking point where they realized that something had to change. This breaking point often included suicidal ideation for participants. All but one participant experienced suicidal ideation during their master's programs, leading to a suicide attempt for one of them (Richard). Participants directly linked those suicidal thoughts and feelings to the shame, sense of brokenness, depression, and/or hopelessness of that period of time in their lives. These devastating

situations all seemed to revolve around how destructive it was to live so inauthentically for so long. The exception was Luke, though he did discuss the fact that he could understand how people in similar situations end up contemplating suicide. He credited the support of his family with mitigating that risk in his own life.

Richard. For Richard, closeting and absorbing the shame he encountered in the program had devastating effects. This seems to be due, at least in part, to the fact that he lived on campus; he was constantly surrounded by the discriminatory culture at his institution. He made it through the program, but shortly after Richard described reaching his breaking point when he said:

And I got to a point of, “I’m gonna die if I stay like this.” I mean, really, truly, I am. I mean, whether I take my own life or – I feel so dead inside... So I think it's just all these experiences of, you know, telling me – I think having to be closeted so long, just, again, pushed back everything.”

In statements like this Richard provided a clear link between staying closeted for as long as he did and the toll that it took on his mental health. Even other people in Richard’s life could see the desperate and precarious place that he was in: “Cause [my parents] saw the depression, and they were like, ‘We’re gonna lose him – we’re gonna lose Richard if we don’t support him.’” This depression culminated in a suicide attempt. It was Richard’s second attempt in his life; he had an attempt in high school as well. In reflecting on that period of his life, Richard shared:

...it got to a point [in his doctoral program] where either I was gonna stuff this piece of me or – [*pause*] and I was becoming really depressed and starting to withdraw and isolate... I don’t care what happens. I can’t keep this inside anymore... I mean, again, had a huge mental break about two years ago when I realized I can’t stay stuck in that space... I’m not living this way anymore.”

As discussed above in Theme 1, despite the overwhelming pain and despair of that period in Richard’s life, he looks back on it through a lens of meaning and purpose: “I think

surviving suicide, for me, twice in my life – there has to be meaning... Like, there's gotta be a reason and some good that comes from that – that complete suffering of internal self.”

Luke. For Luke, the desperation and shame he experienced during his master's program culminating in coming to a place where he realized that either something needed to change or there would be dire consequences:

I feel like I was taught to dissociate... like, there was this part of me that I just deny, disavow, don't talk about I think I was at a point where I was just like, "I have to be more authentic in some way." Like, "It's killing me, I think, and I have to have some kind of outlet." ... I think I was at the point where just, I dunno, couldn't fight it anymore... Your only option is to deny it, cut it off... that for me was, like, I can't – I can't do it. Talking about “it will kill me” – I think that's just, like, the heaviness and weight of, like, “I can't live this way.”

As we discussed this further, it became clear that Luke's words were not simply figures of speech or hyperbole:

I struggle with depression pretty severely... Went through a pretty bad bout of it probably my second year there... I feel like I dragged myself through that program and just barely, like, survived it in some ways.

As Luke continued to unpack what survival in the program looked like, he shared:

I don't think I realized it, but I think it was, yeah, just that weight of – I have to – I can't carry, like, the tension of both these things. So I think that's why I just cut off – I was like, “The only way I'm gonna survive is to say, ‘screw you.’” Like, cut off that part of me that cares. I was like, “I'll lie to you if I have to. I'll sign your form to let me graduate. I'll check the boxes that you're gonna make me check so that I can survive and not be so depressed that I can't go through school.” I think I just had to cut off – again, just dissociate – in a way that I could just operate and survive the program.”

I followed this up by asking, “at what cost?” and he responded, “I think just complete lack of awareness of what it was doing to me.”

Reflecting on his master's program, Luke now sees his time there as surviving trauma:

Survival. Survival mode. Makes me think of just, like, working with trauma, or clients who've been through trauma. Like, you do what you have to do to survive and adapt. Cause I would say – I would consider it traumatic. Like, it's trauma for me. Like, yeah, I did what I had to do to survive it. And now, on the other end, it's like, “Okay, I gotta figure out how to integrate this stuff into my life, now that the trauma's over.”

Thankfully, Luke has never experience suicidal ideation. However, looking back on his master’s program, he realizes how close he may have been to it during that time in his life. Had he not been able to change his perspective on his affectional orientation, and instead continued to live in the shame reinforced by the CCI, he speculated that, “I probably would’ve been in a terrible place – psychologically, emotionally – if I tried to continue down that path, I think.” He went on to expand upon that thought:

Well, I think what's scary is – I think struggling with depression, like, I understand why people feel suicidal. And like, would that have been me if I had continued down that path? It scares me to think that I could identify that potentially having been my path if I couldn't do something different with that part of myself... but if I didn't have [family support], where would I be? I don't know. Like, I get it, how people can end up in that place.

Leon. As Leon described his experiences, especially early on in his master’s program, it became clear that the shame and hopelessness associated with trying to change his orientation and gender identity began to take a substantial toll on him. At that time he was self-medicating with alcohol. I summed up what he had shared by stating:

...it sounds like everything that was going on in the program and going on for you internally, and the tension there – you said – ultimately led to, or contributed to, really a lot of drinking [L: Sure]... it sounds like, as a way to kinda temporarily escape that pain or numb that pain.

Leon responded, “Yeah. For sure.”

For Leon, things reached a breaking point after a lecture in his Human Development course regarding the impact that culture and context have on the development process. He left that lecture and:

... I got in my car and I just drove home, just literally screaming at God with rage, and tears were pouring down my face. Just because it felt like I had come to this place where I was just so desperate for change – like, desperate – it was a matter of heaven or hell for me at the time, and then... to learn that in some way God had set me up for this trajectory of hormone bathing, with those parents, in that culture, in that community, in that religion... And so it was just this moment where it was just like, ‘F- you God.’ Like, full of rage. And so I remember – it was a literal prayer – I said, [*hitting hand on the table*] “If this is so disgusting to you, I’d rather die clean than live dirty.” And so my prayer was that God would send a bus through an intersection just to take me out. To take me home. And every intersection I drove through, it was almost like this whoosh of relief because it just felt like this torture would be over. And I remember turning the last corner and going through the last intersection, and I parked my car in front of my parents’ house, and I just wept because I felt like I was doomed. Like, I just had to suffer for the rest of my life.

In this statement, Leon not only recounts reaching a breaking point, but like other participants, he experienced suicidal ideation as well.

Daisy. Like most of the other participants, the shame and loneliness that resulted from the discriminatory environment and need to stay closeted in her master’s program ultimately led Daisy to seriously consider suicide: “Cause I knew I was at the point where it’s like, something does have to change. I – I was contemplating suicide on probably a very regular basis.” She attributed that frequent suicidal ideation to “The loneliness. The otherness,” that she was experiencing in her master’s program at the time.

When these feelings had become more than she felt she could bear, she planned to check herself into the hospital for a 72-hour mental health hold. Before heading to the hospital, she stopped at a friend’s house to pick up a book – a friend who happened to be another queer-identified student in her master’s program. When she arrived he could tell that something was wrong, and after asking her some questions, she confided in him:

And I was just like, "I can't do this. I'm so lonely." And so my friend kept me at his house and he just, like, pepped me up. He was like, "What are you gonna do?" And I was like, "Well, I got a counselor's number." And he was like, "And you're

gonna call that counselor." ... And so I called the counselor – I was probably there about 3 hours – and I left, and I was like, "I'm not perfect, but I'm good for now."

Daisy went on to describe the lasting impact that day had on her life:

And, you know, I had a counseling session probably a couple days later and I saw that counselor for five years. But I always think if I had not... what if I hadn't been honest with [friend]? But if I hadn't gone there that night... I'd like to believe I'd be there and I would have, you know, I would have taken the measures that I needed..."

Daisy seemed to imply that she's not completely certain that she would be alive today without the serendipitous encounter with her friend that day.

Alexei. While I experienced Alexei to be reserved, soft spoken, and careful with his words most of the time, more of the pain, shame, and despair he felt during his master's program came to the surface when discussing how he finally came to a breaking point:

And then finally got a point... where I finally said, "Fuck it. I don't care... I can't keep doing this." ... Then, when I finally cracked, I didn't care. God didn't like it, he could go fuck himself. At that point it was 17 years of fighting it. I didn't care.

This intensity of emotion – perhaps some anger and defiance – was a departure from Alexei's overall presentation throughout the interview.

As with most participants, this breaking point was accompanied by thoughts of taking his own life. Alexei reported that he experienced "A lot of suicidal ideation. No attempts, but a lot of ideation." When I asked what contributed to those suicidal thoughts, he responded, "I think the self-condemnation and hopelessness were the triggers... So with the underlying, untreated bipolar disorder alongside of the closeted and coming out process, and reparative therapy – um, honestly surprised there were no attempts." He was literally surprised that he did not try to kill himself during his master's program.

Theme 5: Safe Spaces Helped to Mitigate the Shame and Despair of Theme 4

All participants discussed protective factors that mitigated these painful and destructive experiences in their master's programs, helped them cope, and provided spaces where they could feel safe and accepted for who they were. In most cases these protective factors were relational; not just safe places, but safe, supportive people. Alexei was largely an exception with regard to this theme. While he was able to identify protective factors, he had comparatively few, and essentially no spaces where he could be fully authentic *and* fully accepted.

For many participants this included faculty or staff who were at least non-discriminatory, but in some cases openly supportive and affirming. Many participants were also able to connect with and find camaraderie among a group of other queer-identified students in their master's programs. Some also benefited from the support of formal and/or informal relationships with mental health professionals and mentors, both those associated with the program and outside of the program. Participants also identified opportunities to be authentic in safe spaces off campus, and occasionally with friends/allies, accepting family members, and some clients. Finally, some participants discussed the benefits of specific coping skills and activities, including exploring topics of sexuality and gender in class assignments and projects.

Richard. Throughout his master's program, Richard was able to locate and maintain a wide range of protective factors, most of which had one thing in common: they provided safe spaces where he could be authentic (or at least more/mostly authentic) in a safe, supportive environment. Despite the overall position of the institution, Richard

did find some professors and peers with whom he could be authentic. These relationships gave Richard the support he needed to begin, "... slowly chipping away at letting me be authentic in safe places." And some of these relationships persisted through his master's degree and doctoral studies: "There's really only two professors [I came out to] in the master's program and one of them became a mentor of mine, and actually he was my dissertation chair later." That faculty member who ended up serving in a mentoring role had a profound impact on Richard:

And I think, like, my mentor – [Name] – I still look up to him... I respect him as a professor, but like, he's been there through this journey, and you know, he's seen me through a lot of shit... You know, he taught me about authenticity. And we need those mentors and those skills.

Richard went on to discuss how his mentor embodied and modeled characteristics he hopes to emulate as a man.

Richard also spoke of the "underground group" of students who somehow found one another even though "there was no one that came out in my master's program." He went on to explain that, "... it's always funny how gays – I say that queers find each other [*laughter*]." Despite his laughter, this comment came in the context of Richard discussing the GSA application being denied. He and the other students in this "underground group" needed a safe place on campus; when a formal space was denied, they effectively formed their own in secret. In explaining why this group was necessary, Richard simply replied, "It's survival."

In addition to some safe peer and faculty relationships, Richard found support and room to be authentic in relationships with mental health professionals who worked on the campus of the institution. He attended weekly sessions with a counselor who "... was really understanding and she was also someone I felt safe with," and also "saw a

psychiatrist in that same building on campus.” Finding these safe spaces on campus was beneficial for Richard, and he was able to find similar opportunities for authenticity off campus as well.

First, he joined a martial arts program in the community. Even though he did not come out to that group, it still allowed for some of the authenticity he was craving:

But what's weird is I was closeted there too. I was one of the boys, which I liked – considered one of the boys – cause I was tough and I would get in the ring with – we did an MMA kind of fighting – so I would get up in front of them, get knocked around, and they thought I was a badass. And I was allowed to be more masculine in that because that's a masculine sport... and I had a ponytail, so they're like, “This girl comes in with her ponytail and she kicks all the guys' asses!” So I kinda felt good, in a way, because it was a good outlet for me... I think that was why it was so freeing, was that, again, I didn't have – I wasn't in a space that I had to define or not define who I was.

Despite being a closeted lesbian wrestling with questions about gender identity, martial arts provided a space where Richard could be himself, perhaps not in labels and defining his identity, but in action and behavior. He could let his guard down. As I coded this section of his interview, I was struck by the notion that he felt safer in MMA than in his MA.

Richard also found an outlet in “a couple local lesbian clubs that I started, you know, connecting with people not associated with [MA program].” He described the safety he felt there, but also the connection to other people who could relate to his experiences:

That felt safer – to be out in the community, to be with people who – also, [city where MA was located] has a lot of closeted people because of the culture, the Hispanic culture, the Catholic culture – you know, and then there's several – at the time it was “don't ask, don't tell” still... And so, there's several military institutions where they would come to the clubs in a cab so their cars weren't – license plates weren't dinged. But like, you'd meet a lot of people that were having a similar experience and having to be closeted at the time.

Richard was effectively comparing his experience in his master's program to what it was like to identify as an affectional minority in the military during "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Still, these clubs served as an escape and a protective factor for him.

Another space that felt safe for Richard to be authentic was in his work with clients during the clinical aspects of his program:

I think getting into the counseling practice piece was also very therapeutic for me in the sense of, you know, not having – again, my clients – I had some clients ask and I was usually pretty authentic with clients, because again it was in a safe – I thought it was a safe space to be authentic with a client... I think that was good for me – to see how I could be authentic with clients that were in a good therapeutic relationship. That I could be authentic and still do good work with clients.

It was refreshing for Richard to sit with someone, be his authentic self, and not be rejected or shamed.

Finally, Richard discussed two additional coping skills during our time together. While they do not quite fit in with other items in this category, I felt they were important to mention in order to provide context and a more complete representation of his responses. One additional coping mechanism that Richard identified when discussing how he dealt with the shame and depression he was experiencing was, "I was a self-mutilator at the time as well." While this did serve as a way of coping with stress, it was something that Richard was seeking to eliminate. This behavior also has connections to the lack of safety and fear discussed in previous themes; Richard explained that, "if [MA program] found out that you were doing stuff like that, they would kick you out of the dorm..."

Part of the reason Richard sought mental health services was to address his self-harm. This brings the discussion to another thing Richard used to cope: psychiatric

medication. However, this ultimately did not provide the results that he had hoped for. He recounted that, “I struggled with meds – I currently don't take any either – but, just couldn't find one that fit.” Thankfully, it was at this point that he enrolled in the martial arts program.

Luke. In describing protective factors and safe spaces where he could be authentic, Luke identified people and places which were similar to those shared by other participants. The first he discussed was, “the secret, underground gay community.” He explained that “somehow we connected to each other,” and they were able to support one another through the program. In addition to this group, Luke also connected with other students in the program who were supportive: “... I did have some affirming, you know, classmates.” As previously noted in theme 4 above, Luke also felt “fortunate to have a family that was supportive when I came out...”

With regard to support at the program or institutional level, Luke found fewer safe places to be authentic. Like other participants, he described faculty who were not exactly affirming, but also not outwardly, explicitly discriminatory. This also reflects the ambivalence and grace discussed in Theme 1: “... there were a couple professors that I think were [*pause*] supportive – in a, I dunno, roundabout way.” He described another faculty member as, “I think a ‘supportive while taking a more traditional stance’ professor... Safer. Understood. More gracious maybe.” This ambiguity around faculty members’ positions with regard to affectional and gender minority students made it complicated for Luke to navigate the program:

... that was the whole confusing piece of being there. It's like, there's professors who are, like, affirming-ish, but still had a more traditional – And so it was like, I don't know, like, “is she affirming, is she not?” Cause there were a couple of professors like that – her, [Professor Name] – where it was like, “I think you're

affirming but –" Or, again, we're in this weird world of CACREP, so it's just this, like, I don't know what to think.

Still, there were some faculty members with whom Luke at least felt safer than in the program or institution more broadly.

Finally, Luke discussed a “professional development supervisor” and a mentor who were both supportive; the mentor was someone he had met outside of the program, but the supervisor was a paid staff member at the institution. As with the faculty, Luke was not completely clear regarding the staff member’s stance, but he felt safe with them nonetheless: “... my professional development supervisor... was actually a very supportive person there... he was actually, I think, an affirming, supportive person.”

Unfortunately, that safe, supportive supervisor has since left the program: “... so he’s no longer there.” Luke explained that this person left because of the institution’s stance on affectional and gender minorities, and the fact that it was moving to an even more anti-queer position.

Leon. In reflecting on what helped him get through the program, Leon identified a number of factors that provided safe spaces to be authentic. The first was the semi-supportive environment in the program compared with the discriminatory culture of the larger institution: “... the counseling department was soooo different than the biblical department, the theology departments.” In clarifying what he meant by this, Leon described more of a neutral environment than an affirming one – consistent with the ambivalence discussed earlier – but still a situation where the program was at least *safer* than the institution as a whole:

And I think – in all fairness – as I started coming out to myself and speaking more blatantly about it on campus and coming out to fellow students, the school never reacted – the department never reacted negatively. I was never punished or called

in for a talk of any kind. But I did hear of other students, who were openly out, who were being censored or admonished in some sort of way. And so that scared the crap out of me.

The end of this comment makes it clear that the program was not only non-affirming, it was hostile to some affectional and gender minority students. Regardless, Leon personally felt at least some support.

This perception of safety or support in the program may be due to Leon's personal relationship with the chair of the counseling department – an individual who did seem to be very supportive of Leon:

... when I was student there the department chair and most of the faculty, in my opinion, were open to the queer dialogue as a means of teaching cultural competency to its students. Knowing that their students would eventually have someone like me in their offices and they wanted their students to have exposure so that they would be culturally competent as state licensed counselors.

In this statement Leon speaks broadly about much of the faculty in the counseling program, but later he clarified:

... specifically [Program Chair], just kind of took me under his wing. Really encouraged my voice. Invited me to be an adjunct. And just really supported me irrespective of who I – what my sexual orientation was... I think mostly [Program Chair], he was just so, so supportive. And he was, at the time, the department chair, which is really cool... I was actually asked a week after I graduated to co-facilitate a course with – a course on sexuality and counseling. And so that was really [*pause*] inspiring or validating of who I was, particularly at that institution.

Leon also felt fortunate to find a supportive, affirming counselor during his master's program, despite the fact that it was the program that had recommended this individual:

I needed a counselor and I went to [Program Administrator], and she sent me to an adjunct faculty at the time, who was somewhat of a progressive Christian – affirming of LGBTQ people. And I think that they were kind of under the radar.

I clarified what Leon meant by “under the radar” and confirmed that, to his knowledge, the program did not know that this counselor was affirming of individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities. Leon considers this one of many “serendipitous” occurrences during his master’s program. Like other participants, Leon also identified a group of other “queer-identified students” as an important support system: “It was really helpful to kind of meet and just hang out, and bond, and share stories. So that was incredible.”

Finally, Leon described his exposure to alternative viewpoints and perspectives as creating internal space for him to explore the possibility that perhaps he was not “broken” like he thought when he entered the program. This exposure and expansion occurred with regard to alternative theological positions as well as clinical research from the counseling field:

I grew up in an Assemblies of God home where my mom and dad are ordained pastors. So then I go from that little bubble to [MA program], a bubble still, but a bigger one where there's Assemblies of God, but then Baptists, and UMC [United Methodist Church], and... so I think what that mix showed me was that there was something bigger than – there was a greater way of thinking than just staying in the Assemblies of God mindset. And so it was almost, like, this catapult through different layers of growth that said if I could leave that small bubble and go to a bigger one, what next is there for me? And it was this way of being exposed to difference in a way that kept me craving for the difference that felt like home for me.

... it wasn't until I started looking at – to step into my ethics course and really start reading about the APA standards and what non-religious clinicians were saying about these religious institutions that these lightbulbs started going off, like, “Oh, holy shit! There's a different way to treat – to understand this.”

Daisy. Daisy discussed comparatively few protective factors and safe spaces, but the ones that she did talk about seemed to be immensely important to her. The most

significant perhaps was a group of other affectional and gender minority students in her master's program:

But the weirdest thing is we kind of – there was a group, like a [*whispering*] underground movement of people who just, like, you just knew that other people identified the same way you did... This, you know, underground gay scene.

Daisy went on to describe how this group of six or seven “subversive gay people” provided a safe space where they could all get together and simply let their guards down.

When I asked Daisy to speak more about why this group was so important to her, it led to the conversation about her suicidal ideation and the friend – a ‘member’ of this underground group – who intervened. In some real, concrete ways, Daisy sees that this group perhaps saved her life.

To ensure that I was not making assumptions at this point in the interview, I paraphrased what she had shared:

Well, and just listen to what – like, those words that you're saying – “If it wasn't for this, like, secret, underground group – that we somehow found each other and connected and pulled each other through this program – I literally don't know if I would be alive right now.

Daisy simply responded, “Yeah.”

Another important protective factor for Daisy was her interactions with supportive, affirming *adjunct* faculty in the program. In one class, a student shared some discomfort around counseling affectional and gender minority clients, “And he 100% pushed back. You know, I'm still thankful to this day he did... And I was like, I'm so thankful I have [adjunct professor] right now.” Daisy made a clear distinction between her experience with adjunct professors versus full-time faculty at the institution; her sentiment was captured clearly when she said, “I avoided most full-time faculty like the

plague.” Unfortunately, these faculty members with whom Daisy felt safe have since left the program: “And none of them work there anymore.”

Finally, Daisy received counseling services from an individual who actually worked for the institution she attended for her master’s program, but he was supportive and affirming of affectional and gender minorities. Daisy met with him during her time in the program and continued after she graduated. Surprised by his affirming stance despite his affiliation with the CCI she was attending, she sees their time together as a critical piece of her process: “... and he was so amazing. He helped me come to terms with all of these things.”

Alexei. Unlike the other participants, much of our conversation around protective factors and safe space revealed the *scarcity* of those mitigating forces in Alexei’s life. A major piece of that picture was his lack of supportive relationships on essentially every level: faculty members, peers in the program, friends, and family. On a program level, the unsafe, anti-queer environment discussed in Theme 1 underscores the lack of support Alexei found there. The interaction he discussed in the Ambivalence section of Theme 1 – where a faculty member he looked up to and felt very connected with expressed how “disappointed” she was that he was gay – shows how even the more “affirming” faculty in his eyes were still quite shaming and discriminatory. She tolerated his affectional orientation because he was still keeping up his family obligations, but in no way was she supportive or affirming. With regard to fellow students, I asked, “did you get the same sense from peers that you got from faculty that, like, “Ah, this is not a safe place to talk about this?” He responded, “In general.”

The rejection and lack of support that Alexei experienced on a friend and family level was perhaps even more devastating. He shared that around the time he was in his master's program "there were maybe four people I had ever talked about [his affectional orientation] with... three-and-a-half of those four people were in favor of reparative therapy." Even friends with whom Alexei felt safe enough to share this piece of himself were only supportive if he was working on changing it: "So, one friend in particular I told. And he was a great friend as long as I was fighting it. When I finally came out, then that friendship died very quickly." Alexei summed up the rejection and loss he experienced by sharing:

When I finally did come out, lost probably 90% of connections from before. Still had a few friends from childhood, early adulthood who were fairly open or even affirming, but most not. Still have very little contact with my siblings. My mom didn't talk to me for 10 years.

It appears that the support of the vast majority of Alexei's network was conditional; he was only entitled to that support as long as he was closeted and/or actively fighting to change his affectional orientation.

Given this overall lack of support, I asked Alexei, "... you said you're surprised there were no [suicide] attempts. How did you cope? What helped pull you through?" He offered two main factors – his wife and his stubbornness:

During the coming out process one of the biggest protective factors was actually my wife and the very compassionate, forgiving person that she is. Cause it could have been oh so much worse [*laughs*]. And, um [*pause*] probably – but probably the single biggest protective factor is I'm just stubborn.

I followed up by asking how being stubborn was a protective factor and we had the following discussion:

ALEXEI: That I – I believe in meeting my obligations, really almost no matter the personal cost. I've gotten much better at limiting those obligations, but once I

accept it, then I carry it through. And so, [*pause*] if at any point in those times that I have had obligations and the suicidal ideation is creeping up, it's just – it's not an option. Even though it might be a desire, it's not an option. So, that's probably been the most long-term protective factor.

INTERVIEWER: Mmmhmm. So, like, "I can't follow through on those thoughts – I can't kill myself – because I have this coming up, or that to do, or I promised I would do that, or these people are counting on me."

ALEXEI: Right. And now I have kids.

It would appear that by “stubborn” Alexei was referring to his commitment to important responsibilities and relationships in his life.

Finally, like most participants, exposure to alternative views and a broadening of his perspective seemed to create safe space, at least internally, for his affectional orientation. Ironically, like other participants, this process occurred during his time enrolled in a CCI. Alexei referred to this as “cracking open my worldview,” and explained that he:

... had a couple faculty in particular – these were two of the very affirming faculty – and just the way that they taught their courses challenged my worldview about a lot of things. And so that began opening things up. So I think it probably helped set the stage for later development, but at the time I probably didn't make that connection.

He went on to describe another similar situation:

... another place that the foundations of that facade started cracking were also through the institution. In my undergrad I had to take New Testament and Old Testament courses, and they were presented by faculty who clearly had their own strong belief system, but they were presented in a [*pause*]... they were presented in a way that wasn't 100% consistent with the theology of the school. With many more... not alternative facts, but many more things that were still open to interpretation cause we didn't have all of the facts.

These experiences began to give Alexei the freedom and flexibility to question some of his previous beliefs about a range of topics, including his affectional orientation, though he did not move to a place of acceptance on that front until years later:

They were not so black and white, and so seeing that the foundation that I had built my black and white thinking on was not actually solid – yeah, that also began the crumbling. Didn't manifest for years, but it definitely started then.

Theme 6: Participants' Shift in Perspectives

All participants described a marked shift in their perspectives during and/or shortly after their time in their master's program. These shifts tended to occur with regard to their faith and spirituality, their views on their affectional and gender minority identities, or both. For most participants, these were not subtle, nuanced changes, but dramatic transformations of their views and beliefs.

Richard. Richard's perspectives began to shift during his program with regard to his affectional orientation and gender identity, and the impact those would have on his clinical work. At one point in the program, he questioned whether any clients would even want to come to a "gay counselor." However, as he began to see clients in his internship, he realized that he had been mistaken about how clients would respond to him:

... one time I came out to a client cause they were hinting around it, so I just named the elephant in the room and, um, then they were like, "Well, then I feel like I can tell you about this abusive situation now." And it wasn't – didn't have anything to do with that, but me being so open and authentic gave – it was almost, like permission for her to be open and authentic about this trauma history that she had never shared with another person before. So it was like, I saw how I think in early parts of my internship experience that I was able to – I could be authentic in the counseling room.

In this way, he began to see that rather than liabilities or limitations, his marginalized identities could actually be strengths that aided his work in the counseling room. He encountered this again later in his practice as a transman:

as I'm transitioning, things are changing in the counseling room. Cause, you know, there's some clients that don't want to see males. And so, like, the clients are very specific, "I don't want to see a male counselor." And so here, like –

[name] is the owner – said one time, "Well, he's a trans male; would you be okay with that?" And they were like, "Oh, yeah, I'm okay with a trans–"

These experiences helped shift Richard's perspective regarding his affectional orientation and gender identity away from the shame that he experienced before and during his master's program, toward a more accepting and affirming position.

Luke. As mentioned in Luke's brief biography at the beginning of this chapter, he believed he could change his affectional orientation and was actively working toward that when he began his master's program:

...at the point of entering into school, I took the position that I could change my sexual orientation. And that's really what I was convinced I could do. And wanted to do. And worked hard at that actually for quite a while... I think that's what I was taught by the church and by Christianity, was that I could change it... I think I was very convinced that I could change it.

Eventually though, Luke's perspective began to change when he started working on a thesis on this topic and was exposed to the current literature in the field:

When I started looking at actual, like, scholarly articles and actual research on the topic, I started going, okay, there doesn't seem to be much indication that this can change... and so, like, this lightbulb in my head just started to come on of like, what if you can never change this? Like, what if this is what it is?

This essentially led to an existential crisis for Luke: "... if I can't change this, what does that mean for my faith? What does that mean for my life? So, a very disorienting experience after being convinced for 26 years that I could change it."

The "disorienting experience" Luke described was magnified by his environment; being enrolled in a CACREP accredited program housed within a CCI highlighted the tension:

... and I think that's just the problem that I experienced with Christianity in general, but obviously with [MA program], is because there's this dualistic approach... so yeah, I don't think they realize the disconnect there... how do I reconcile these two parts of my life and, you know, again, the CACREP side and

the faith side – these two things that seem to be going in very different directions and you're stuck in the middle. You're forced to hold on to both of them somehow.

This tension came to a head during Luke's participation in an ex-gay ministry:

So, when I got involved with Where Grace Abounds, um, a lot of, like, older men – you know, like 40's, 50's – who, you know, were Christians and still very much struggled with their attractions, and I was like, "I do not want this to be my life for the next 20, 30 years. Like, living in this torment [*laughs*] of, "I don't want this attraction. I want to get rid of it and I'm gonna work on it." I was like – as a 28-year-old kid, I'm like, "I'm not gonna spend the next 30 years of my life doing this.

Through a combination of experiences like the one recounted above and Luke's formal research into the topic of affectional and gender diversity, he explained that:

...in a matter of 4 years, yeah, I went I from – pretty much a 180... From "I can change this" to "I don't think I can change this." So that was the challenge at [MA program], was, you know, how am I gonna live out my life then?

Related to his shift in perspective, Luke has become uncomfortable with clients and colleagues knowing that he attended a master's program at a CCI because he worries what they will think or assume about him:

“... sometimes I'm nervous to tell certain people I went to [MA program] cause they're like, ‘Ooo, don't want to see you as a therapist.’... And so I'm sometimes very quiet about attending [MA program], so I just – I hate that there's this opposing, clashing... you know, a lot of people ask me, like, ‘Oh, do you market yourself as a Christian therapist?’ And I'm like, ‘No!’ Cause, like, people then assume... I'm gonna align with their beliefs – so I'm like – I don't want to have people just assume that they know what I think or believe.

Leon. Like Luke, Leon went into his master's program hoping to change his affectional orientation and gender identity. However, he experienced major shifts with regard to his theology, his view of these marginalized identities, and his integration of the two. When we were speaking about the breaking point he reached after the lecture in his

Human Development course and his subsequent drive home hoping that he would be killed by a bus, he said:

And it was just, kind of, a spiritual experience for me where I just kept feeling – I don't know how to describe it – but just like feeling this mantra: "God is love. God is love. God is love." And it was just like this epiphany for me... And so if God was love, there could be no sinful version of love and a righteous version of love, if God is love. And I think that that was a major turning point for me, just to – and I had to have been maybe three quarters of the way through the program at the time, maybe about half way – but I just remember that that was a very big, like massive turning point for me in many ways. Not only just academically, and how I approached my research in the program, but how I looked at my spiritual development from there forward, and how I interacted with my private therapist at the time. I mean, it just shifted, and it kind of opened me up to this idea that maybe I'm not damaged.

Later, I suggested that it sounded like he got to a point of saying "I'm done trying to change this," and he responded, "Yeah, and not only am I done, but I don't need to. I don't need to change this. And it was just over years, this idea that I never needed to because God wanted me to become this person."

Daisy. For Daisy, like other participants, an important stepping stone in her perspective change with regard to affectional orientation and gender identity was a broadening of her views on theology more generally. She recalled sitting in class with students who were training to become pastors and realizing that some of things she used to consider black and white were in fact much more grey:

I think the thing that got me to start exploring it was when I started realizing no one in this place agrees with each other. You all interpret theology completely differently. We're literally just interpreting interpretations of interpretations of translations that were dictated after this person died.

And again:

Like, I will never forget my New Testament teacher – ah, such an amazing woman – woman too. So cool. And she was like, "This is what I believe, and kinda the New Testament department believes the end times will be. This is our interpretation. The Old Testament department here does not agree with this. This

is how they believe it went..." I was like [*confused/surprised face & gestures*]... It was like life changing. And so that – and that was my second semester – and that's when I finally was like – I opened myself to say, "Can I think about this differently?" And that's when I got into this, "Well, maybe I could date women..." And then this turmoil.

It was still a process and a journey from there – "I think it was all coming to a head of just, like, this internal identity struggle" – but experiences like this effectively gave Daisy permission to question and explore her previous beliefs on a range of topics, including her own affectional orientation and gender identity.

As she reflected on her time in the program, she talked about how formative it was to be exposed to this less rigid approach:

I'm also like, if I didn't realize we could – like, if I didn't know the Bible so intimately through these classes and through this work, and I didn't know you could question it as much as you could, and interpret it, and that no one agrees on the material in here, would I have – would I be here?

She went on to joke:

For shock factor sometimes I like to tell people, 'Yeah, [MA program] made me gay.' And their faces – just so great. It's funny though cause I do often tell people [MA program] made me liberal. And [MA program] made me embrace this part of myself.

Despite the joking and the irony, Daisy sees the theological training and biblical knowledge she received at this conservative Christian institution to be instrumental in her acceptance of her affectional and gender minority identities.

Consistent with feelings expressed by Luke and Leon, Daisy began to become embarrassed by her program's stance on this issue and worried about what others might think if they know where she earned her master's degree. When discussing her shared office space at work, Daisy recounted the following interaction with her coworker:

You know, it's [*sigh*] – and I, for a long time in my office, I hid my degree. I hid my degree cause I don't want people to think I hold those same belief systems...

So we share kind of an admin office and so when we put our degrees up I was like [*noise & face that expressed discomfort*]. She was like, "Oh, where do you want me to put this?" I was like, "Put it at the very top of the wall so no one can read it." [*shared laughter*] Like, I want it up there because it looks pretty and I did earn, but...

Another shift in Daisy's thinking grew out of her increasing disenchantment with the conservative Christian answers to her "problem." Early on in her process Daisy found a way to talk about her affectional orientation in a socially acceptable way within conservative Christian circles:

To everyone I'd always been like, "I like women, and I'm not gonna date women. I'm either gonna be celibate or I'm gonna try to date men." And that's what I'd always said. And I tried. And I think I did it because it helped me tell that part of my story – that I was attracted to women – and kept me safe. But I'm only gonna date men.

Eventually, when Daisy fully accepted the fact that she was attracted to women, she seriously considered trying to remain celibate. However, after attending the panel discussion on sexuality and hearing from a gay, celibate man, she found herself having deep concerns about that option:

I just remember thinking, "I really struggle to think that celibacy is the best answer... I'm going to be so lonely. And like, I was surrounded by some amazing married couples – like I had multiple friends who were a married couple where I was either classmates with one of them or whatever it might be – and I was just like, I would be denied this?"

Daisy went on to explain, "that's when I was just really starting to feel very lonely. And I, like, do not think celibacy is an answer for me."

Like other participants, Daisy eventually came to a place where she realized that the typical Christian "solutions" do not work because there is no "problem" in the first place:

When I first came out to [my mother], the next day she was like, "Okay, it's not because of your father and I that you're like this – or that you're messed up?" I was like, "Uh, A of all, I'm not messed up..."

She's come to a place today where she fully accepts, embraces, and is proud of her gay identity; her time in her master's program played an important role in the transformation of her thinking on these topics, just perhaps not in the way the program intended.

Alexei. Given that Alexei did not fully accept or embrace his affectional orientation until after his master's program, he did not exhibit the same shift in perspective that was seen in other participants' stories. Still, that change in perspective seems to have at least begun during his time in the program, as discussed in the theme 5 above with regard to his exposure to alternative views and different perspectives. He has not moved to a place of fully accepting his affectional orientation and identifies as a gay man. His current perspective can be seen when he was responding to my question about whether or not he would go back and attend that institution again:

If I was still in the closet, yes. Um [*long pause*] If I had the experience or the understanding of advocacy that I have now, then yes, I would pretty much go in and dare them to kick me out... But if I was at a place, like, early on in the process where – where I would have to hide that during that portion of life – hide that while trying to do school – then absolutely not.

He is not willing to hide his affectional orientation under any circumstances, a dramatic shift from where he was when he began his master's program.

Theme 7: Experiences in Master's Program Stunted Development

Across all participant accounts, the stories and experiences they shared painted a picture of the anti-queer environment in their master's programs stunting their development in a number of areas: the development of their affectional orientation and/or

gender identity, their professional development and counselor identity, and their sense of self or self-acceptance. Each of these subthemes is discussed below in greater detail.

Stunted development with regard to affectional orientation and/or gender identity.

Richard. Richard spoke extensively about how the program stunted his development. Even that word – “stunted” – came out of his initial interview. Early in our time together Richard stated:

And I think my educational experience really stunted my development in how I came out. I mean, I wasn't able to pursue those healthy romantic relationships and fully, you know – those innocent things that happen in relationships for the first time, you know. Holding hands, and being out in public, and dating openly, and bringing people home to meet family. And my parents were very conservative Catholic, and still are, but you know – so I was taught this at home and then going to a school that really highlighted this.

In this statement, Richard clearly identifies the fact that this stunting began earlier in life, but that it continued in and was reinforced by his master's program. When discussing what it was about the program that stunted this development he responded, “the stunting – just having to be closeted.”

As Richard continued to look back upon his time in his master's program, he became more aware of the extent to which it negatively impacted the development of his affectional orientation and gender identity:

You know, really sitting here and reflecting on this, it really did even stunt my gender identity... I sometimes wonder if things would have been different – how fast, how long I would have been transitioned, you know?... It's just been such a longer journey than I think – if there were institutions [where] we're able to be open and authentic [*pause*] I think maybe this wouldn't have taken as long as it did.

He went on to wonder about whether he may have even found the confidence and courage to come out to his family sooner "... if I had all this professional and social support."

Luke. When Luke talked about the impact the program had on his affectional orientation, he described both implicit and explicit messages. With regard to the former, he described the program's discomfort with or avoidance of the topic of sexuality in general: "You're not taught to – 'Hey, let's explore, let's talk about sexuality, let's explore different perspectives and views and people's experiences.' Like, that was never – I mean, never once done in my time there." On the more explicit end of the spectrum, Luke recalled a classroom discussion that has stayed with him to this day:

"I remember – the class that I dropped – I remember the professor talking about a gay student who, you know, had left his faith. And it was like this – everyone's, like, so sad. Like, "Oh, that poor soul." Again, you feel like you're this - you're the defector. You've left the faith, your soul is now compromised, like, you're like this person to be pitied. And so I was like, "Okay, now that's me..." Like, how did that kind of stuff affect me? Again, just small things that, at the time, I probably wouldn't have thought about – five years later I'm not thinking about it – like, that had an impact on me.

Luke insinuates here that this experience and others like it impacted him and his view of his affectional orientation – and still continues to affect him today – though he may not be fully aware of exactly how or to what extent. This is reminiscent of Richard wondering how he might be different if he had been in a more supportive environment.

Leon. For Leon, the stunting with regard to his affectional orientation and gender identity came with the continued messages from the institution and the program that those pieces of him were both unacceptable and changeable. He experienced this in one-on-one encounters, such as when his faculty mentor recommended he look at straight

pornography. He also encountered these ideas in the resources provided by the institution:

... it was the content that I was learning. I mean, I was in the library all the time looking up journal articles. Any time a paper – I had freedom to study what I wanted, it would be this. And it was this – how do I want to put this? – this forced integration of theology, conservative Christian theology with academic, clinical research. And I had no choice, given the conservative Christian resources at that institution, just to come up with this opinion that says, “This is wrong.” Or, “How do we treat this?” or “What do we do about this?”

Daisy. When Daisy discussed the impact that her master’s program had on her development with regard to affectional orientation and gender identity, one of the first things that surfaced were messages that perhaps this was not a legitimate part of her identity, but instead a result of trauma:

I think counseling school did this to me – I really struggled to determine am I actually gay, or is it because I was abused? And I hate that that was even a cycle that was in my head ... I think that's when I started to then basically determine why I was gay. You know, like, oh it's because of this, so I'm not really gay. There was literally a point after [full-time faculty] talked about false memories in Trauma and Abuse, I was like, "I've thought about it so long I've made myself gay." I definitely thought that for a good period of time. And so, in some aspects – again I don't regret my education; I love the people I met there – but in terms of a formal education I really feel like if I had gone to – I mean, I know if I had gone to [name of another program], which is where a few of my gay friends who are faith based have gone – I've encouraged them to go there – or if I had gone to a non-religious institution, I do think I probably would have stepped through probably healthy, faster.

In this passage, Daisy directly links some of the teaching she received in the program, combined with the overall culture and environment there, to a stunting of her acceptance of her affectional orientation.

To check my understanding of what Daisy was saying, I stated:

... it sounds like it slowed that development down... with regard to your sexuality and your gender identity. Because you had to kind of hide it and even question if it really was a part of you – it just – that piece of you got stuck for a while.

To this Daisy responded, “Mmmhmm. Yeah. And that’s – yeah. So, that, I feel like, kind of sums up how – like, I look back sometimes and I’m like, did it stifle this part of my progression?” Here Daisy reiterates and clarifies the notion that hiding and closeting during her master’s program stunted or ‘stifled’ her development.

Alexei. As previously discussed, at times Alexei seemed to downplay how damaging his time was in his master’s program with respect to his affectional orientation. However, there were places in the interview that suggested otherwise. When discussing the idea that the program reinforced shame and early messaging, we had the following exchange:

INTERVIEWER: ... it sounds like the environment reinforced – so you said one of the biggest hinderances was early messaging – and it sounds like not just early, but, like, continued messaging [ALEXEI: Right], similar messaging [ALEXEI: Right]... perhaps got in the way of you figuring out what to do with this piece of you.

ALEXEI: Definitely.

Alexei affirms my comment both while I’m speaking [“Right... right”] and after I finish the thought. Early messaging – shame surrounding his affectional orientation – played an integral role, but the ways in which his program reinforced those messages “*got in the way*” of his development in this area.

This is directly connected to the impact the culture and environment in the program had on Alexei’s decision to stay closeted: “Which really, at the time, added more external motivation to stay in the closet. Probably would have anyway, but it was a reinforcer.” It would be hard to argue that staying in the closet helped his development or acceptance of his affectional orientation, but this will be discussed further in Chapter V.

Stunted development with regard to professional development and counselor identity.

Richard. As Richard reflected upon his training in his master's program, he was very clear on this topic: "I think what these programs don't really understand is you're stunting professional development as well." One aspect of this was the lack of training around how to manage his work in the field as a queer-identified counselor:

I thought professionally I wasn't going to be able to be an out counselor for a long time either, because I was like, "In [state where Richard lived] who's gonna want to come see a gay counselor?" ... how do you market for the LGBT population? I mean if this is who I am, maybe I can just see them, and how do I do that?

Unfortunately, Richard did not feel safe to openly explore these types of questions in his master's program.

Another way he saw his program stunting his counselor identity was with regard to how it reinforced his shame, closeting, and inauthenticity:

... how are we supposed to help clients? How are we supposed to help clients get to the places that we're fearful to go ourselves because we've been told all our lives that this is wrong? You know, and I don't think – I think it's almost unethical – well, I do think it's unethical – for programs to stunt students' development in any way because they don't like what's happening. I think that we do a huge disservice to the profession and our future clients and future students with making people fit in these boxes. They're not able to be fully authentic, you know, in their programs.

I rephrased this as, "How do I learn how to bring all of me into the counseling room when I'm not even allowed to bring all of me into the classroom?" To which Richard responded, "I'm not even safe to bring all of me into the classroom."

Richard also experienced stunting in his professional development due to the amount of personal work he needed to do in response to damage done by having to stay closeted during his graduate work. He explained that, "I got to such a space before I

started medically transitioning – I wasn't good for students. Thank goodness I wasn't seeing clients at the time." This statement highlighted the idea that upon completing his program, the shame and depression he experienced had taken such a toll on him that he did not feel competent to see clients.

Luke. In reflecting on his time in his master's program and specifically the shame he experienced, Luke said, "So, yeah, how many of those little things throughout my time have impacted how I developed as a counselor and in my profession?" One way in which he sees his program's detrimental impact on this aspect of his development is in regard to authenticity as a counselor:

I'm forced to live with this shame of, like, I'm unfixable in some way. So, yeah, as a therapist, how do you – I guess you have to dissect – you have to cut that part of yourself off in some way... So yeah, absolutely I think I struggled with authenticity as a therapist for a long time. And I think even still trying to figure that out... I was taught to not self-disclose this part of my life... to your professors and to every student you're around. So absolutely that's going to transition and carry over into my work as a therapist and how I sit with clients. So, yeah, I think I just was very disconnected or unaware of how I sat with clients for a long time.

As we explored this topic further, part of what surfaced was Luke's concern that his closeting and closing off portions of his identity during his master's program may have potentially stunted his development in ways that he is not even aware of. We had the following exchange with regard to that sentiment:

LUKE: Yeah, and I guess that's what's hard, is like, I don't even know what – potentially where I could have been as a therapist. I think I felt like I got out of school and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I have so much growth to do" [laughter] Cause I was just so – and I guess that's the unhealthy part of, like, "Let me just shut down and barrel through this." Like, not very healthy as a therapist, to then get out and that doesn't magically go away. So now I'm like – I have to reconnect with being a good therapist now.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, like –

LUKE: Like, I got the paper, but [*pause*]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, like you came out of your program rather than being like, "I am ready to see some clients," you came out like, "Whew, I got a lot of work to do [LUKE: *laughs*] before I'm ready to really dive into this." [LUKE: Yeah. Oh, yeah] And, yeah, those pieces of you that you had to shut down while you were there, you realize now, "Well, I can't be a healthy, authentic therapist with those pieces shut down." [LUKE: Mmmhmm] Like, "I now have to do a bunch of work to try to reintegrate who I am."

LUKE: Yeah. Basic stuff as a therapist. Like, I wish I felt more comfortable with this, sitting in a room with a person. But, how do you do that? Cause you're taught "shut off part of who you are" for so long that now it's like, "Ugh, I gotta re-learn how to undo some of that crap."

As Luke continued to explore these ideas, he reflected on how his post-master's training exposed deficient pieces of his own counselor identity:

So I think when I got out of school, um, and started doing some other trainings, got exposed to more somatic type therapies, I realized how un-self-aware [*laughs*] I was – of how I had just completely cut off any somatic, emotional connection in my work as a therapist. So I think that's why I was so drawn to, like, EMDR and stuff like that. Because, for my own work, my own process, I had so much work to do.

In many ways, for Luke this issue centered around the personal work he needed to do given the shame and trauma he experienced: "Shame is the big one that came to mind as we're talking about that... one of the biggest struggles I had was just the shame that I had to figure out what to do with."

Luke also saw his graduate program negatively impact his counselor identity with regard to competence in working with clients who identify as affectional and gender minorities:

I remember applying for internships I ran into that problem. Originally I wanted to work with a clinic that was LGBT affirming, but told that I couldn't... so [internship site] used to allow interns through [MA program], but as [site] took a more affirming approach, [MA program] separated themselves from [site].

Finally, Luke felt his master's program stunted his professional development because of a lack of training regarding how to navigate the counseling world as a gay man:

I have a client who sought me out because they assumed I was [a conservative Christian] and he's made some comments about, like, gay people. You know, we've never had that discussion, but he's like, 'Oh man, I have this gay client and I just don't know what to do with them.' And in my mind, I'm just like – [*laughs*].

In response, I reflected that how to handle this type of situation would have been a valuable topic to explore in his master's program, but he did not feel safe to do so. He responded, "Sure. Yeah. Yeah, I guess I hadn't really thought of it that deeply, but, yeah, absolutely. Probably a lot of things that were missed."

Leon. When Leon discussed his professional development, he focused primarily on the program's lack of properly preparing all students – not just those who identify as affectional and gender minorities – to be competent working with queer clients. I summarized some of what he shared by saying:

... like you said, if the institution is making it unsafe to even have those kinds of conversations, it sounds like you're saying, "How are they training counselors that are heading out into the field to be competent [LEON: For sure] to sit with a queer client [LEON: Absolutely]?" Like, "if we can't even talk about it – " and like you said, it feels like teaching those students how to discriminate. Showing – modeling discrimination.

Leon responded, "Literally. Well, not only modeling, but directly influencing."

He also discussed impact on professional development with regard to the resources and materials that the program presents to students:

And I think to say, "Okay, as a means of satisfying CACREP requirements, we're gonna put this book that says change in sexual orientation and gender identity is possible' – to meet CACREP standards – is harmful to not only its queer students, but to the academic training of all of its cisgender, straight students. Equally so.

Daisy. For Daisy, the ways in which her master's program negatively impacted her professional development are very present and still impacting her clinical work today.

Well, I have been having a little bit of this existential – ah, that's maybe not the right word – but this internal conflict because I'm gonna be supervising an intern from [Daisy's MA program] this coming year... So, this is my internal dilemma... So I finally told [intern coordinator at Daisy's place of employment], "Do I tell her I'm gay?" And [intern coordinator] was like, "Would you tell any other intern here that you're gay?" And I'm like, "No!" But she knows that I also went to [MA program] so she has this assumed thought that I'm going to be of the same mindset as her.

As we continued to discuss this situation, it became clear that for Daisy this is about much more than simply having the intern potentially make assumptions about her beliefs or views on a range of topics. She worries about the potential fall out that could occur:

And what if she shows up and now she's uncomfortable that she has a gay supervisor, and then she fires me, or we have to switch? Like, that's gonna hurt me a lot... I don't know that I, right now, have the emotional bandwidth to handle that. So part of me – I want to do it to protect myself.

In statements like this Daisy expressed fear of being hurt if her affectional orientation becomes an issue in supervising this intern.

As Daisy share more about this fear, she described how it has carried over from her time in the program:

But, part of me is like, "Will [MA program] let me come to their... like... will they fire me? Do they require that everyone sign a statement of faith in their internship program?" But all these fears go through your head.... I have both a guilt that I feel nervous about supervising this individual – cause it's not giving her the benefit of the doubt – but just like this idea that [*disgusted noise*] will [MA program]... I haven't gone there or been a part of it for almost eight years and it still eats at me, you know?

The shame and pain Daisy experienced in her master's program was not only detrimental back then; it continues to cause tension, fear, and hesitation in her work to this day. In

part of our conversation about this topic, I paraphrased some of what she had shared by saying, “There's, like, fear and uncertainty and wounds that are dragged into your current career...” and she responded with, “Mmmhmm,” while nodding affirmingly.

Like other participants, Daisy agreed that her master's program missed the opportunity to help her navigate professional development and counselor identity issues that she would surely face in the field as an affectional minority. She internally wrestles with how to navigate situations that involve advocacy for and self-disclosure of her affectional orientation: “There's so much fear... but then it's also that piece of, like, as a counselor if I'm feeling this way, then sharing it can I help another person not feel that way?” It would have been helpful for her to explore questions like these in her master's program, but a lack of safety prevented her from doing so.

Alexei. While I feel as though I can see this theme in some of Alexei's responses, I feel that is more my interpretation than something he was explicitly expressing, and those thoughts will be reserved for Chapter V. He did speak about the program reinforcing black and white thinking – “just everything very black and white, laid out, cause-effects. Um, and then realizing that that's not how life is” – but this had more to do with the program's general perspective, rather than his experience there as an affectional minority.

Stunted development with regard to sense of self / self-acceptance.

Richard. The final area of “stunting” that Richard discussed involved the impact that the program had on his self-acceptance. Reflecting on that time, he stated:

I think it really does stunt that pride of self and self-actualization, and the congruence of living an authentic life... just all that stunting of just not being able to be completely authentic with who you are in the spaces that you're quote, unquote [*air quotes*] “supposed” to be able to be open and accepted.

He went on to discuss the fact that “It’s taken me so long to accept pieces,” underscoring his difficult and prolonged process of self-acceptance.

Richard then linked this idea to his second suicide attempt and the despair leading up to it:

Well, and I think [the suicide attempt] goes back to, like, that master’s program – or just, you’re not being able to be authentic, so keep carrying that, and it builds. I think not being taught to really go dive down and be authentic, or saying, ‘You can be authentic except for _____’... those experiences just keep stunting further and further.

Ultimately, that shame and inauthenticity had a profound impact on Richard’s sense of self and quality of life: “I’m not living my authentic self when I get this depressed.”

Luke. After graduating from his master’s program, Luke realized how much personal work he needed to do in order to repair the damage done during his time there: “... for my own work, my own process, I had so much work to do.” As discussed in the previous section, part of that work had to do with professional development and counselor identity, but much of it went beyond that. I paraphrased his words by saying:

As a counselor, I had to work through some of that stuff and figure that out. But just as, like, a person – as a human being [LUKE: Yeah] – I had to figure out how to, like, reconnect those pieces that I had worked so hard to disconnect so that I could survive.

Luke responded with, “Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely.”

Leon. With respect to self-acceptance, and in keeping with the shame discussed in earlier themes, Leon talked about the program’s message that he was “dirty, damaged, and disgusting.” This messaging had a significant impact on his sense of self:

... it kind of reinforced the shame that I had heard in my conservative church. This idea that I was inherently damaged. Broken. Kind of this rhetoric that goes in line with saying, “I am an abomination.”

When speaking about the shift that occurred after surviving the drive home from his Human Development lecture, and how the desperation and rage of that moment was transformed into beginning to accept himself, Leon recalled:

... it feels like I was just so stuck in this trench and I couldn't find my way out. And that day I found the latch and the door, and it was just kinda like this upward climb that lasted, I mean, several years... but it felt like crawling towards self-acceptance, and it took so much courage.

That was a remarkable turning point for Leon, but it also implies the *lack* of self-acceptance he had felt up to that point in the program.

Daisy. The unsafe environment at Daisy's program led her to not only closet her affectional orientation, but to question whether it was even a legitimate part of who she was:

Coming to [MA program] and, again, not talking about this, I was like, "This does not need to be part of my identity." Right, kinda taking that step back of just shoving and stuffing. I think it delayed that part of my process because I was like, "I have to be so protective of this identity in the Christian culture."... So I do think in some ways that entering into it stifled a lot of this cause I'm *so* concerned about my safety...

As we continued to discuss this lack of safety, the conversation moved to how it continues to impact her today. I paraphrased what she had shared by saying:

And I don't want to put words in your mouth, but it feels like you're saying, you know, your time in your MA – it helped make you who you are, it shaped you in some powerful and really good ways, and it's helped you wrestle with these things and kinda come to where you are *AND* there's also this, like, lingering sense of fear or, like, "I'm not supposed to talk about this."

Daisy responded by affirming my comment: "Yeah."

In her current work, this fear – which has some of its roots in her master's program – still causes Daisy to struggle with self-disclosure regarding her affectional orientation:

I have really struggled with if I just say "my wife" or "my girlfriend" or something like that in a presentation... And I'm, "So why am I sharing these identities?" So I have really struggled with this push/pull of like, we're not supposed to self-disclose. But if I share part of my identity is that helpful? Is it harmful? It's like, "Why the hell are you sharing about your sex life?"

For Daisy these feelings seem to stem from the message she received from society in general, but reinforced in her master's program, that, "sexual orientation, affinity orientation is dirty." In another place in the interview she reflected:

... it is amazing how much tension I feel about this idea of self-disclosing. I think it's because of that piece of *sexual* orientation. I'm literally just telling you who I prefer to sleep with and that feels dirty... Whereas "me and my wife" I bet you probably won't think about it a ton, but I think about it almost every time I say it.

Alexei. As with the other categories in this theme, the brevity of some of Alexei's responses caused me to "read between the lines" and infer his meaning, then check my understanding by reflecting those ideas back to him. However, he clearly addressed how the culture and environment in the program stunted his self-acceptance when he said, "There was a lot of internal conflict. A lot of internal conflict... believing that if I did embrace my sexuality that I would be completely turning away from any relationship with my God." This struggle or "conflict" was compounded by the fact that the CCI he was attending endorsed and reinforced this message.

Theme 8: Able/Unable to Reconcile Christian Faith with Affectional and Gender Identities

Each participant's journey was slightly different to ways in which they did or did not reconcile their Christian beliefs with their affectional and gender identities. However, for all of them, their time in their master's programs seemed to have played a pivotal role in that process. This topic is treated separately from the "stunting" discussed in the previous theme as that felt like an inappropriate way to discuss spiritual development.

Whether participants retained or rejected their Christian faith, categorizing either of those as “stunting” would be a value judgement implying a right or wrong way to engage in spirituality. In line with Pargament’s spiritual development model discussed at length in Chapter II and again later in Chapter V, both integration and temporary (or lasting) disintegration are potential outcomes when one encounters conflict regarding spiritual beliefs.

Richard. Throughout his master’s program, Richard experienced a shift away from the Christian faith he grew up with: “I joke that I’m a recovering Catholic.” All joking aside though, it was the shame and othering that Richard experienced both in his master’s program and within Christianity more broadly that led to this definitive split:

And I think at the end of my master's program I was really disgusted with religion – organized religion – and I think that any time anyone brought up, like, scripture or, you know, Christianity I was just like, "I'm out." Like, I just tuned stuff out.

This did not, however drive Richard completely from all spirituality. He stated that, “This profession has helped me find spirituality, not religion... So I still to this day find spirituality and connection with people.” Part of Richard’s spirituality is experienced through medication and exercise, specifically riding his bicycle:

And so, for me, my development has gone away from the organized to the – what brings me – what fuels my soul, what makes me happy, what makes the stress go away. And meditation is part of my daily routine. And exercise is another... cycling's like, oh my gosh, like that – that's my church! You know, I get on my bicycle – and I like to ride by myself – I do sometimes ride in groups, but my preferred method is to ride by myself and to take in – to really be intentional about my ride and the fact of, what did I see? What animals did I see? How did the wind feel? How did the sun feel? You know, like, it's a really intentional ride.

Still, there is a strong distinction for Richard between religion – particularly conservative Christianity – and spirituality, and his distaste for the former has persisted: “I still can’t sit in an organized religious service... and I’m not anti-religion, I’m just...

I've been hurt so much by people saying they're religious and by religion." At this point in the interview I responded with, "The inauthentic 'love your neighbor'..." and Richard continued, "... but not these ones." The pain and the shame he experienced from conservative Christianity, both inside and outside of his master's program, had left its mark.

Luke. As discussed in Theme 6 above, Luke's perspective with regard to his affectional orientation changed dramatically during his time in his master's program. This left him feeling like he was somewhat on the outside looking in at the faith he had grown up with:

I guess that's what's weird about that topic, right, is it's like, in so many other ways I can fit in and be part of it, but this one little thing says I no longer... I think that's what sucks, is, again, if there's this thing about me that fundamentally I can't change, what do I do with it then? I'm just out I guess. Like, I'm no longer – I can't be a part of this community and there's nothing I can do about it. That was kind of what it felt like... it just feels like there's this strange part of the evangelical community where you have to align with this thing to be part of this community.

For Luke it got to the point where even being around conservative Christian ideas became difficult:

I dropped a class cause one of the professors, I was like, "I can't be in his class." It was an Old Testament theology class and I was like, "I can't deal with this, okay, like physically can't force myself to do it." So I had to drop his class and just told him, "Ah, I'm busy, I can't do it." But I was just like, "I can't – can't do it anymore." Like, I couldn't – felt like I couldn't force myself in some ways. Certain things I just didn't align with anymore.

As he progressed in the program, Luke began to realize that not only was he unable to reconcile his theology with his affectional orientation, but his beliefs were changing on many fronts related to his faith:

You know, I really thought for a while that maybe I would go into more of a space of, like, gay Christianity. You know, the tension of those two things. But I

really, again, more on just kind of a broader theological stance, realized there's things I just don't align with with Christianity. And so I don't want to try and balance this, like, being gay and being Christian together. I just – I don't think – maybe I wouldn't call myself Christian.

Later in the conversation, Luke seemed to take a firmer position on this, though still with some ambiguity and fluidity:

Yeah, I would say right now I'm not really sure. I think, you know, I don't identify as a Christian anymore. I'm trying to – I think what I've always been wrestling with, is like, okay, am I just in this resentful place where it's like, there was this bad experience, so I don't want to identify with that [*laughs*]? Or is it more just, authentically, that's not who I am? I think there's a part of me that feels [*pause*] a draw towards spirituality, but I'm not sure what that is for my life right now. So, I think I'm – it took me a while to be okay saying I wasn't a Christian [*laughs*]. You know, again, being very committed to that faith and theology for a long time.

He seems to be a bit surer of what he does *not* identify with, but is still trying to determine where he stands now. He appears to be in transition with regard to his faith and spirituality; no longer Christian, but feeling the loss of that piece of his identity and not sure what that means for him.

Leon. As Leon encountered alternative perspectives, his views around his faith, affectional orientation, and gender identity began to change. He discussed attending an affirming church for the first time and he explained that it was “really transformative for me... it was like that larger bubble that I had found that was my home...” He went on to share:

To go there and see queer people holding hands and praying together, or taking communion together, or holding hands and lifting one hand in the air as they praised the Lord during praise and worship – it was revolutionary for me. And I honestly think that exposure to that church probably saved my life. Like, literally.

While Leon continued to work toward integration of these previously disparate identities, his theological positions began to shift:

And I kept growing to a place of now where I wouldn't identify as Christian, but definitely still believing that there is a God... God is bigger than religion in my opinion. And I love the Bible, but I also love the Quran and other religious books, and I think if we really believe that God is love, then eventually – I believe – we would move beyond Christianity.

As Leon moved away from the conservative Christian beliefs he grew up with, he started to find spirituality in his therapeutic work with clients:

I feel like when I'm in the therapy room – when I'm in my chair and I have a client across from me, and it's a gay person struggling in any sort of [*pause*] with addictions, or coming out, or a religious family member, or just communicating in their relationship – what's happening in that room feels, to me, more like transformative spiritual work than I've ever felt inside of a church... to repair that person's identity through psychotherapeutic interventions feels more to me like the work of God than what the work of the Christian church is doing. Because, in my experience, the Christian church is divorcing the person from their God-given identity. And I feel like therapy is restoring that identity, that union. And so to identify as Christian almost feels like it goes against my identity as a therapist.

This realization of the damage conservative Christianity is doing to affectional and gender minorities ultimately led Leon to the following conclusion:

to walk into a place and say, "I'm a gay Christian" or "a queer Christian" just feels so gross to me. Because – not only from my personal history that I don't want to identify with [that] hateful, anti-gay rhetoric – but I also don't want people assume [*pause*] [*sigh*] that in some way I might be duplicitous. Because Christianity is not a safe identifier in the queer space. And so for me to – it's almost like a personal branding matter. And if that wasn't even the case, I still wouldn't identify as a Christian...

Still, Leon reiterated that he not only embraces spirituality in his personal life, but sees it as integral to his clinical work. He explained that for him, "... spirituality without psychology is just religion, and I think psychology without spirituality is just academics and diagnosis... I feel like where we see some true transformation is when they both combine and touch each other."

Daisy. Like most participants, Daisy sees the shaming and othering experienced generally within conservative Christianity and specifically in master's programs like hers as driving affectional and gender minorities away from their Christian faith. She recounted a story about a good friend of hers who was a youth pastor at a church, but was let go after coming out as gay. This occurred early in Daisy's counseling program; she had been attending this church at the time and volunteering in the youth program. Her friend had the following interaction with the pastor of the church:

[the pastor] told my friend, who was the youth pastor – who no longer works there – even after he was let go he was like, "Can I come to church?" And the pastor was like, "I can't offer you communion..." Like, "Yes, I want you to be there. I want your boyfriend to come. I will not serve you communion." And I was like, "I'm out." If I can only be so much a part of this church – and so it's like, I'm not willing to fall in love with something I can't be fully part of. It's not worth it to me. And my wife has heard this story and it breaks her heart. Cause we both would like to get involved again in some sort of faith-based community, but we're like, "It's not worth pain."

Experiences like this continued to impact Daisy and her wife's faith, to the point where her wife essentially walked away from her Christian beliefs:

... but it's hard for me, cause I just see [wife] losing any aspect of faith... And my wife has it in the core of who she is, but seeing her lose it kills me. And it's because of all of this shit. It's LGBT issues predominantly, but it's also the racial. It's what's going on with the border. It's the church continually others people. And it's just like, "Don't have money? Don't have means? Don't have this? We're not having anything to do with you."

Daisy and her wife found it more and more difficult to reconcile their Christian faith with what they saw going on around them.

It may appear that Daisy was only speaking about Christianity in a broad sense, and not her master's program or the CCI she attended, but she went on to say:

And so I try to figure out how could I write to [MA program] to maybe change their minds. So I tried to write – I wrote this really long response in the open-ended space they gave me [in a survey the institution sent out] cause I was like, if

we could get people to just change their mind, people like my wife won't leave the church.

It is clear that Daisy is not just speaking about Christianity or “the church,” but her master’s program as well. She feels that the program contributes to and reinforces the messages that push marginalized individuals away from faith.

However, unlike most of the other participants, Daisy was ultimately able to reconcile her Christian faith with her affectional orientation, though this involved some significant shifts in her theology and beliefs. Ironically, to some degree she credits the CCI she attended with helping her come to this place of being able to integrate those two aspects of her life:

... but I think I have faith because of – still because of the fact that I was able to explore the liberalness of it... I think the only reason I hold on is because what I learned through [MA program] – that I can have a different belief system and still be involved.

Despite the conservative position of the institution, Daisy’s theological training and exposure to alternative ideas there actually gave her the tools to create space in her life for both her faith and her affectional orientation.

The changes involved in this integration process were not only theological or philosophical, they also led to a move away from organized religion. Part of that comes from simply having difficulty finding a church where Daisy feels supported and accepted: “I have a strong faith. No, I do not actively go to a church because there are very few that hold affirming theology.” She reiterated this break from organized religion when talking about her wedding: “And faith was part of our ceremony, so, you know, it's this thing that's such an integral part of who I am and so important to me and I'll always have faith, whether it's organized or not.”

Alexei. Consistent with what most other participants shared, Alexei was ultimately unable to reconcile his Christian faith with his affectional orientation. At one point he left organized religion for a while, but when he came back to it he found that "... it's like trying to put on old clothes that don't fit anymore." After this he attempted to integrate the two in a variety of other ways:

I started going to therapy, so looking at it from that angle. Coming at it academically; looking at other interpretations of everything I had been told up until that point. But even then, there's still the messaging that, no, these are just people saying what they want to hear. And so by you accepting this, you're just reading that you want to hear. So it was [*pause*] really it wasn't until – really not until my spirituality became much more deist on some days: that there is a god, maybe; to agnostic: I have no idea – that what God thought about my sexuality really became a moot point. So sometimes I still hear those old tapes, but pretty rarely. As I see more contradictions in theology, more contradictions in history, just kind of continues this whole big house of theology just kind of crashed out, in my mind anyway.

Alexei attempted to incorporate his affectional orientation into his faith, but could not find a way to do so.

Later, Alexei used a metaphor to describe his struggle with integration and then eventual rejection of his faith:

And it's kind of like if I had been playing chess and trying to go through the right amount of moves to get to a point where I was reconciled with my faith and who I was, then I just threw the game. Like, just picked it up and, like, "I'm not playing this game anymore... I don't recognize that there's someone sitting on the other side of the table playing with me anymore."

He also offered the following explanation for why he thinks he was unable to reconcile the two:

... my early theology was so rock hard that by putting any crack in it, eventually it was all going to fall apart. And maybe other people had been brought up in a more malleable faith. I don't know what would have happened if I'd had different pastors...

Here Alexei seems to suggest that perhaps because of the rigidity of his theology – the black and white thinking he referred to earlier – his faith simply could not grow and adapt to accommodate his affectional orientation. There was almost a sadness as he reflected on what could have been had he “been brought up in a more malleable faith.”

Conclusion

While participants shared a wide variety of experiences, their responses were remarkably similar on a number of topics. As discussed in Chapter III, to help ensure that these themes were not being artificially imposed upon the data, all of the above themes were presented to participants ahead of the follow-up interviews and all five fully endorsed each applicable theme. The next chapter will explore my interpretations of these themes – the back half of the “double hermeneutic” discussed in IPA research (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3) – in addition to addressing limitations, researcher learnings, implications for the field, and possible areas for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This section begins with an exploration of the limitations of the study and lessons learned, including reflections on the researcher journal which was kept throughout the project. Following this I will provide a discussion of the findings, including my interpretations. This discussion is informed by connections to the extant literature, as is consistent with IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009). Some of the literature referenced here was also presented in Chapter II, however, it is common in IPA to encounter information and themes during the interview process which were not anticipated at the outset of the project, so some new literature will be introduced as well (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of implications for the field and possible areas of future research.

Limitations

As with any study, there were certain limitations, both foreseeable from the outset and not, that may have impacted the findings and need to be acknowledged. First, though the goal at the start of the project was to use a snowball sample, none of the participants were actually located in this manner. Snowball sampling has its strengths and weakness, as discussed in Chapter III, but it is particularly well suited to accessing hidden populations which made it a good fit for this study. Despite the hopes (and attempts) of “snowballing,” all five of the participants were identified through either the researcher’s personal and professional network or an email solicitation via the CESNET Listserv.

Despite participants offering to reach out to others in their networks, to my knowledge no one who participated in the study did so because of a referral from a previous participant.

This may protect against the concern of too much homogeneity that is sometimes characteristic of snowball sampling, but conversely the presence or lack of such homogeneity is largely unknown in this case. Perhaps these participants represent a broad and diverse swath of experiences outside of the phenomenon in question, and therefore provide a good overview of the general experience of being an affectional and gender minority student at a CACREP accredited CCI. However, it is also possible that the participants have much in common beyond the few questions asked on the demographic questionnaire. There could potentially be a substantially different subset of this population that was missed in this study. To be sure, the intent of this study – and any IPA for that matter – was never to create a generalized, authoritative theory; rather, the goal was to begin to explore and lay a foundation for further exploration in an arena where there was little existing literature. Still, the sample provides perhaps just some of that foundation; more research is needed to determine how common their experiences are and whether or not potential subsets exist.

With regard to potential subsets of the population, one such group which was not captured in this study is students who did not finish their graduate programs. All five participants in the study graduated and are practicing in the field in some capacity. These are effectively “success” stories – despite the discriminatory culture and environment at their CCIs, they persisted. Hearing the stories of students who were not able to complete their degrees, or transferred to another institution to do so, would further inform the conversation on this issue.

Similarly, it would be informative to explore the experiences of affectional and gender minority students who attended CACREP accredited programs which are *not* housed in CCIs, including students who identified as Christians when entering those programs. I suspect that many of the experiences of the participants in this study are unique to the setting – CACREP accredited CCIs – but comparing their experiences to those of similar students at other institutions may help shed additional light on the topic. This is also addressed in the future research section below.

A final limitation in this research was the dependence upon participant memories. Though there is no reason to suggest their recollections were unreliable, recall is by nature open to interference. As Eby (2009) suggests, “chaff gets into the grains of winnowed memory” (p. 89). In the current study, multiple accounts (initial and follow-up interview) from multiple participants in varied settings helps protect against this, but relying on participant recall still has inherent limitations. Perhaps a future study of currently enrolled students would be helpful in adding further protection against this.

Researcher Reflections

As mentioned in Chapter III, a researcher journal was maintained throughout the research process, starting with reflections on an initial consultation which took place prior to beginning the project. When I was contemplating pursuing this topic for my dissertation, I sat down with a trans individual who had previously attended a CACREP accredited counseling program at a CCI. That conversation was very influential in developing what would become the interview schedule as well as informing the overall research design. As we explored this topic together, it became evident to me that this individual had not actually processed much of what happened to them in their master’s

program. An important conclusion I drew from this, which was reflected in the research journal, was that follow-up interviews might be necessary. If my participants were similar to this consultant, they may benefit from reflecting on our conversation from the first interview and then having an opportunity to come back and add to their responses or talk about additional information that came up for them in the time that elapsed. I made note of these considerations in the researcher journal and they were a major factor in deciding to conduct follow-up interviews, beyond the simple fact that it is a more robust design.

However, when it came to actually conducting these follow-up interviews in the study, I found that most participants had little to add to their previous responses. I was puzzled by this and wondered about two possible explanations. First, it is possible that too much time had passed between interviews. Follow-up interviews occurred months after the initial interview. Perhaps if those had instead occurred just days or weeks after, with the interview still fresh in their minds, participants may have been able to provide additional, equally rich responses. Unfortunately, this simply was not possible with the time-intensive nature of transcription, coding, and theming that needed to take place prior to those follow-up interviews; I had to complete those processes in order to know what questions to ask in the follow-ups.

The second possible explanation that came to mind – and the one I hope is more accurate – is that these initial interviews were different in some important ways from the “interview” with the consultant at the start of the project. Unlike that early consultation, I went into these interviews with a much more well thought out purpose, research question, and interview schedule. This allowed for a focus and specificity that was not present at the start of the research. I also had the benefit of having completed a thorough literature

review, which allowed me to have a sense of what participants might share, again providing the opportunity to target interview questions accordingly. Participants had the benefit of collecting their thoughts on the topic ahead of time as well. Based upon the information included in the emails soliciting participation and the informed consent documents, participants had a fairly clear idea of what they were going to be talking about when that initial interview finally took place. For these reasons, it is possible that the initial interview thoroughly covered the topic and participants were sufficiently prepared, meaning that they simply did not have much to add during the second contact.

Also related to the interview process, the research journal reflects the tension I felt trying to ensure that I walked the line between learning from each interview and refining the interview schedule – the iterative process described in chapter III – while still allowing room for each participant’s unique story to emerge. I often wondered where that line was and wanted to be careful to sufficiently bracket my own interpretations so as not to push a particular agenda. This is a common consideration in IPA research, as Smith et al. (2009) explain:

The IPA approach to data collection is committed to a degree of open-mindedness, so you will have to try to suspend (or ‘bracket off’) your preconceptions when it comes to designing and conducting your interviews or other data collection events. As far as we can, we aim to enable participants to express their concerns and make their claims on their own terms. (p. 42)

However, they go on to hedge this precaution with the notion that, “It doesn’t hurt to have some idea of what form these claims are likely to take” (p. 42). It seems there is a balance between going into the interview process with knowledge about the phenomena in question and a framework for making sense of what the participant may share, but not to the point where we do not have room for new or alternative information.

A final note on the data collection piece: though I had proposed that I might interview some participants via video conferencing, I decided to conduct all initial interviews in person. While some participants were drivable, in some cases this meant flying to other cities to engage in those face-to-face interviews. While this was time intensive (and an added expense), I was concerned that something may be lost in the less intimate setting created by video conferencing. I did not want to look back on the project and wonder if someone might have shared more had they felt more comfortable, especially given the sensitive and personal nature of the data. I will never know if this decision made any tangible difference, but I do not regret it. In fact, a number of participants commented on the level of commitment involved in showing up in person. It seemed to convey to them how seriously I took the project and how important their stories were, so perhaps my assumptions around comfort and rapport have some merit.

As I moved into the analysis phase of the project, an extensive amount of time was spent transcribing the interviews, and research journal entries addressed that topic. Though I considered using a transcription service, I was ultimately thankful that I chose to transcribe them myself. This endeavor allowed me to become very well acquainted with the data before analysis had even formally begun. Smith et al. (2009) contend:

The first step of an IPA analysis involves immersing oneself in some of the original data. In most IPA studies this would be in the form of the first written transcript and this stage of the process would involve reading and re-reading the data. If the transcript is from an interview, it is helpful to listen to the audio-recording at least once while first reading the transcript. Imagining the voice of the participant during subsequent readings of the transcript assists with a more complete analysis. (p. 82)

Transcribing provided a thorough immersion in the data in the midst of completing a necessary step in the data collection procedures. Not only did I listen to each interview,

but transcription involved listening to each section multiple times in order to be sure that I had accurately captured the data.

After completing the coding and theming portions of the research, I provided participants with a list of tentative themes based upon their initial interview. With the exception of some very minor pushback from Luke regarding his ambivalence about his program (essentially a discussion about word choice, which was easily resolved in the follow-up interview), all participants agreed with and fully endorsed every theme. Though this piece of the study went surprising smoothly, the research journal captured my conclusion that if I were to do this over again, I would have included quotes from each of their transcripts to support, clarify, and elucidate the themes. Those themes made sense to me, but I had spent countless hours reviewing the transcripts, laying out the themes, rearranging them, and discussing them with the co-coder and auditor. The participants, without the luxury of all that reflection, could have had a more difficult time understanding how some of those high-level, summative headings connected to their stories. Providing a brief quote or two for each one would be very helpful for participants in ascertaining whether the themes accurately captured their sentiments. Again, this did not prove to be an issue in this particular project, but in future research I will amend this step in the process accordingly.

Finally, some entries in the research journal highlighted the tension between wanting to let participants' words speak for themselves, especially when they shared something particularly powerful, and the desire to protect their confidentiality. I redacted obviously identifiable information, but at times the nature of the content or exact wording of what was said felt like it could potentially lead to a violation of the participants'

anonymity. Certainly such risks were discussed and understood by participants during the informed consent process, but I still felt a high degree of responsibility to tread carefully. These participants shared deeply meaningful information which potentially puts them at risk should it ever be connected back to them and I took that very seriously. Ultimately, I decided I would rather lose some of the power or clarity of a statement rather than potentially outing a participant.

Discussion

In order to frame the discussion and interpretation of the findings in this study, I will first begin with a reminder of the purpose and research question identified at the outset of the project:

Purpose

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore the lived experiences of members of affectional and gender minority communities who currently attend or previously attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs, and the sense they make of how those experiences shaped their development with regard to spirituality, affectional and gender identity, and counselor identity.

Research Question

- Q1 How do affectional and gender minority individuals who attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within conservative Christian institutions describe the impact on their identity?

The themes presented in Chapter IV will be addressed in relation to the stated purpose and research question, and in conjunction with relevant literature.

As I explored information applicable to the research question with participants, it was often necessary for them to back up a bit in order to provide context for their

responses, such as when Daisy said, “So, like, to backtrack a little...” This was a common sentiment among the participants; the backtracking Daisy is referring to gave space for participants to describe “the lived experiences of members of affectional and gender minority communities who currently attend or previously attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs,” as specified in the purpose statement above. These conversations essentially provided themes 1 through 6 and set the stage for discussing the impact of those experiences on their development with regard to affectional orientation and gender identity, counselor identity, and spirituality (themes 7 and 8).

Theme 1: Experienced an Anti-Queer Culture in Their Master’s Program

The anti-queer culture at CCIs starts with their policies and codes of conduct. Every participant was aware of their institution’s discriminatory stance because it was explicit in writing. Perhaps these policies and codes are intended to deter affectional and gender minority students from enrolling in these programs, but as Wolff & Himes (2010) suggest, “the real impact is upon students who may begin to realize their same-sex attractions while attending the institution. These students may feel trapped, isolated, and helpless without a means for support or guidance” (p. 455). This was true for Luke and Leon, who went into their programs hoping to change their affectional orientations, but realized along the way that this was not possible. Similarly, Daisy and Richard entered their programs considering celibacy as an option. Once these participants began to embrace their affectional and gender minority identities, they were trapped.

Consistent with current literature regarding the culture at religious institutions, participants shared story after story of the discrimination and shame they encountered in their master's programs (e.g., Barton, 2010; Craig et al., 2017; Wolff, Atieno Okech, Smith, & Southwick, 2019). This discrimination and shame came at the hands of fellow students, faculty members, administrators, and even the president of one institution. According to the participants in this study, these programs – from top to bottom – are not providing a safe environment for students who identify as affectional and gender minorities, despite CACREP's approval and endorsement. This was evident in the sad irony of Richard comparing his experience in his graduate program to being an affectional minority in the military during "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and his wondering, "If I'm really who I am, am I safe?" A student should *never* have to ask that question – not any student, in any school, at any level – but especially not in a CACREP accredited counseling program given the codes and standards in the counseling field. A more in-depth discussion of whether these programs meet the relevant standards of the field is provided later in this chapter.

Similarly, Luke shared that one of his professors was "Safer. Understood. More gracious maybe." I am thankful that Luke found support in certain places in his program, but again, students should not have to characterize some faculty in CACREP accredited programs as "*safer*" than others – they should simply all be safe when it comes to their attitude toward and treatment of affectional and gender minorities. Many more examples were presented in Chapter IV, such as blatantly discriminatory policies and codes of conduct, and an anti-gay speech by an institution president, but some of the more glaring

were the discriminatory teachings that came directly from faculty members. Luke shared the following experience:

I think [faculty member teaching the class] was railing against how the DSM-V was changing gender dysphoria to not be classified as a mental disorder. And I'm just like, "I cannot believe there are people that still, like, believe this."

Luke's surprise that "people" still hold this belief is an understatement; we are not just talking about "people," but a full-time faculty member in a CACREP accredited counseling program.

Equally concerning were Daisy and Leon's descriptions of faculty members teaching students how to refer or refuse service to affectional and gender minority clients. Even a surface level look at these incidents suggests that they are unacceptable in a CACREP accredited counselor training program based upon both CACREP and ACA's standards, but there is a deeper issue here. Behind such discriminatory positions and practices is not a body of peer reviewed research, but the personal ideology of the faculty members making these assertions. These are value-based positions which are not only unsupported by research, they are *contradicted* by current literature in the field (Rose et al., 2019).

Given these kinds of experiences recounted by the participants in this study, it is difficult to see how it could be argued that these institutions meet the expectations set forth by CACREP (2015), specifically standards 1.K. and 1.Q., which state, "The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community" and "The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to recruit, employ, and retain a diverse faculty to create and support an inclusive learning community" (p. 6). Per

the discussion on these standards in Chapter II, it seems reasonable to include affectional orientation and gender identity under the intended meaning of “diverse.” If, instead, CACREP intends to exclude those identities from that definition, no public explanation of that decision has been made available by the organization.

As discussed in Chapter IV, these programs did not create the shame that participants in this study described; the participants clearly carried some of that into their programs from previous experiences. In line with the existing literature regarding the prejudiced attitudes toward affectional and gender minorities that persist in many pockets of U.S. culture (e.g., Miller, 2017; Tillery, 2018), participants in this study described a variety of discriminatory experiences prior to entering their master’s programs. However, even though the programs did not plant those seeds, it is clear that they cultivated the soil in which such insidious seeds could grow. They also watered and nurtured those seeds through their policies, codes of conduct, faculty and administration teachings, library resources, and overall culture.

This sentiment was captured succinctly in Luke’s comment that, “my program there I don’t think realizes that it is endorsing shame.” Participants used a variety of painful words to describe the ways in which their programs reinforced that shame; they talked about receiving messages that, because of their affectional orientation or gender identity, they were “broken,” “sinful,” “dirty,” “damaged,” “disgusting,” a “pervert,” and an “abomination,” to name a few. Many, if not all, of these messages and the shame they carry with them were likely heaped upon the participants in other times in their lives, but the fact remains that they also heard these messages in their CACREP accredited master’s programs and from representatives of those programs. Again, these messages

seem to run counter to the expectation that programs “create and support an inclusive learning community” for their students (CACREP, 2015, p. 6).

Given this kind of treatment, I was surprised that participants did not appear to come into the interview space with ulterior motives or an “axe to grind”, evidenced in part by the ambivalence they discussed with respect to their programs and the people there. I rarely felt anger in the room during the interviews; it was more sadness, disappointment, and pain, along with pride in having survived and gone on to thrive personally and professionally. In addition, most participants seemed to go out of their way to complement their programs, highlight positive differences between the programs and the institutions, praise supportive faculty and peers, and reflect on the good that came out of their time. Luke and Daisy both talked explicitly about not wanting to be bitter or resentful. Daisy’s time in her program led to suicidal ideation, but she “wouldn’t trade it for the world.” Leon, despite offering some of the most scathing, critical remarks, also praised the program and the former chair in many places through the interview. A number of times, Alexei spoke of his program in favorable terms and contrasted it against another program that he is “very afraid of.”

It would appear that these individuals did not agree to participate in this study in order to disparage their programs; they seemed to genuinely want to tell their stories, and I found them to be surprising kind, gracious, and forgiving toward these programs and institutions despite the experiences they had there. This shows their strength and resilience, but also adds to the credibility of the difficult, painful experiences they shared. As participants continued to exhibit this ambivalence though, I wondered about some of the reasons for it. Their statements seemed to fall generally into two categories: 1)

focusing on the positive while downplaying the significance or impact of negative experiences and 2) finding meaning in the painful experiences.

With regard to the first, participants often appeared to consider something supportive that felt neutral to me or consider something neutral that felt shaming and discriminatory to me. For example, Luke said, “they were somewhat gracious to me as long as there was kinda like this boundary that I have to be careful not to cross.” Rather than grace, this sounds tolerant at best, but still threatening and with an undercurrent of fear. If they were truly gracious, then I would not expect him to need to be “careful” or hide. Later he characterized the program’s stance as “We’ll tolerate you... as long as you’re quiet and don’t, uh, you know, talk, or don’t say anything, or don’t question anything.” Again, this does not sound like grace.

Similarly, Leon stated, “...as I started coming out to myself and speaking more blatantly about it on campus and coming out to fellow students, the school never reacted – the department never reacted negatively. I was never punished or called in for a talk of any kind.” Here Leon seems to be praising the counseling department for not treating him negatively, but based upon the codes and standards of the counseling field, a student in a CACREP accredited program should not even need to consider that they might be “punished” because of their affectional orientation or gender identity (e.g., ACA, 2014, C.5.; CACREP, 2015, 1.K.; Harper et al., 2013, F.8.) . Along these same lines, Alexei described the stance of some of his faculty members as, “... it's not condemning, but not affirming either. Kind of in the mindset of ‘everyone sins, so why are we worried about this?’” This statement implies that the faculty members in question considered his

affectional orientation to be a sin; calling a piece of his identity sinful feels condemning to me, but Alexei considered it to be more neutral.

In exploring how to make sense of these accounts, I came to the following tentative conclusion: what seems to make experiences like these noteworthy for participants is that they expected to be treated otherwise. They expected to be treated poorly and discriminated against, so when they were not, it felt like “grace,” rather than something they deserved. The absence of discrimination almost begins to feel like support or advocacy. This finding is consistent with the concept of internalized homophobia, which consequently has been shown to correlate with psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, demoralization) and increased substance use (Walch, Ngamake, Bovornusvakool, & Walker, 2016), both of which were described by the participants in this study.

Richard reflected this idea even in discussing his current position as a counselor educator when he said, “I’m so lucky that I’m able to be out at work.” Taken by itself, this comment would not have given me any pause, but in conjunction with what other participants shared, it is consistent with the notion that these participants are so used to poor treatment that anything short of that feels acceptable or equitable. In actuality, Richard is not “lucky” that he gets to be himself at work without facing discrimination, shame, and anti-queer rhetoric. He is entitled to and deserves to work in an environment free from discrimination, but he is so accustomed to it that its absence makes him feel fortunate. It would appear that this kind of mindset contributes to the ambivalence that participants exhibited with respect to the CCIs they attended.

The second underlying factor in participants' ambivalence – finding meaning – was a universal experience across all interviews. This appears to help participants situate the painful experiences they went through into the larger context of their stories, and to see those experiences as at least somewhat purposeful and productive. This is captured well by Richard's assertion that, "I think that there's a reason why I had to go through all that. I have to believe that." He *has* to believe that because the alternative – to believe that the suffering had no purpose or meaning – is untenable for him. This calls to mind Frankl's (2006) assertion that, "man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life. That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that his suffering has a meaning" (p. 113). Consistent with Frankl's suggestion, the participants in this study appear to be willing to accept their suffering provided they can find meaning in that suffering. It was worth it because it is part of what made them who they are.

Theme 2: Experienced a Culture of Control and Fear in Their Master's Program

Connected to the anti-queer environment participants experienced in their master's programs, they also described an overall culture of control and fear. There was a sense that the CCIs represented in the study were not just discriminatory, but attempted to control student behavior and even the ideas and perspectives available to students at those institutions. The environments in these programs appeared to instill fear in the participants, but also that fear itself was an attempted means of control. This is consistent with Craig et al.'s (2017) conclusion that the structure and institutional policies at

religious colleges and universities creates a “culture of fear” for affectional and gender minority students (p. 7).

As evidenced by the codes of conduct and “lifestyle statements” that participants discussed, they saw the institutions seek to control not just behavior on campus, but aspects of their personal lives that seem to have little to no bearing on their academic pursuits. Luke explained, “You know, I dated somebody and I didn’t share that with the school. I’m sure that wouldn’t have been approved.” In the follow-up interview he explained that toward the end of his program he moved off campus to share an apartment with his partner, but hid this information as well. I was struck by the notion that the institution would think it has any right to approve or disapprove of who Luke dates or who he lives with. It felt like an overstep, something Alexei spoke very explicitly about: “I didn’t think the university had the place to be telling everyone what to do in all of their lives.”

The hiding and closeting that participants described seems to be in direct response to the discriminatory environment discussed in theme 1, but also due to this institutional control. Ironically, the attempted control – or “illusion of control” as Leon called it – does not stop student behavior; as Luke suggests, the identities and behaviors in question just become hidden. With regard to the statement of faith and codes of conduct at his institution, Leon said, “I mean, I lied. I had to sign it because I was so desperate.” This institutional control became even more destructive for participants when it led to or reinforced fear around their standing in their programs.

This fear and control also played out in the resources and ideas that were available to participants, something that continued to reinforce the shame from theme 1. Leon

discussed this with respect to the books and other materials provided in the library and recommended or required on course syllabi, which supported the notion that one can change their affectional orientation. He said, “And that is so empirically incorrect and inaccurate, but they’re still using these resources as though they have scientific claim.” Like the discussion above regarding the teaching of some faculty members, these outdated, debunked resources (Munsey, 2009) – which are supported or endorsed by the programs – are pushing an ideological agenda that is not supported by current literature or scientific research in the field. And not only is the information inaccurate, it is damaging to the students in the program. After discussing his consumption of the content referenced in these “resources,” Leon said, “I was so lost and hopeless. And I think it's just a tragedy that students who are so desperate for hope would land in these institutions, only to experience that same path.” This material is certainly damaging to affectional and gender minority students, but as Leon suggests, it is potentially detrimental to all students at the institution: “... harmful to not only it's queer students, but to the academic training of all of its cisgender, straight students. Equally so.”

Participants’ experiences of the environment of control and fear in their master’s programs is reminiscent of Jenkins (2018) reflection on his own upbringing in conservative Christianity: “Maybe that’s what I was rejecting now. Certainty. But that’s what faith is – belief without certainty. Yet I had been raised to assume otherwise. In my version of Christianity, certainty seemed propped up by a scaffolding of fear” (p. 248). Unfortunately, since graduating some of the participants have seen their programs move into an even more conservative, controlling, and anti-queer position. Programs have come out with new lifestyle statements which are “...blatantly anti-queer. On purpose” (Leon).

This has coincided with, and sometimes led to, the few safe, supportive faculty and staff members at these institutions leaving, rendering those programs even less safe. On a more encouraging note, both Alexei and Richard's programs have respectively moved toward more accepting and affirming positions. In the follow-up interviews, they shared that each of their master's programs currently have an out lesbian professor. Institutions like these can serve as a model for the kind of change and transition that is necessary at CCIs, which will be addressed in depth later in this chapter.

Theme 3: Closeting or Trying to Change Affectional Orientation and/or Gender Identity was Extremely Destructive

The combination of the anti-queer environment (theme 1) and the culture of fear and control (theme 2) led participants to conclude that the only way to stay safe was to closet and/or change their affectional and gender minority identities. Unfortunately, this turned out to be much more destructive than any of them expected. After going through that experience, Alexei resolved, "I'm not hiding again. For any reason." This speaks to how crushing it was to be closeted for so long, and in such a discriminatory environment. Luke eventually decided "I don't want to feel this depressed, so I'm just gonna shut off this piece of me for now so that I can survive, get through, do what I have to do." This made sense from a survival standpoint, but was so unhealthy for him. He ended referring to his time in his master's program as "traumatic." Reflecting upon how hopeless and desperate he had become, Leon called it a "tragedy" that other affectional and gender minority student would end up in programs like his.

This is consistent with current literature on the topic, which has shown that concealing one's affectional orientation negatively impacts psychological well-being,

including increased depression and self-stigma (e.g., Bruce, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2015; Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007; Selvidge, Matthews, & Bridges, 2008). In a recent study of 373 LGB-identified participants, Riggle, Rostosky, Black, and Rosenkrantz (2017) found that, “Higher levels of LGB-specific concealment were significantly associated with lower psychological well-being and more depressive symptoms. Higher levels of LGB-specific authenticity were significantly associated with higher psychological well-being, fewer depressive symptoms, and lower levels of perceived stress” (p. 54).

Theme 4: The Damage Described in Theme 3 Led to a Breaking Point

The closeting and inauthenticity of theme 3 culminated for all participants in a breaking point; a moment or season of life where they realized that something needed to change or there would be dire consequences. For four of the five participants (all except Luke), this breaking point involved suicidal ideation, and a suicide attempt for one of them. Though even Luke said things like, “I have to be more authentic in some way. Like, it's killing me,” and talked about going through a “really bad bout” of depression in his second year in the program. Alexei reported being “honestly surprised there were no attempts;” Daisy was on her way to check herself into the hospital for a 72-hour mental health hold; Leon drove home praying at every intersection that a bus would run a red light to “take me out. Take me home;” and Richard, a few years after his master’s program, did attempt to take his own life.

To be clear, I am certainly not suggesting that experiences in their master’s programs were the sole factors that led to suicidal ideation; that is something which

perhaps had been building since before they began their graduate work. Regardless of how they talk about it now though – with calm presentation, downplaying the difficulty and pain, and highlighting meaning and strength they have taken from their experiences – the fact remains that four out of the five participants in this study were on the brink of suicide during their master’s programs. They also directly connected those feelings to the shame, hopelessness, and depression they felt in their programs. That is the truth about their experiences of being affectional and gender minorities at CCIs. These findings mirror those of Craig et al. (2017); In their study of affectional and gender minority students at religious colleges and universities, they found that for many of the participants, “the constant pressure and need to escape the pain of daily life often led to suicide attempts while enrolled in school,” and “[t]he persistent antigay messages that these students received contributed to a sense of shame that was so powerful that many almost did not survive” (p. 13).

Theme 5: Safe Spaces Helped to Mitigate the Shame and Despair of Theme 4

Thankfully, most participants went on to describe a network of safe spaces where they could be at least somewhat authentic and still accepted. Though these varied across participants, a common thread seemed to be a relational component – not just safe spaces, but safe people. Whether connecting with “secret, underground” networks of other affectional and gender minority students, affirming peers in the program, safe(r) faculty members, or associations outside of the campus community, most participants found relationships in which they could be both more known and more accepted than they could in most settings within their CCIs. Places where they could be authentic became, in some

ways at least, a mitigating factor for the shame they experienced because of their closeting during that time.

All of this makes a strong case for why a GSA would be so valuable for these students, the benefits of which have been well documented in other studies (e.g., Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010; Wolff et al., 2019; Woodford, Kulick, Garvey, Sinco, & Hong, 2018). Regardless of the research, when Richard tried to create a GSA in his master's program it was denied by the institution. He explained how students need space to "have these honest conversations and this safe space to be able to be courageous and talk about feelings and experiences, then – I think that's what we need in master's programs. That we need – really need those things." Richard's feelings here are supported by the literature. As discussed in Chapter II, Dunn et al. (2015) found that affectional minority students need safe spaces for exploring their "sexual orientation and faith, as both separate and intersecting constructs," and that relationships were also a critical component of this process (p. 382). Unfortunately, CCIs provided no such safe space for these participants, who instead often felt discriminated in those programs. This calls to mind the "intense and pervasive" isolation and exclusion that Beagan and Hattie (2015) describe with regard to affectional and gender minorities who are attempting to reconcile those identities with their spirituality (p. 112).

Theme 6: Perspective Changed During Master's Program

Throughout their experiences in their master's programs, all but one participant described significant shifts in their perspectives regarding their affectional and gender minority identities, their spirituality, or both. All four of those participants [Richard,

Luke, Leon, and Daisy] moved to places of more acceptance regarding their affectional orientation and gender identity, a shift that took place largely in spite of the CCIs they attended, whose policies and positions on the topic make it clear that they do not accept those identities. Many participants pointed out and joked about the notion that their CCIs ironically played a role in the transformation of their beliefs in a decidedly liberal direction. Daisy shared how deep theological and biblical training actually helped her see the grey in those things and gave room for her to question her beliefs on a range of topics, including affectional and gender diversity. Luke and Leon echoed this sentiment; exposure to alternative perspectives and current research helped these participants continue to accept the pieces of their identity they used to hide and began to undo the shame associated with that.

For Leon, seeing real-life models of integrating diverse affectional and gender identities had a profound effect on him. He visited an affirming church during his master's program and saw "queer people holding hands and praying together, or taking communion together, or holding hands and lifting one hand in the air as they praised the Lord during praise and worship." This experience "was revolutionary for me. And I honestly think that exposure to that church probably saved my life. Like, literally."

The exception was Alexei, who remained closeted, continued to believe his affectional orientation was sinful, and was actively trying to change it throughout his master's program. It was not until his doctoral program that he finally decided, "Fuck it. I don't care... I can't keep doing this." In his master's program, Alexei seemed to be in a very different place than the other participants in this study with respect to his acceptance (or lack of acceptance) of his affectional orientation, which appears to have hampered his

ability to locate and/or utilize any potential safe spaces to be open and authentic. In his belief that his affectional orientation was sinful, he was not looking for places to openly express it, which is consistent with Ginicola and Smith's (2011) assertion that many individuals who identify as affectional minorities "do not identify with their sexual orientation at all but rather highlight their values and their religious beliefs as their primary identity" (p.306). This seems to have impacted Alexei's identity development in significant ways, which will be addressed in theme 7 below.

Theme 7: Experiences in Master's Program Stunted Development

Despite the protective factors and perspective changes discussed in association with themes 5 and 6, all participants described stunting of their development as a direct result of their time in the discriminatory environments cultivated by their master's programs. Richard first coined the term "stunting" when describing this process, and in speaking about the impact on their development other participants used words like, "stifle" and "delayed" (Daisy), "unhealthy" (Luke), and "harmful" (Leon).

With regard to their affectional orientation and/or gender identity. One obvious way that participants' experiences stunted their affectional and gender identity development was the simple fact that they were in discriminatory environments and felt the need to stay mostly or completely closeted during their master's programs. Living in discriminatory contexts has been linked to internalized homophobia, and negative impacts on mental health and identity development (e.g., Blumenfeld, 2012; Frost et al., 2019; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher, Choudhuri, & Taylor, 2019). Richard discussed this issue in connection with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, and how detrimental a lack of safety is to higher order development.

Consistent with Richard's assessment, Maslow (1943) stated, "Practically everything looks less important than safety... A [person], in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterized as living almost for safety alone" (p. 376).

Using D'Augelli's (1994) model, discussed in detail in Chapter II, can serve as a helpful backdrop when making sense of why the discriminatory culture at their CCIs had such a profound impact on the development of participants' affectional identities. One important reminder at the outset of this discussion is that D'Augelli (1994) stressed that his model is not linear and individuals may move through each stage relatively independent of the other stages. When they began their programs, it would appear that all participants had entered the first stage, exiting heterosexual identity, at least to some degree. This stage involves recognizing one's non-heterosexual orientation and telling others about it (D'Augelli, 1994). Each participant recognized their affectional orientation, even if they did not accept it at the time, and had come out to at least a few close people in their lives. However, difficulties in stages two and three seem to align well with the experiences of participants in this study.

Stage two, developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual (LGB) identity status, involves "a sense of personal socioaffectional stability," including learning how to live out one's affectional orientation socially and relationally (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 325). This is where things become problematic for the participants of this study. Given the discriminatory and unsafe culture in their institutions, it is clear that pursuing the social and relational aspects of this stage would be a struggle. D'Augelli (1994) theorized that to successfully navigate this stage, affectional minority individuals "must learn how to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual, with these constructs defined by their proximal community of

lesbians, gay men, or bisexual people” (p. 325). Instead of learning how to navigate social settings and relationships with their diverse affectional orientations, these participants found themselves in environments where they needed to stay closeted for their own safety. There was virtually no “proximal community” of other affectional minorities, save the secret, underground groups that some participants described. This sheds light on why someone like Luke would graduate from his program realizing “I had so much work to do.”

Furthermore, another critical aspect of this stage is challenging and revising myths and stereotypes regarding diverse affectional orientations, which involves interacting with people who model and exhibit behavior counter to those myths (D’Augelli, 1994). Again, participants effectively had no such models in their master’s programs. Perhaps they had some outside of that context, but a large part of their world at the time was not only devoid of exceptions to those myths, it was actively reinforcing the stereotypes.

Similarly, stage three in D’Augelli’s (1994) model would also appear to be extremely difficult for participants in this study: developing an LGB social identity. D’Augelli (1994) defined this as, “creating a large and varied set of people who know of the person’s sexual orientation *and are available to provide social support*” (p. 326, emphasis added). Again, participants in this study obviously did not have such a support network, at least not within the walls of the CCI they attended. D’Augelli (1994) further emphasized the importance of having an affirming environment in moving through this stage:

A network composed of people who would prefer the person to hide his or her sexual orientation or who do not discuss it at all is not an affirming one. Tolerance

is indeed harmful in this regard, in that it subtly reinforces societal interest in lesbian, gay, and bisexual invisibility (p. 326).

This is precisely the culture that some of the participants in the study described; even when they did not experience overt, explicit discrimination, they encountered a “subtle humming all throughout” (Leon) and an environment where conversations around affectional and gender diversity simply did not take place: “‘Hey, let's explore, let's talk about sexuality, let's explore different perspectives, and views, and people's experiences.’ Like, that was never – I mean, never once done in my time there” (Luke). The anti-queer culture that these participants found themselves in was exactly the opposite type of environment that they needed from an affectional orientation development standpoint, leading each of them to endorse the idea that this piece of their identity was stunted during that time.

Related to this topic of affectional identity development, throughout the interviews and coding process, I noticed how different some of Alexei's responses and experiences were when compared to the other four participants. These differences may have been due, at least in part, to the unique position he found himself in during his master's program. First, he seemed to be more closeted and less accepting of his affectional identity at that time than other participants were during their programs. His theology at the time – which was reinforced by the CCI – simply did not leave room for exploring the stages D'Augelli (1994) posits, beyond perhaps the first stage of recognizing his affectional minority status. He also had virtually no support system where his affectional orientation would be accepted, something which D'Augelli's (1994) model certainly puts forth as a vital component to the developmental process.

Finally, he was married and had children, further reinforcing the closeting, stunting, and attempts to change his affectional orientation. In that sense he had much more to lose and, therefore, more motivation to deny this piece of his identity. He even acknowledged the idea that his program may have been much more difficult for him had he been in a different place with regard to his acceptance of his affectional orientation: “Where I think it would be really different is for students who may or may not be out, but know and accept their orientation.” He explained that he would “absolutely not” enroll in his master’s program if he were in that space. It is as though in some ways he had an easier time in his program than other participants because he “was still pretty deep in the closet at that point.”

Regarding gender identity, Luke and Alexei identify as cisgender men, Leon and Daisy both expressed some fluidity and gender nonconformity, and Richard identifies as a transman. While Leon and Daisy would not use the term “transgender” to describe themselves, consideration of Lev’s (2004, 2006) transgender emergence model does inform at least the very beginning of the developmental processes they experienced, especially given that the model does address a broad range of “gender-variant” individuals rather than simply a more narrowly defined transgender population. Based upon the interview data, it would appear that Leon, Daisy, and Richard may have been in the first stage of the model – awareness – during their master’s programs. As the name implies, this involves “the coming into consciousness of the internal sense of feeling different and the realization that indeed one may *be* different” (Lev, 2004, p. 235).

Beyond this first stage though, the model does become more specific to coming out as transgender and the transition process, including body modification and navigating

post-transition issues (Lev, 2004). These stages do not apply to Daisy or Leon, and Richard did not move through those processes until after finishing his doctoral work. For this reason, applying that model to Richard's journey feels as though it is beyond the scope of this project, which seeks to keep the focus on participants' time in their master's programs.

With regard to their professional development and counselor identity.

Participants also described stunting of their professional development and counselor identity, though much of this was not apparent to them until they began working with clients, either in their clinical experiences in the program or after graduating and entering the field. This is consistent with other research regarding the impact that a negative campus climate can have on affectional and gender minority professional development. Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, and Frazer (2010) found that, "Perceptions of campus climate can have important implications on personal, emotional, academic, and *professional development*," for affectional and gender minority students (p. 11, emphasis added). For participants in this study, work with clients, supervisees, and students revealed the places in which parts of their counselor identity were stuck or had not been attended to.

For example, unable to openly address professional issues around his affectional orientation in his master's program, Richard had to navigate how to be an "out" counselor on his own while seeing clients in internship. Luke, Leon, and Daisy also addressed this lack of preparation regarding how to practice in the field as affectional and gender minorities. Luke and Leon encountered conservative Christian clients who expressed anti-gay beliefs; this caught them off guard, having never discussed how to

handle this scenario in their training programs because it would not have been safe to have that conversation. Like Richard, they were all left wading through these situations alone, wondering whether they should disclose their affectional identities, how to have that conversation if they did, and how to handle continuing to work with these clients.

These are obvious gaps in their training as counselors that should have been addressed in a CACREP accredited program. Similar issues regarding other minority identities would certainly be attended to, such how a female-identified counselor would handle a misogynistic male client or what a racial minority counselor should do if they encounter a racist client (Guiffrida, Tansey, & Miller, 2019). Conversations around related issues like triggers and self-care would naturally flow from exploring those topics. Unfortunately, for the affectional and gender minority individuals in this study, such conversations never happened in their training programs regarding these marginalized identities. This is both a client care and personal safety concern for them.

Luke and Richard also both spoke about how, upon graduating from their respective programs, they were not ready for their professional work with clients because of how much personal work they still needed to do regarding their affectional orientations. This was typified by an exchange I had with Luke:

LUKE: Okay, I gotta figure out how to integrate this stuff into my life, now that the trauma's over.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and, sure we all do that in certain experiences in life as we go through – that shouldn't be the case in a CACREP accredited master's counseling program. [L: Right] That shouldn't be something that falls into the category of "trauma I had to survive, that then I have to do a lot of work to unpack that trauma and reintegrate who I am."

LUKE: Right. Sure.

In addition to considering his time in his master's program trauma – which is disturbing enough on its own – he is also shining a light on the stunting of his professional development during that time. He left the program not ready and excited to see clients, but keenly aware of the fact that the damage done by his time in the program left him unfit for clinical work until he attended to his own personal work.

This stunting of professional development extends to other aspects of work in the counseling field as well. Daisy discussed an opportunity she has to begin supervising an intern from her master's program, but with that comes guilt and fear: guilt because of assumptions she is making about this supervisee, but also fear regarding what the supervisee is going to think of her if she discloses her affectional and gender identities. Daisy also expressed fear and discomfort regarding being formerly connected again to her master's program. It was clear that the damage done during her time there has lingered and continues to impact her professionally today.

Finally, these programs negatively impacted participant's professional development through the lack of authenticity associated with the closeting process. The importance of developing of an authentic, empathic relationship between therapist and client has nearly universal acceptance in the counseling field and is cited as something which sets counseling apart from other professional relationships (e.g., Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016; Fuertes, Moore, & Ganley, 2019; Hatchett, 2017; Kottler & Balkin, 2017). That being said, some participants raised the issue of how being conditioned, taught, and shamed into closeting major pieces of their identity during their master's programs played a destructive role in their future ability to build authentic relationships with clients.

Richard asked, "...how are we supposed to help clients? How are we supposed to help clients get to the places that we're fearful to go ourselves because we've been told all our lives that this is wrong?" Luke stated:

I struggled with authenticity as a therapist for a long time. And I think even still trying to figure that out... I was taught to not self-disclose this part of my life... So absolutely that's going to transition and carry over into my work as a therapist and how I sit with clients. So, yeah, I think I just was very disconnected or unaware of how I sat with clients for a long time.

When I addressed this topic in the follow-up interview with Leon, he agreed that it would have been an issue for him, but all of the identity integration work he was doing in his personal therapy at the time mitigated the negative impact of the inauthenticity in other places in his life. This corroborates both Richard and Luke's experiences, and shows how powerful a safe, supportive space can be for these students.

Participants' stories of stunted professional development, while sad and disappointing, do not come as surprise given the existing research on the counselor identity development process. A critical task in counselor identity formation is integration, rather than compartmentalization, of one's professional and personal lives (Moss et al., 2014). There is a threefold issue here for the participants in this study. First, per the discussion above, their personal identity development is already challenging as affectional & gender minorities. Second, reconciling their affectional and gender identities with their spirituality further complicates that process, which will be addressed below in theme 8. Finally, integrating their affectional and gender identities with their counselor identity was severely hampered as the former were unwelcome and unsafe in their training environments.

In a related study Gibson et al. (2010) drew similar conclusions; integration of personal and professional identities was a key process in counselor identity development, but the study went on to discuss the critical role that relationships with professors and supervisors play. They also suggest that an important component of this development involves, “[t]he professional community help[ing] the new professional maintain contact with the standards, expectations, and rules of the profession” (Gibson et al., 2010, p. 22). This seems particularly problematic at CCIs where it appears the institutions themselves do not even uphold those “standards, expectations, and rules” when it comes to the treatment of affectional and gender minority students and clients. Again, these findings make it clear why the professional developmental journey is so difficult for affectional and gender minorities at CCIs.

With regard to their sense of self or self-acceptance. Finally, participants described a stunting with regard to their sense of self or self-acceptance as a result of their experiences at CCIs. This naturally flows from the anti-queer culture in these programs; Beagan & Hattie (2015) found that affectional and gender minorities in Christian environments experience “shame, guilt...anxiety...low self-esteem, depression, and self-loathing, often accompanied by addictions, self-harming, and suicidal ideation” (p. 111). Every single item in that list was mentioned by at least one participant in this study. Some, like shame, were mentioned by all five.

Daisy equated the unsafe environment and subsequent closeting to and overall stunting of all aspects of who she was (other words she used in the interview included “shoving,” “stuffing,” “stifled,” and “delayed”): “But my first year I was so much more both closeted about my personality or my gender identity, sexual identity kinda piece, but

just my personality. My being.” As Daisy noted, this includes her affectional and gender identities, but extends to her very being; her sense of self.

Reflecting on his time in his master’s program, Richard stated, “I think it really does stunt that pride of self and self-actualization.” He went on to explain that this was due, in part, to not being able to be authentic, despite being in a place where he was “supposed” to be safe and accepted. Later in the interview I paraphrased some of what he had shared and offered this reflection: “... contrary to what the program was telling you, this part of me's not wrong, broken, bad – it’s welcome and accepted [in the counseling room]... And actually, sometimes can be really effective, useful, valuable. Like, it's not what my program says it is.” Richard responded with, “Right,” affirming the notion that the program had sent the message that parts of his identity were broken and needed to be fixed, rather than accepted. Despite this messaging, he eventually was able to fully accept his affectional orientation and gender identity, and even to see those as strengths.

In that same vein, Leon recounted that his program reinforced the “idea that I was inherently damaged. Broken.” Luke described his program teaching him how to dissociate. During his time in graduate school, Alexei felt as though accepting his affectional orientation would mean rejecting God, a messages reinforced by the institution’s policies. The code of conduct at his institution discusses “misuses of God’s gift” of human sexuality and provides a list of examples which includes “homosexual behavior” along with things like “sexual assault” and “incest.” Comparing Alexei’s affectional orientation to these disturbing criminal acts undoubtedly contributed to his inability to look upon that piece of his identity with acceptance.

Theme 8: Able/Unable to Reconcile Christian Faith with Affectional and Gender Identities

When it comes to participants' development with regard to faith and spirituality, the language of "stunting" did not feel appropriate. Some participants were able to reconcile their Christian faith with their affectional and gender identities, at least to a degree, and some were not. However, rather than placing a value judgement on one or the other, it felt more fitting to simply discuss those different outcomes and what appears to have contributed to them. This is consistent with Pargament's (2013) Spiritual Transformation Model, which allows for what he terms "integration" or "disintegration" after spiritual struggle, acknowledging that rejection of one's faith is a possible outcome (p. 275). Additionally, rejecting a rigid, black and white belief system, or expanding one's beliefs to include a broader understanding of spirituality could certainly be seen as growth rather than "stunting." Leon talked specifically about that broadening; he used the analogy of moving into larger and larger "bubbles" until he found the right fit:

... it was almost, like, this catapult through different layers of growth that said if I could leave that small bubble and go to a bigger one, what next is there for me? And it was this way of being exposed to difference in a way that kept me craving for the difference that felt like home for me.

In a qualitative study involving interviews with 47 individuals who identify as affectional minorities and grew up in the "Bible Belt," Barton (2010) found that over half of the participants "engaged in a deep and prolonged struggle to reconcile their sexual identity with their religious upbringing" (p. 478). That conclusion holds true for all participants in the current study and was evident in their descriptions of the stress and difficulty of trying to integrate these identities, which they had been taught were incompatible. This "struggle" is also consistent with findings in other studies regarding

the challenges associated with integrating of Christian faith and affectional and gender minority identities (e.g., Haggerty, 2017; McNeill, 1996; Wieferich, 2005; Vespone, 2016).

Beagan and Hattie (2015) identify four potential outcomes of this identity integration process: “rejecting the gay identity, rejecting the religious identity, compartmentalizing the gay self and religious self, or identity integration” (p. 95). Daisy, Leon, and Richard appear to have landed in the identity integration category of that model, but to varying degrees. Daisy perhaps achieved the most thorough integration (i.e., fully integrating the two rather than rejecting the majority of her religious identity), though it did still involve significant changes in her belief system. She is the only participant who would even consider using the label “Christian” to describe herself now, but even that came with caveats and some discomfort in the interview. Leon used the term “post-Christian” to describe his spirituality and stated, “I love the Bible, but I also love the Quran and other religious books, and I think – if we really believe that God is love, then eventually, I believe, we would move beyond Christianity.”

Richard largely rejected his former religious beliefs, though he said that his development process has helped him to “find spirituality, not religion.” Later he shared, “So I still to this day find spirituality in connection with people. And, you know, I still can't sit in an organized religious service... I've been hurt so much by people saying they're religious and by religion.” While he has rejected organized religion and the Christian faith he once professed, he has still in some respects found ways of integrating his affectional and gender identities with his spirituality.

For Luke, it would appear that he is currently still in the process of sorting out what this integration piece will look like in his life. He was clear that he no longer identifies as a Christian, but he also added, “I think there's a part of me that feels [*pause*] a draw towards spirituality, but I'm not sure what that is for my life right now.” Of the five participants in this study, Alexei seems to be the one who fits most fully in the category of rejecting his religious identity. He self-identified as “deist on some days,” but otherwise agnostic. Also, when speaking about his former Christian beliefs, he did not describe a gradual shift where he incorporated or integrated other views. Instead, Alexei experienced a sharp break when he decided to embrace his affectional orientation, leading him to say, “God didn't like it, he could go fuck himself... what God thought about my sexuality really became a moot point... this whole big house of theology just kind of crashed out, in my mind anyway.” It sounds as though faith and spirituality have little, if any place in Alexei’s life at this point in time.

As discussed previously, all of these varied outcomes are consistent with current research regarding spiritual development and the integration of faith with diverse affectional and gender identities. Pargament (2007) contends that spiritual struggles “can lead to renewal, growth, and positive transformation... or despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness” (p. 115). Perhaps outside of Alexei’s, each of the participants’ stories could be framed as spiritual growth depending upon one’s vantage point, though the CCIs these individuals attended would almost certainly disagree with that sentiment.

Implications for the field

Considering the findings of this study, there are number of important implications for the fields of counseling and counselor education. First, it would appear that there is an

attempt to control student behavior at CCIs which extends beyond what is reasonable or prudent for an academic institution. Second, the administration, faculty, and staff at CCIs are uniquely positioned with both a responsibility and an opportunity with regard to their treatment of affectional and gender minority students. Finally, in conjunction with that responsibility and opportunity, the fields of counseling and counselor education need to address the discrepancies between the expectations placed upon counselors and the standards to which training programs are held.

Control and Over-Reach

Related to the theme of control and fear addressed earlier, participants' accounts highlighted the idea that CCIs attempt to regulate a wide range of students' personal lives. They have policies and codes of conduct that deal with intimate details regarding who students date and engage with romantically – among other things – all of which would appear to be things that should lie outside of an academic institution's jurisdiction. This seems especially true given that we are not just considering behavior on campus, but all aspects of students' lives. Alexei addressed this when he said, "I didn't think the university had the place to be telling everyone what to do in all of their lives."

On that same note though, the policies at CCIs do not address all aspects of student life and behavior, but seem to arbitrarily pick and choose certain topics. It is unclear why they disallow diverse affectional and gender minority expression, threatening students with remediation or even removal, while allowing or at least ignoring other things they consider "sinful." Why not disallow or remediate students who lie? Students who speed? Who steal? Students who are not generous or fail to care for the poor? Students who do not forgive? These suggestions may seem unreasonable and

excessive, yet CCIs feel they have the right, or even the obligation, to take such stances with regard to affectional and gender expression. These programs tolerate and promote hateful, bigoted, patriarchal, narrow minded, discriminatory views in their codes, policies, classrooms, and campus climates, and they graduate students who hold and support those perspectives. At the same time, they shame, threaten, and “remediate” other students simply because of those students’ affectional orientations or gender identities. These dichotomous stances regarding student behavior and identity should be reversed, with the former remediated and the latter supported.

Responsibility and Opportunity

Woven throughout each interview was the thread that affectional and gender minority students seem to enter CACREP accredited programs at CCIs in a very vulnerable position. Furthermore, they place their trust in those institutions and the faculty there, in part *because* the programs are CACREP accredited. Alexei, Daisy, and Richard specifically named CACREP as an important factor in choosing their program. Alexei actually did not even want to attend a faith-based institution, but the CACREP accreditation trumped this concern.

This vulnerability and trust creates both a responsibility and an opportunity for those programs and institutions. They have a responsibility to provide safety, protection, and support for these students and have an opportunity to model how one can integrate diverse affectional and gender identities with spirituality. Unfortunately CCIs and the CACREP accredited programs housed within them appear to be failing on both counts. With respect to student vulnerability, participants described the precarious position they found themselves in upon entering their programs. Leon said:

I mean going to this institution represented hope that I could be straight, and I had to sign that form because it was my last hope. It was deep theological training and access to resources I didn't have otherwise, or live powerless against my own sexual orientation.

Daisy, Luke, Leon, and Richard all talked about the underground group of “subversive gay people” (Daisy) that helped them survive their respective programs. Daisy credits that group with literally saving her life; what about the students who do not find this community? These programs have an ethical imperative to support students like the participants in this study, but continue to do the exact opposite. Leon came into the program desperate, but instead of the hope he was looking for, he found more shame:

... it was almost like this institution, that was supported by CACREP, had the permission to shame me indirectly, and in a one-on-one situation. That it was – this idea that as an institution, supported by CACREP, we get the permission to tell you that who you are is dirty, damaged, and disgusting, and that there's a way that we should be able to fix this, and you should be courageous enough to take what we say, and try to change yourself.

Regarding the need to protect vulnerable students like himself, Leon and I had the following exchange:

LEON: ... it would helpful if [CACREP] would understand that inside of academia there's this subset of religious institutions, but even within those religious institutions there's a subset of students who would identify as Christian and LGBTQ. And those students are a minority within a minority within a minority. And CACREP isn't protecting them.

INTERVIEWER: ... and neither are those institutions, right?

LEON: Totally.

One concrete way in which these programs could provide some of the safety and support that affectional and gender minority students are so desperate for is to allow students to form GSAs on campus. Participants in this study shared over and over again how valuable and healing it was to have safe spaces and safe relationships where they

could be authentic and accepted. Instead, the administration at CCIs responds to these vulnerable student populations with discrimination and threats. This calls to mind Richard's experience of engaging in self-harm as a coping mechanism, but also being worried about getting kicked out of the dorms because of that behavior. He needed help and support, but only felt more fear and shame. Speaking of the kind of environment he tries to create for his own students, Richard shared, "... if you have these honest conversations and this safe place to be able to be courageous and talk about feelings and experiences, then – I think that's what we need in master's programs. That we need – really need those things." He is effectively talking about what he and the other participants in this study needed during their master's programs.

Related to this, those who support the position of CCIs may want to argue that the institutions did not cause or contribute to the pain, shame, despair, and suicidal ideation exhibited by the participants in this study; perhaps they would like to believe that the students brought all of this into the programs with them. I believe the data strongly contradicts that position, but even if we consider that possibility, by nature of that argument one is conceding that this is a student population in need of protection, care, and support, and those institutions are doing the exact opposite. By making that argument, supporters of these policies at CCIs are still condemning themselves when it comes to the treatment of students who identify as affectional and gender minorities.

In addition to the responsibility to protect vulnerable students, the administration and faculty at CACREP accredited CCIs have an opportunity to provide models for individuals who identify as affectional and gender minorities. When discussing his inability to reconcile his spirituality with his sexuality, Alexei described how rigid, "rock

hard,” and “black and white” his theology was at the time. He concluded his discussion by stating, “... maybe other people had been brought up in a more malleable faith. I don't know what would have happened if I'd had different pastors.” There was a sadness in Alexei's voice as he wondered about how things could have been different for him. The implication is that perhaps he would have been able to integrate these seemingly disparate pieces of his identity if he simply had different training and alternative models.

Likewise, Luke lamented the fact that he did not have models outside of his conservative Christian perspective, with its negative stereotypes of affectional and gender diversity. This left him wondering what to do with his affectional orientation: “I'm supposed to just cut off? Deny? Ignore? I don't know what they want me to do with it...” With respect to what it looks like to live as a gay man, he reported, “I guess it was foreign to me that you could be a normal, everyday person. Live a normal life.” He was forced to step out in that space alone and figure it out as he went: “I felt like this renegade... like I was taking this path that – it felt like – very few people were taking. Of saying, ‘I think that it's okay for me to be gay.’” Again, Luke's comments show the utter lack of models he encountered.

Instead of healthy models of integration and affirmation, participants put their trust in the faculty in these programs. Those faculty members were often, at best, neutral or silent on the topic of affectional and gender diversity, but some of them even reinforced the outdated, unscientific, and destructive notion that one can change their affectional orientation. With regard to integrating spirituality with diverse affectional and gender identities, McNeill (1996) contends that these individuals, “ask different questions, have different needs, and, therefore, need to work out the special theological

and spiritual implications that are rooted in the gay and lesbian experience” (p. xvi). Leon captured this sentiment and highlighted the missed opportunity when he shared: “I wasn't completely safe there to ask the questions I needed to learn how I needed.”

Given the lack of models and the failure to expose these students to alternative, affirming perspectives, it seems that most participants in this study came to the conclusion that their diverse affectional and gender identities were incompatible with Christian faith. At the same time, all of them eventually realized that their affectional and gender identities are a core, unchangeable part of who they are, though for some this came after much effort to change those pieces. Ultimately, they are left with only one solution: change or abandon their faith. One can consider how this might have been different for them had they attended secular or Christian institutions where other options were presented.

Different Standards for Training Programs Versus Practitioners

Although there are many similarities between the CACREP (2015) standards and the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics, there appears to be a clear divide between what is expected of practitioners in their treatment of clients and what training programs are held to with respect to their treatment of students. In discussing how the institution he attended treats affectional and gender minority students, the impact it has on those students, and the fact that – in light of those things – it is still CACREP accredited, Leon used the following words: “devastating,” “crime,” “tragedy,” “harmful,” “hypocritical,” “insane,” “absurd,” “torture,” and “grievable.” As discussed in Chapter III and earlier in this chapter, it seems as though the CCIs represented in this study fail to meet current CACREP standards (specifically 1.K and 1.Q as they deal explicitly with students and

faculty, rather than applying to curriculum or clients; see Appendix E for a list of all relevant standards).

In 2016 CACREP released a “Chair’s Report” that discussed “increased collaboration and support between counseling’s professional organizations,” (CACREP, 2016b, para. 3) and included the following example:

A revision to a CACREP guiding statement requiring that “counseling programs must provide the knowledge and skills that enable students to fully comply with the ACA Code of Ethics” and that students abide by the ACA Code of Ethics while enrolled in CACREP accredited programs (para. 4).

This is apparently a one-way street, with students in CACREP accredited programs being held to the ACA Code of Ethics, while it seems the programs themselves are exempt from those standards. If CCIs were responsible for meeting the same expectations as students using the criteria laid out in the ACA Code of Ethics, they would come up woefully short in some areas and be in clear opposition to those standards in other areas.

Section C.5. of the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics reads as follows:

Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination against prospective or current clients, students, employees, supervisees, or research participants based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital/ partnership status, language preference, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or any basis proscribed by law. (p. 9, emphasis added)

This code is clear as written; counselors are prohibited from discriminating against someone on the basis of diverse affectional and gender identities. As the participant experiences captured in this study have shown, CCIs are simply not in compliance with this standard with regard to their treatment of affectional and gender minority students, both in policy and in practice.

If this was not clear enough already, the ACA's adoption and endorsement of the LGBQQIA (Harper et al., 2013) and transgender (Burnes et al., 2010) competencies eliminates any remaining doubt. Countless examples from those documents could be used here, but just a few will suffice. The LGBQQIA competencies include the following standards:

Competent counselors will:

E. 11. Advocate with and for LGBQQ on various ecological levels of community systems (e.g., micro, meso, and macro; Toporek et al., 2009) to provide affirming, accepting, and supportive counseling services (e.g., educating the community and promoting changes in institutional policies and/or laws as the mental health of LGBQQ is often affected by stigma and oppression) (Harper et al., 2013, p. 17).

F. 8. Advocate for and with LGBQQ and support the empowerment of LGBQQ to advocate on their own behalf to promote inclusive policies and practices in the workplace as they are applicable on a microlevel (e.g., training on LGBQQ in the workplace), mesolevel (in local communities), and macrolevels (e.g., in the larger communities with policies, legislations, and institutional reform) (Harper et al., 2013, p. 18).

The transgender competencies contain similar advocacy expectations (e.g., F. 11 & F. 12), but even from the very first competency listed, CCIs are in violation of these recommendations:

Competent counselors will:

A. 1. Affirm that all persons have the potential to live full functioning and emotionally healthy lives throughout their life span while embracing the full spectrum of gender identity and expression, gender presentation, and gender diversity beyond the male-female binary (Burnes et al., 2010, p. 141).

And these standards are not new. The LGBQQIA competencies were written in 2013 and the transgender competencies were accepted by the ACA back in 2009.

Reading these standards, one is left with only one conclusion: CCI's and the CACREP accredited programs housed within them do not meet the professional and ethical

standards in the field regarding affirming or advocating on behalf of their affectional and gender minority students. In fact, in many cases they do the exact opposite of what these standards encourage.

When looking at the transcripts from this study, the clearest example of this issue came in Leon's discussion of the faculty mentor who recommended that he look at straight pornography as a way to help change his affectional orientation. Leon's words here are so poignant that I will let them be the last ones on this topic:

“... as a clinician in private practice, if I were going to suggest that one my clients were to look at straight porn as a way to change their sexual orientation, that is a massive, grievous offense, and I could probably lose my licensure. And I think it's insane that CACREP would be able to credential an institution who's willing to do that to their students. There should be some way of grieving an academic institution if we would hold that same level of responsibility to the students they're producing and turning into the community.

This is not just a discussion about meeting the letter of the law with regard to CACREP requirements; it is about the ethical, moral, and social justice responsibilities that all institutions should be held to. Even more troubling, these institutions and the individuals driving this discriminatory culture are not doing so based upon peer reviewed research, clinical insight, or commonly held best practices from the field; they are simply pushing their conservative Christian agenda. That is unacceptable in a CACREP accredited counseling program. Related to this, when Leon and I were discussing the conservative Christian “bubble” he grew up in, and then being exposed to bigger bubbles with alternative perspectives, I said, “[MA program] can live in that bubble if you want, but not *AND* be a CACREP accredited institution.” Leon responded, “Absolutely. Absolutely. For sure.”

Even more concerning, this problem appears to be getting worse at certain institutions, with participants sharing that at some CCIs new policies have been implemented which are even more discriminatory. Unfortunately, affectional and gender minority students are caught in that tension created within CCIs, as Luke described when he said:

how do I reconcile these two parts of my life, you know, again, the CACREP side and the faith side – these two things that *seem to be going in very different directions* and you're stuck in the middle. You're forced to hold on to both of them somehow” (emphasis added).

Richard spoke to this when he said, “well, I do think it's unethical for programs to stunt students' development in any way because they don't like what's happening. I think that we do a huge disservice to the profession and our future clients and future students.” He highlighted two important pieces here: first, this is not just about CACREP or counseling, but unethical treatment of students. This is a problem regardless of their program or any accrediting body. Second, there are implications beyond just the well-being of affectional and gender minority students. Though it is outside the scope of this study, Richard is calling into question the impact that the discriminatory environment at CCIs ultimately has on *all* students and future clients as well, a concern that Leon also expressed.

With these issues in mind, perhaps the conversation for the field moving forward should not be whether these programs and institutions meet current CACREP standards, but a broader discussion of why the standards for training programs fail to align with and fall so short of the standards for practitioners. Should this not be either equivalent or even reversed, with training programs held to *higher* standards than the students they are sending out in the field? These and other additional considerations will be discussed below with regard to future research opportunities.

Future Research

Throughout the interview and analysis process, a variety of areas for future research came to light. First and foremost, additional studies exploring this topic are warranted, including those with larger sample sizes in order to ascertain whether or not these participants' experiences were unique or more universal. Building upon that, future research could explore similar questions to the those posed in this study, but directed to counselor educators and straight, cisgender students at CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within CCIs. The perspective of affectional and gender minority students is of paramount importance given the current state of this issue in the field, but the experiences of all students and faculty members would be welcome contributions to that conversation. Another closely related study would involve exploring the experiences of affectional and gender minority students at secular CACREP accredited institutions in order to help determine how those did or did not differ from the stories of these participants. As I write this, one such study in the data collection phase just recently came across the CESNET Listserv (C. Haym, personal communication, January 18, 2020), and more work like it would seem useful.

Given participants' concerns regarding the impact that these training programs are having on the professional competence of all students in working with affectional and gender clients, more research is needed on that front as well. Leon captured this concern when he shared:

Because when a Christian counselor hangs their shingle, they're not hanging their shingle saying, "I don't believe this, and I do believe this." They're not putting that on their shingle. So it's a trap when a random person from the [queer] community steps into their office.

Future research needs to address this potentially problematic situation, and existing literature has already revealed some possible solutions. In a meta-analysis, S. Smith et al. (2009) found that evidence from “41 studies revealed that there was a significant negative relationship between contact and sexual prejudice. This suggests that having contact with lesbians and gay men is associated with reduced sexual prejudice towards homosexuals by heterosexuals” (p. 187).

To accomplish this within counselor training programs, Bidell (2014) suggests “developing opportunities for LGB interpersonal contact through counseling coursework, fieldwork, and the recruitment of LGB faculty, staff, supervisors, and students, could be an effective and systemic method to enhance LGB-affirmative counseling” (p. 176). The problem is that this may be very unlikely within the current culture and context of CCIs. When the students, staff, and administration at CCIs remain insulated within such a like-minded community, they may effectively be guarding themselves from being able to change and grow in their views toward the affectional and gender minorities. Perhaps researching the process by which CCIs like Richard’s and Alexei’s have moved into a more affirming space could shed light on this topic.

As mentioned at the end of the previous section, future research also needs to explore the lack of alignment between CACREP standards and relevant ethical codes in the counseling field. This study shows that there are clear discrepancies around the expectations placed upon students and professionals versus training programs with regard to the issue at hand, but perhaps there are additional areas where such discrepancies exist. This also calls into question the legitimacy of CACREP’s accreditation procedures and the enforcement of their standards. One is left to wonder how an institution with blatantly

discriminatory language in their policies and student handbooks and anti-LGBTQ+ literature promoted in their syllabi could successfully navigate the self-study process.

Taking the conversation beyond CACREP, counseling, and competence, as I sat with these stories I began to wonder if a contributing factor to the suicidal ideation experienced by participants is the idea that conservative Christianity is capital “T” truth, but when affectional and gender identity proves to be unchangeable, there is a hopelessness that settles in. When participants feel as though they are “broken,” “dirty, damaged, disgusting,” a “pervert,” an “abomination,” – and then realize that they cannot change that aspect of their identity – perhaps suicide starts to look like a more and more viable option. That seemed to be the case for a number of participants in this study. Research into the nuances of what that process looks like may help inform efforts to protect and support these vulnerable students.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the entirety of the project, a few final thoughts stand out. First, participants described experiences in their master’s programs that ran the full gamut, from discrimination and despair to moments that profoundly shaped who they are today in positive ways. However, the fact that suffering can be formative and sometimes ultimately produces growth is not a justification for causing that suffering. Despite the ambivalence discussed earlier, it is clear from these participants’ stories that at some CCIs the administration and faculty create and foster a discriminatory environment toward affectional and gender minority students. This is clearly antithetical to the ethical expectations of both the counseling field and higher education in general. For this reason, it is my belief that such institutions should lose their CACREP accreditation unless they

make significant changes, starting with formal policies and codes of conduct, but trickling down to things like how these issues are discussed in classrooms, the academic resources required and provided, and the overall campus climate.

Second, though each of the participants may have stayed closeted even if they had attended secular institutions – they learned to operate that way for survival and protection – I wonder how their journeys could have been different had they gone to Christian counseling programs that were affirming. An environment that modeled affirmation and advocacy could have been so healing for them, and perhaps would have fostered their growth and development on every level, instead of stunting it. I hope that someday the administration, faculty, staff, and students at CCIs will take advantage of the opportunity they have to be powerful, positive influences on affectional and gender minority students – allies, advocates, and models – rather than unsafe and discriminatory barriers standing in the way of their development. Until they do, I fail to see how CACREP can, in good conscience, continue to endorse these programs.

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APPENDIX A
EXAMPLE EMAIL SCRIPT

EXAMPLE EMAIL SCRIPT

Hello _____,

My name is Matt Tis and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at the University of Northern Colorado. I am currently seeking participants for a dissertation study exploring the lived experiences of affectional and gender minority students who attend or attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within conservative Christian institutions. The goal of the study is to gain a better understanding of participants' experiences during their MA programs with specific focus on their spirituality, affectional and gender identity, and counselor identity.

I want to be clear that I am approaching this project from a stance of acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy for affectional and gender minority communities. My hope is that the information learned in this study will help inform the current conversation in the counseling field regarding the discriminatory policies at some Christian institutions of higher education.

In order to conduct this research I am asking participants to engage in two individual interviews: an initial interview (in-person or Skype) of approximately 90 to 120 minutes and a follow-up interview (whatever format is convenient: in-person, Skype, phone call, etc.) to clarify any responses and explore additional topics that have emerged throughout the interview process. Names and identifying information of participants will not be part of the final written report to protect confidentiality. The researcher, a co-coder (who will

help develop themes), a research auditor, and my faculty research advisor will have access to the interview transcripts, but those documents will make use of pseudonyms. Only the researcher will know the identity of participants.

In order to participate you must a) have attended at least one academic year of study in a CACREP accredited counseling program housed in a conservative Christian institution with policies, guidelines, and/or student codes of conduct that disaffirm/disallow diverse affectional and/or gender identity expression/behavior and b) have identified as a affectional and/or gender minority during your time there (either publicly or privately). Information regarding current affectional and gender identity and spirituality may be gathered as part of the study, but has no bearing on your ability to participate. You do not need to currently identify nor have formerly identified as a Christian to participate in the study.

If you think you may qualify to participate and are interested in being a part of this research project, please contact me via phone or email to talk more about the study, ask any questions you may have, and potentially set up a time for an interview. Thank you for your consideration and your help in pursuing social justice and equality for affectional and gender minority communities.

Sincerely,

Matt Tis, MA, NCC, LPC

Doctoral Candidate; Counselor Education and Supervision

University of Northern Colorado

(303)819-1311; Tis7808@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor:

Jennifer L. Murdock Bishop, PhD, LPC, CO-SSP-SC, NCC, ACS

Associate Professor; Doctoral Program Coordinator – CES

Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado

Campus Box 131, Greeley, CO 80639

(970)351-2544; Jennifer.Murdock-Bishop@unco.edu

University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board:

Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639;

970-351-1910

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH**

Counselor Education and Supervision

Project title: *The Experience of Affectional and Gender Minority Students at CACREP Accredited Counseling Programs Housed within Conservative Christian Institutions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

Lead Researcher: Matt Tis, MA, NCC, LPC

Doctoral Candidate; Counselor Education and Supervision

University of Northern Colorado

(303)819-1311; tis7808@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Jennifer L. Murdock Bishop, PhD, LPC, CO-SSP-SC, NCC, ACS

Associate Professor; Doctoral Program Coordinator – CES

Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado

Campus Box 131, Greeley, CO 80639

(970)351-2544; Jennifer.Murdock-Bishop@unco.edu

Dear Potential Participant,

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of affectional and gender minority students who attend or attended CACREP accredited counseling programs housed within conservative Christian institutions. The goal of the study is to gain a better understanding of those experiences and how the policies and culture at those institutions shaped participants' development with regard to their spirituality, affectional and gender identity, and counselor identity. My hope is that the information learned in this study will help inform the current conversation in the counseling field regarding the discriminatory policies at some Christian institutions of higher education. Your uncompensated participation will contribute to the cultural and systemic change needed in this area; hearing your experiences and stories is incredibly important.

As a participant in this research, you will engage in an initial face-to-face or Skype interview and a follow-up interview in whatever format is comfortable or convenient (e.g., in-person, Skype, phone call, etc.) to confirm my understanding of your responses, respond to follow up questions, and explore any additional areas of interest that have emerged through the course of interviewing other participants. Interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure that your views are represented accurately. You will also be provided with a list of tentative themes drawn from your responses to gauge your agreement with the conclusions drawn from the interviews and analysis. The interviews will occur at an arranged time and place that is safe and convenient for you and each should take approximately 90 to 120 minutes (likely less for the follow-up interview).

To gather demographic data for the study, you will be asked how you identify with regard to affectional orientation, gender identity, spirituality/religion, and race/ethnicity. You will also be asked to provide your age, the amount of time you attended your MA program, whether the program was CACREP accredited at that time, and whether you graduated. You will choose a pseudonym (a fake name) before the interview. All audio recordings will be transcribed by the researcher. Transcript data will only be available to the researcher, a co-coder who will help distill data into themes, a research auditor, and my research advisor. However, pseudonyms will be used in the raw transcript data, so only the researcher will know participant identities. Any quotes or information from the interview used in the final report will reference only the pseudonym and/or demographic data, with all identifying information removed. Any information collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

During the research process, all hard data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the care of the researcher. Upon completion of the research, the faculty advisor will store all data in a locked file cabinet. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer. All audio files, written transcriptions, and consent forms will be destroyed after five years. I do not foresee any risk to any participants as a result of participation in this study, however, someone could potentially find aspects of your experience familiar and through your story infer your identity, although your identity will not be revealed or confirmed to anyone by the researcher. There is also the possibility that any research related information I send to you (e.g. a copy of this form with your signature) could be opened/seen by an individual other than you. For these reasons, though the researcher will take careful steps to maintain confidentiality, participant anonymity cannot be

guaranteed and there does exist the possibility of being outed by participation in the research.

Some interview questions do pertain to personal matters and may evoke memories and thoughts that are sensitive and/or associated with strong emotions; please know that you can stop at any time or ask any questions that you have. Upon completion of the interview process, you will be provided with an opportunity to debrief, ask any additional questions, and learn more about the nature and purpose of the study. Referral sources will be provided for any aftercare that you feel is necessary and appropriate following participation in the study.

Please retain a copy of this form for your records and feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

Matt Tis, MA, LPC, NCC

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your

selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

I am willing to participate in an individual interview. I give consent for the researcher to contact me about scheduling a potential time for an individual interview.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Pseudonym chosen for this study:
Age:
Race/Ethnicity:
Gender Identity:
Affectional Orientation:
Pronouns:
Briefly describe how you currently identify with regard to spirituality/religious affiliation:
Was your MA program CACREP accredited during the time you were enrolled?
During your enrollment, did the institution have policies, guidelines, faith statements, and/or student conduct codes that disaffirmed or disallowed diverse affectional and/or gender identity expression, behavior, or advocacy?
Did you graduate?

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- Tell me a bit about your affectional and/or gender identity.
- What was it like to navigate your MA program with this identity?
- How did your time there shape your spiritual journey?
 - Who or what specifically helped?
 - Who or what hindered it?
- How did your time there shape your affectional and/or gender identity?
 - Who or what specifically helped?
 - Who or what hindered it?
- Talk about how those processes shaped who you are as a counselor.
 - Who or what specifically helped?
 - Who or what hindered it?
- Can you tell me about any times when you felt unsafe in your program because of your identities or any times you felt you couldn't be yourself? (Possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel? How did you cope?)
- If you could go back and do it over again, would you still attend that institution? (Possible prompts: What factors into that decision? How was it different than you expected?)
- How have these experiences shaped who and how you are today, if they have?
- What else would you like me to know?

APPENDIX E
RELEVANT CACREP AND ACA STANDARDS

RELEVANT CACREP AND ACA STANDARDS

CACREP

- 2.F.1.e: advocacy processes needed to address institutional and social barriers that impede access, equity, and success for clients.
- 2.F.2.h: strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination.
- 2.F.4.g: strategies for advocating for diverse clients' career and educational development and employment opportunities in a global economy.
- 1.K: The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community.
- 1.Q: The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to recruit, employ, and retain a diverse faculty to create and support an inclusive learning community.
- 5.B.2.c: the unique needs and characteristics of multicultural and diverse populations with regard to career exploration, employment expectations, and socioeconomic issues.

ACA

- A.4.b: ...respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor's values are inconsistent with the client's goals or are discriminatory in nature.

- C.2: multicultural counseling competency is required across all counseling specialties.
- C.5: Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination against prospective or current clients, students, employees, supervisees, or research participants based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital/ partnership status, language preference, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or any basis proscribed by law.
- F.6.b: Supervisors assist supervisees in securing remedial assistance when needed. They recommend dismissal from training programs, applied counseling settings, and state or voluntary professional credentialing processes when those supervisees are unable to demonstrate that they can provide competent professional services to a range of diverse clients.
- F.11.a, b, & c: Counselor educators are committed to recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty; Counselor educators actively attempt to recruit and retain a diverse student body. Counselor educators demonstrate commitment to multicultural/diversity competence by recognizing and valuing the diverse cultures and types of abilities that students bring to the training experience. Counselor educators provide appropriate accommodations that enhance and support diverse student well-being and academic performance; Counselor educators actively infuse multicultural/diversity competency in their training and supervision practices. They actively train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practice.

APPENDIX F

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: April 19, 2019

TO: Matt Tis, MA
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1404960-2] The Experience of Affectional and Gender Minority Students at CACREP Accredited Counseling Programs Housed within Conservative Christian Institutions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: April 19, 2019

EXPIRATION DATE: April 19, 2023

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or nicole.morse@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.